

PARAPLEGIA NEWS JULY 2024

PN

Convention Recap

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NVWG fun in New Orleans

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Illustration by Kerry Randolph
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SeanPavone Photo/Sensvector

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"I've had an opportunity to call some of the greatest players to ever play my friends. I've seen a Paralympics. I've seen some amazing things, and I met the love of my life." — Cheryl Vines

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Now in its 78th year and the official publication of Paralyzed Veterans of America, *PN* is a national, monthly magazine that covers news, health, research, lifestyle and issues of interest and concern to veterans and others with spinal-cord injury and disease. Anyone interested in submitting an article to *PN* should consult the Contributors Guidelines found on our website at pnonline.com. *PN* neither endorses nor guarantees any of the products or services advertised in the magazine. Readers should thoroughly investigate any product or service before making a purchase.

PN STAFF

AL KOVACH JR.
Editor-In-Chief
Ext. 100 / al@pvamag.com

SHERRI SHEA
Operations Manager
Ext. 102 / sherri@pvamag.com

ANDY NEMANN
Managing Editor
Ext. 112 / andy@pvamag.com

JOHN GROTH
Assistant Editor
Ext. 105 / john@pvamag.com

BRITTANY MARTIN
Assistant Editor
Ext. 110 / brittany@pvamag.com

CHRISTOPHER DI VIRGILIO
Web Content Manager
Ext. 106 / chris@pvamag.com

STEVE MAX
Advertising Representative
215-284-8787
steve@max4media.com

ANN GARVEY
Art & Production Director
Ext. 103 / anngarvey@pvamag.com

KERRY RANDOLPH
Senior Graphic Designer
Ext. 104 / kerry@pvamag.com

SUZI HUBBARD
Circulation Coordinator
Ext. 109 / suzi@pvamag.com

**EDITORIAL, BUSINESS, AND
ADVERTISING OFFICE**
7250 North 16th Street, Suite 100
Phoenix, AZ 85020-5214, USA
Tel: 602-224-0500
pnonline.com / info@pvamag.com

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JULY Editor's DESK

July is a busy time of year for us at PVA Publications. It's one of those months with a multitude of things going on, both in the office and outside of it.

It's busy because we're working on the September issues of *PN* and *SPORTS 'N SPOKES* almost simultaneously, and we're trying to create a tentative 2025 editorial calendar for both publications. We also lose a bit of production time because there's a long holiday weekend this month, we have some new people starting work with us (more on that in a later issue), and there are multiple events for us to cover, including the National Veterans Wheelchair Games (NVWG). I think that about sums things up.

Regardless of how busy we are now, we finished production on this issue of *PN* several weeks ago with some great takeaways for you. To start, Paralyzed Veterans of America's (PVA) 78th Annual Convention took place in May in Minneapolis and Assistant Editors Brittany Martin and John Groth were on hand to tell you all about it in *Convention Highlights* on page 32 and on our website, pnonline.com. If you're headed to the NVWG in New Orleans this month, you'll find some fun things to do when you're not competing in *Big Games In The Big Easy* on page 26. And there's also good news to tell you about the Department of Veterans Affairs building some key facilities in *Expanding Long-Term Care* on page 20.

We hope you can take something from each of those articles and enjoy all the content in this month's issue. Have a safe, happy and fun Fourth of July.



Andy Nemann, Managing Editor

contributing to this issue...



Rachel Y. Krishnan, AIA
(p. 20)



Mark R. Thompson, AIA
(p. 20)

PARALYZED VETERANS OF AMERICA

NATIONAL OFFICE

1875 Eye Street NW, Suite 1100
Washington, D.C. 20006, USA
202-872-1300 • www.pva.org

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PVAfromtheTOP

ROBERT L. THOMAS JR.
NATIONAL PRESIDENT

The Pursuit Of Independence

Welcome to the beginning of the 2024-2025 fiscal year.

I would first like to thank the Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) Board of Directors for their continued support in reelecting me as PVA's national president for another term. I will continue to work in this role to help our members and leaders push to keep fulfilling our important mission.

I believe that congratulations are also in order for all of the newly elected and returning members of the PVA Executive Committee. It's my opinion that the national directors have put together a great team.

The individuals on that team are: Senior Vice President Tammy Jones; Vice Presidents Josue Cordova, Ken Ness, Anne Robinson and Lawrence "Louie" Mullins Jr.; Treasurer Tom Wheaton; and Secretary Marcus Murray.

We have a lot of work to accomplish, but before diving into this new fiscal year, let's first enjoy the Fourth of July celebration.

PVA will always work toward ensuring those living with disabilities can live their lives to the fullest.

For many people, this is the beginning of summer when families take vacations and host myriad picnics, barbecues and fireworks displays, but it's much more than that. It's the celebration of the United States of America's independence from Great Britain.

During my early childhood, I didn't know the true meaning of the Fourth of July. I was just excited I didn't have to attend school and got to watch the fireworks. However, as I grew older and matured through my education, I learned it is a celebration of how we became a free and independent nation — and that's why it's referred to as Independence Day.

This is the time when our nation's forefathers in the original 13 colonies decided to write and sign the Declaration of Independence, declaring our separation and freedom from Britain nearly 250 years ago. The United States has had many hardships since becoming an independent country, including the Civil War, which was fought to help all people become independent and free.

This reminds me of what PVA has done and continues to do. We advocate for our fellow men and women who need assistance in maintaining their independence through necessary health care and medical devices. We work diligently to push legislation for our members and communicate with our leaders on the best practices for our members to live independent lives.

PVA will always work toward ensuring those living with disabilities can live their lives to the fullest without so many hurdles, similar to our forefathers' intentions when establishing the document that states, "that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

As we enjoy this holiday and the liberties that come with living in this great nation, let us not forget those men and women who laid down their lives in the pursuit of independence and the continued fight to keep our country free. ■



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reasons & remarks

AL KOVACH JR.
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Team Travel

When I started traveling long distances to compete in races more than 30 years ago, I quickly learned the do's and don'ts from fellow athletes in regards to air travel.

I learned stuff like how to pack light, how to pee on a plane and how to prepare my wheelchair and competitive equipment to prevent damage. It was also suggested to me that I avoid traveling with big groups.

Obviously, that's hard to do when your team is traveling to a competition. Besides, traveling as a team can be exciting, and the shared experience is great for bonding with your teammates. But it can also come with unintended consequences.

If you've traveled with a team, you're probably familiar with the reaction you get from the flight crew or the passengers who aren't with your group.

Aside from provoking the ire of those other passengers who fear they'll miss their connection just because it takes so long to board an entire team, there's the predictable wonkiness of boarding a plane that is eclipsed only by the absolute chaos that greets you upon landing at your destination.

Too often I hear stories about airline workers treating wheelchairs as basic freight rather than medical equipment that our lives depend upon. Furthermore, it pains me to see our damaged sports equipment piled high in baggage claim like it was junk. Sometimes, I wonder if Fred Sanford (from the TV show *Sanford and Son*) and the gorilla from that American Tourister commercial work for the airlines.

According to the Department of Transportation, there were 11,527 wheelchairs "mishandled" by the U.S. airlines in 2023. There are too many reasons to list here as to why that number is so high, but the reality of this situation is that the only way teams can

A group of paralyzed veterans who wanted to spread the gospel of wheelchair basketball is the genesis of team travel for people with disabilities.



COURTESY OF AL KOVACH JR.

PVA Publications Editor-In-Chief Al Kovach Jr., seated left, and Chris Kaag, seated right, were among 10 wheelchair users who had to be carried down stairs because there was no jetway during a trip to Grand Cayman in 2011.

keep their wheelchairs and equipment safe is to simply stay home.

With that said, you may find it interesting that a group of paralyzed veterans who wanted to spread the gospel of wheelchair basketball is the genesis of team travel for people with disabilities.

Chronicled in his book, *Wheels of Courage*, David Davis documents the trials and tribulations relating to the

travel together, but driving a bus for 10 hours along the Pacific Coast Highway would be arduous, and commercial airlines weren't equipped to handle an entire team of paraplegics.

Since the team comprised veterans based out of a military hospital, the military could justify providing the Rolling Devils with a C-47 military transport plane. The aircraft's

By 1948, wheelchair basketball had become the most popular sport among individuals with disabilities. Teams all over the country were eager to compete, but it was the Flying Wheels from the Birmingham Veterans Affairs Hospital in Van Nuys, Calif., who came up with the idea of barnstorming the U.S. Unlike the Rolling Devils, this team didn't have the support of the military, so they were limited to using commercial aircraft.

This time, it was Los Angeles Air Service that provided the team with a DC-3 passenger plane. Without a cargo door and ramp, the veterans came up with the idea of rolling their wheelchairs onto a wood plank, which was then hoisted up to the door of the main cabin using a forklift. Fortunately, as a passenger airplane, the seats were comfortable, so flying 6,000 miles to multiple cities wasn't too bad. However, the honey bucket situation was no different from that of the C-47.

Airlines have made a lot of improvements over the past 75 years, but they need to address a few glaring issues. I certainly appreciate the passage of the Air Carrier Access Act, and I like the idea of mandatory reporting of "mishandled" wheelchairs. I also prefer using a jetway rather than a forklift to enter an aircraft, and I guess that miserable aisle chair beats being carried to my assigned seat.

In my next life, I'll leave my adaptive sports equipment at home. Perhaps I'll pick up the sport of swimming and simply pack my Speedo. In the meantime, keep Fred and that primate away from my stuff, and please fix that honey bucket situation.

As always, please let me know your thoughts at al@pvamag.com. ■



The Flying Wheels wheelchair basketball team from the Birmingham Veterans Affairs Hospital in Van Nuys, Calif., prepares to board a DC-3 passenger plane for a game in 1954.

first generation of paralyzed veterans who played wheelchair basketball. What started off as a means of rehabilitation in spinal-cord injury wards quickly became a serious competitive sport.

In 1947, the Rolling Devils based at the naval hospital in Corona, Calif., wanted to compete in games beyond Southern California, so they set their sights on a few matches in the Bay Area. The team wanted to

accommodations weren't posh, but it had enough seats to fit the entire team and space to stow all their folding wheelchairs. Back then, there were no jetways, so the athletes improvised by using a ramp to access the main cabin through the aircraft's large cargo door. Beyond that, the only challenge was the toilet or "honey bucket," which was located at the back of the plane behind a forbiddingly narrow door.

Advances In Accessibility

Each July, Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) celebrates the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the other accomplishments of the disability rights movement.

In honor of these historic advancements, PVA would like to reflect on the regulatory and legislative efforts in disability advocacy that have occurred thus far in 2024.

Land, Air & Sea

There's been a culmination of years worth of advocacy efforts to increase accessibility in travel. Whether individuals with disabilities are on land, in the sky or on the water, work is being done to ensure accessibility.

In March, the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) issued a proposed rule on ensuring safe air

travel accommodations for people who use wheelchairs.

The changes proposed by the DOT include several vital steps that would dramatically improve the air travel experience for people with disabilities, including prompt return of delayed wheelchairs or scooters; prompt repair or replacement of damaged wheelchairs or scooters; improved standards for onboard wheelchairs; and enhanced training for airline personnel and contractors who assist wheelchair users.

Additionally, an agreement was reached on the Federal Aviation Administration Reauthorization Act of 2024. The bill includes several provisions focused on addressing the experience of air travel passengers with disabilities.

Specific sections in the bill include training requirements for assisting passengers with limited mobility and properly stowing assistive devices;

analyzing and improving the DOT's complaint process; addressing the need for more access standards, as well as improved access to airline websites, applications and information communication technologies; continuing studies into safe and secure in-cabin wheelchair tie-down systems; and increasing access to seating accommodations.

Safe and accessible air travel is a basic civil right, and PVA is pleased to see regulations and legislation work to eliminate barriers for passengers with disabilities.

PVA is also heartened to see increased access for cruise ships and hotels through several important ADA enforcement actions. In January, the U.S. Attorney's Office for the District of Connecticut reached a settlement agreement with American Cruise Lines, Inc., to resolve complaints alleging the passenger vessels were not operating in

compliance with the ADA by not being accessible for wheelchair users.

Under the settlement agreement, the company must increase accessibility on all ships and implement accessibility standards and policies to provide greater access during the cruises.

In May, the Department of Justice (DOJ) announced it reached a settlement agreement with AHIP MD Baltimore 5015 Enterprises LLC, owner of the Hilton Garden Inn at White Marsh, located in White Marsh, Md., to resolve alleged ADA violations.

The agreement stems from an ADA complaint alleging an individual with a disability and a relative were provided a room that wasn't accessible after previously reserving an accessible room, resulting in serious injury to the individual. The complaint led to an investigation by the United States Attorney's Office for the District of Maryland.

Technology

Inaccessible web content denies people with disabilities equal access to information, and artificial intelligence and algorithms can lead to disability discrimination. Disability advocacy continues to adapt and respond accordingly to technological advancements.

In April, the DOJ issued a final rule on the accessibility of web content and mobile apps provided by state and local governments. The rule has been more than a decade in the making. It requires state and local governments to make their websites and mobile apps accessible for people with disabilities. The agency is adopting the technical standards of Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 2.1 Level AA.

Additionally, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services published a final rule, Nondiscrimination in Health Program and Activities, regarding section 1557 of the Affordable Care Act (ACA).



Advocacy has helped improve some aspects of traveling by air for wheelchair users.

Section 1557 of the ACA prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability and other protected classes in covered health programs or activities. The final rule considers telehealth and patient care decision support tools in the health care marketplace, so the nondiscrimination protections also apply to the use of technology, including artificial intelligence and machine learning.

Voting

With 2024 being a presidential election year, PVA has seen an influx of voting-related laws and cases that will affect voters with disabilities.

In April, the DOJ updated its voting and elections website and guides

that provide voting and election information for voters and state and local elections officials.

One of the updated guides clarifies the right to voter assistance under the ADA and that state laws restricting people from aiding with voting,

subject to criminal penalties, interfere with voters' rights to assistance.

The update was right on time, as there are states such as Ohio and Georgia placing restrictions on who can legally assist people with disabilities with voting by mail or drop box.

Stay up to date with the status of PVA's disability advocacy by joining PVAction Force at pva.org/research-resources/pva-action-force.

Anthonya James is a PVA advocacy attorney in Washington, D.C. ■



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A Robot To Assist ALS Patients

The debilitating disease of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) leads to loss of mobility and an inability for patients to complete even basic tasks, such as lifting their arms, eating or moving their hands.

This brings great stress to patients and their caregivers. A team of Stony Brook University researchers is aiming to alleviate the many difficulties that accompany advancing ALS by using computer and artificial intelligence (AI) technologies, mechanical engineering and consultation by medical experts to create a Caregiving Robot Assistant (CART) for ALS patients and their caregivers.

The project is supported by a three-year, \$1.5 million grant from the Army. It is led by I.V. Ramakrishnan, PhD, professor of computer science and an associate dean in the College of Engineering and Applied Sciences at Stony Brook University in New York.

The multidisciplinary research team includes faculty in computer science, engineering, nursing, the Renaissance School of Medicine and clinical and support staff from the Christopher Pendergast ALS Center of Excellence in the Neurosciences Institute at Stony Brook Medicine.

"We are in the process now of developing CART into a usable prototype for ALS patients and their caregivers," says Ramakrishnan. "The technical innovation of CART is in the development of an algorithmic approach to manipulation planning based on the screw geometry of motion, along with an approach to what we call 'self-evaluation,' where the robot evaluates its competence in performing a task and actually prompts a caregiver to provide additional demonstrations."

The AI technology built within CART enables it to mimic how to do a task using the movements a caregiver provides manually as a guide.

Crucially, CART will learn from only a few examples in an interactive manner by actively prompting the caregiver for demonstration examples as the robot needs, and thereby not overly burdening the caregiver. For example, a caregiver would provide how it should move its robotic arms to pick up a spoon and angle it exactly toward the patient's mouth, or provide the steps to move a cup and empty it.

Additionally, because ALS patients' needs change and can change quickly, the program enables caregivers to easily "train" CART to perform tasks differently or add new tasks, as well. This adaptability aspect of CART is central to the project with actual patient use.

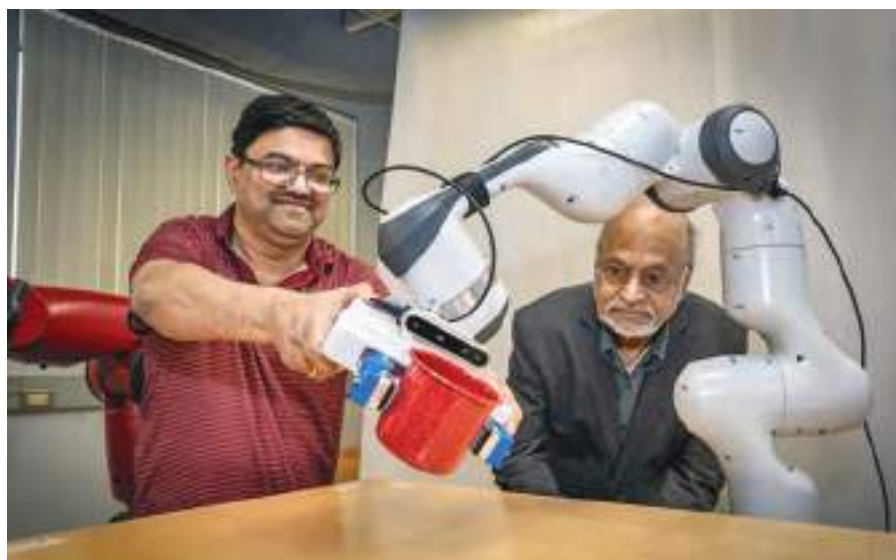
Patient Testing

Vibha Mullick, a senior web and database analyst in computer science and

a team member on the project, will provide crucial consultation to the interdisciplinary group about CART in the areas of design, user-friendliness and functionality.

Her husband of 38 years, Anuraag Mullick, 64, has lived with ALS since 2016. He is treated at Stony Brook Medicine's Christopher Pendergast ALS Center of Excellence. Anuraag now has severe motor disability, limited range with his arms and hands, difficulty swallowing and speaking and respiratory problems. Vibha is his primary caregiver. Together, they will test CART as it is programmed, re-programmed and further developed into a prototype.

"Coping with grief, fear, frustration and the uncertainties that come with advancing ALS is an ongoing challenge," says Vibha. "We are hoping that by providing insight into just how effective CART can be for my husband as a patient and me as a caregiver helps to ensure this new technology bridges the gap between technological innova-



I.V. Ramakrishnan, right, and Nilanjan Chakraborty demonstrate one of the Caregiving Robot Assistant designs in a Stony Brook University engineering lab. They move the robot's arm, essentially "training" it to hold a cup and move its arm to a designated location.

JOHN GRIFFIN/STONY BROOK UNIVERSITY



Members of the Caregiving Robot Assistant research team include Vibha Mullick, and her husband, amyotrophic lateral sclerosis patient Anuraag Mullick, in the center. Back row, from left, are Clare Whitney, Nilanjan Chakraborty, Theresa Imperato, C.R. Ramakrishnan and Wei Zhu. Front row, from left, are Maria Milazzo and I.V. Ramakrishnan.

tion and the lived experience of ALS caregiving. And we hope it will be a great tool to improving the quality of life for Anuraag and other ALS patients.”

Anuraag had a long and successful career as a hotel manager and owner before his ALS diagnosis. He will experience and test CART with Vibha when it is further developed in the lab, and he may be able to use CART when he’s at home.

A New Generation

Clare Whitney, PhD, and Maria Milazzo, PhD, in the School of Nursing will coordinate with Vibha to conduct the patient user aspect of the study. Simona Treidler, MD, of the Department of Neurology, along with Theresa Imperato, RN, of the ALS Center of Excellence, will recruit other ALS patients to try using CART as they assess patients’ disease stages and their needs.

Vibha hopes the team can push the technology to the point where integrating robots into physiotherapy is a routine program to assist

Anuraag and other ALS patients with range of motion exercises.

While CART will be tested initially for ALS patients, it is ultimately being designed for any patient with acute or chronic locomotor disabilities.

The investigators believe that the ease with which CART can be trained, operated and adapted to evolving patient needs will eventually “usher in a new generation of assistive robots to provide reliable, round-the-clock physical assistance to people with severe locomotor disability and make caregiving much less burdensome.”

Other research collaborators include C.R. Ramakrishnan in computer science, who leads the inferencing component; Nilanjan Chakraborty, PhD, a professor and roboticist in the Department of Mechanical Engineering; and Wei Zhu in applied mathematics and statistics, the biostatistician for the project. ■

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Finding Her Family

Without the National Wheelchair Basketball Association (NWBA), Paralyzed Veterans of America Director of Research and Education Cheryl Vines wouldn't have found one of her passions, a group of lifelong friends and people to champion for — and, also, the love of her life.

CHRISTOPHER DI VIRGILIO



A 2024 National Wheelchair Basketball Association (NWBA) Hall of Fame inductee, Cheryl Vines, right, gets a hug from Golden State Road Warriors coach Paul Jackson, a 2007 NWBA Hall of Fame inductee, at halftime of the April 14 NWBA Adult Division II wheelchair basketball championship game in Richmond, Va.

Over the last 52 years, Vines has supported, volunteered and served the organization in more than a handful of different ways — from fan to tournament selection committee member and chairman to classifier to treasurer.

After her five decades of involvement, the NWBA Hall of Fame committee decided it was time to honor her this spring.

A 70-year-old Los Osos, Calif., resident, Vines was one of three women inducted into the NWBA's first all-female class on April 13 at the Virginia War Memorial in Richmond, Va. She joined former Paralympians Andrea Woodson-Smith, PhD, and Darlene Hunter, PhD, as the organization's three inductees during an evening ceremony in the event area of the 1955 memorial dedicated to Virginians killed in World War II, the Korean War and the Vietnam War. Vines actually watched Woodson-Smith and Hunter grow up playing wheelchair basketball, so it was a humbling honor.

"I haven't done a lot of big things. I do a lot of little things to make big things happen, and I think that that's so important in an organization like this. It takes all of us doing the little things to make things," says Vines during her Hall of Fame induction speech. "I've had an opportunity to call some of the greatest players to ever play my friends. I've seen a Paralympics. I've seen some amazing things, and I met the love of my life. I have gotten much more from my work in the NWBA."

During the ceremony, each woman received a NWBA

CHRISTOPHER DI VIRGILIO



Cheryl Vines speaks during her induction into the 2024 National Wheelchair Basketball Association Hall of Fame April 13 at the Virginia War Memorial in Richmond, Va.

Hall of Fame ring and a bright blue jacket. And as an added bonus, each will be invited to attend the 2024 Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame induction ceremony in Springfield, Mass., this summer, Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame President and CEO John Doliva announced in a video at the ceremony. It's the first time a wheelchair basketball class has been invited to an induction ceremony.

"I've been to Naismith lots of times and to have my name there is beyond reality," Vines says.

National Wheelchair Basketball Association (NWBA) 2024 Hall of Fame inductees Darlene Hunter, PhD, left, Cheryl Vines, middle standing, and Andrea Woodson-Smith, PhD, right, are pictured, along with Golden State Road Warriors head coach and 2007 NWBA Hall of Fame inductee Paul Jackson during halftime of the April 14 NWBA Adult Division II wheelchair basketball championship game.




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"I've had an opportunity to call some of the greatest players to ever play my friends. I've seen a Paralympics. I've seen some amazing things, and I met the love of my life. I have gotten much more from my work in the NWBA." — Cheryl Vines

Making A Path

Her path to the NWBA was unique.

Vines had no family member, spouse or friend with a disability. But she did like sports and, in 1974, the late Wayne Kunishige, one of her good friends and mentors, invited her to attend a Valley Freewheelers wheelchair basketball game in Fresno, Calif. She fell in love with it and from then through

1976, Vines kept scores and ran the clock at the team's games.

In 1976, she graduated from Fresno State University in Fresno, Calif., with a degree in therapeutic recreation and worked as a recreation therapist in California, but she stayed involved in wheelchair basketball, following the Golden State 76ers (now the Golden State Road Warriors).

Then came an unlikely chance meeting with her eventual husband and then-Arkansas Rollin' Razorbacks coach at an April 1987 NWBA assistant commissioners meeting in Dallas. While another assistant commissioner was yelling at Cheryl during a meeting, Harry stood up and rescued her. Harry told the assistant commissioner that he was beating a dead

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horse, and the meeting ended soon after.

"I went over to thank Harry. I offered to buy him a beer. The rest is history. I had met the love of my life," Cheryl says. "We married four months later, and I moved to Arkansas from California. I always wondered if I got married, how would I explain to someone how much I loved the NWBA, and I didn't have to."

Cheryl and Harry got married and moved to Little Rock, Ark., in August 1987, where they made quite the team. Harry coached Arkansas from 1978 to 2000 and finished with a 238-40 overall record, leading the Rollin' Razorbacks to 10 post-season tournaments from 1988 to 2000 and winning five NWBA national championships (1991, 1993, 1994, 1996 and 2000) during his tenure. Meanwhile, Cheryl helped run the tournaments, kept scores, made travel arrangements and lunches and traveled with the team.

Helping Out

In 2000, Harry retired from coaching and later became NWBA first vice president and then NWBA president (2001-06).

That same year, the NWBA and its members helped Cheryl through one of the worst years of her life. Harry had a heart attack in April 2000



Cheryl Vines, right, receives her 2024 National Wheelchair Basketball Association (NWBA) Hall of Fame induction ring from presenter and NWBA Hall of Fame member Dave Kiley.

and two of Cheryl's good friends, Bill Duncan and Kunishige, both died.

"I thought my NWBA career might be over," she says. "But it wasn't."

Cheryl says other NWBA officers picked up extra duties of Harry's role. That included current Rollin' Razorbacks coach Jared Johnson, who started coaching the Razorbacks despite never coaching before. Other team supporters and members did fundraising, while meetings were rearranged for Harry and Cheryl.

"There were cards and letters and phone calls of support just asking what they could do for help," Cheryl says. "At that point, I knew the NWBA truly was my family."

Harry, along with Cheryl's help, continued to serve as president for five more years. He died Feb. 6, 2006.

Cheryl has helped the NWBA in other roles since — serving on the tournament selection committee, becoming the first woman in the committee's history, and later serving as chair. She also served as a classifier, helping the NWBA adopt the 4-point system and move to its current functional classification rules, and then as treasurer of the Hall of Fame committee in 2021.

"Cheryl has served in so many capacities for the development and betterment of our sport at so many

different levels — chairing, bylaws, supporting and the hire of two different executive directors," Hall of Fame Committee Chair Dave Kiley says during her induction speech. "... Isn't it funny that when you establish yourself as one that gets it done, you can never leave it?" ■

Expanding Long-

The VA system of extended help for veterans with SCI/D is getting an essential increase.

VA



U.S. Department
of Veterans Affairs



Term Care

by Rachel Y. Krishnan, AIA
& Mark R. Thompson, AIA

A key part

of Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) care for veterans with spinal-cord injury and disease (SCI/D) is getting a much-needed expansion thanks to ongoing efforts from Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) and its architecture department.

There's a significant shortage of VA SCI/D long-term care beds, and for many years, PVA has made it a high priority to increase those facilities. PVA's advocacy is seeing success, as construction is currently underway on new facilities in Dallas and San Diego.

As it does with all VA SCI/D centers, the PVA Architecture Department is assisting with the planning, design and construction of these two new facilities that will increase the number of beds by 40% over the next few years.

Officials from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and Paralyzed Veterans of America Architecture Department met to review plans for the new San Diego VA spinal-cord injury and disease long-term care facility.

The VA System Of Care

The essential addition of the two new facilities means the VA comprehensive SCI/D system of care will encompass 25 acute care centers, more than 150 stand-alone outpatient clinics and eight long-term care centers.

The system is designed in a hub and spoke format, with hub acute care centers located at major VA medical centers in various regions of the country. Each hub has numerous outpatient clinic spokes, which are located in geographic areas around their hub.

The acute care hubs provide comprehensive interdisciplinary rehabilitation services for new injuries and sustaining care for veterans with SCI/D, including ancillary specialty medical services needed by each veteran.

The outpatient clinic spokes provide post-rehabilitation primary and preventative care, and they also refer veterans to their respective hub site for more comprehensive care.

The VA SCI/D long-term care centers provide the opportunity for full-time living in a residential environment with specialized staff, amenities, equipment and care tailored to meet the needs of veterans with SCI/D.

While the acute care and outpatient care system delivered in the hubs and spokes is a robust nationwide model, the quantity of beds available in the VA system specifically



Architect's exterior rendering of the new Dallas Department of Veterans Affairs spinal-cord injury and disease long-term care facility, with the main entrance on the left and three resident neighborhood wings on the right.

designed for SCI/D long-term care is inadequate to meet the need.

There are currently only 192 beds available at six facilities in Brockton, Mass.; Cleveland; Hampton, Va.; Hines, Ill.; Long Beach, Calif.; and Tampa, Fla. Additionally, the current facilities are concentrated in the eastern United States, leaving only 12 beds west of the Mississippi River.

Due to the lack of long-term care beds, many veterans with SCI/D live in state homes, community nursing homes, medical foster care or VA community living centers, which aren't always designed or staffed to meet their specialized needs.

Architect's rendering of a typical resident bedroom, left, and a typical resident living room, right, at the new Dallas Department of Veterans Affairs spinal-cord injury and disease long-term care facility.

The current construction projects in Dallas and San Diego will help address this shortfall in two underserved geographic areas with large populations of veterans with SCI/D.

Dallas

One of those underserved areas is the south-central United States, where a new SCI/D long-term care facility is being constructed in Dallas. This facility will incorporate a unique "neighborhood" concept and become the new long-term care design standard in the VA's SCI/D design guide.

Ground was broken Nov. 12, 2023, on the Dallas facility that's adjacent to the existing





SCI/D acute care center hub. The first facility in the region, it will initially provide 30 SCI/D long-term care resident beds, with space planned for 30 more in the future.

This new facility is designed to foster a more home-like residential environment. The design's intent is to be non-institutional in scale, space configuration, interior finishes and furnishings to create a warm and welcoming environment that reinforces a sense of ownership. It'll consist of five neighborhoods, each with a group of six private bedrooms clustered around a small gathering area composed of a living room, a kitchen and a dining area.

Each centrally placed gathering area, which replaces the location of the traditional nurse's station, is designed to create a neighborhood of veterans and their visiting families. Staff and support spaces are located less con-

spicuously and away from the daily living areas. Each private bedroom also includes a private bathroom and outdoor space for the resident.

The five neighborhood wings branch off from a central spine, serving as the "Main Street" for the community, with destination points and social gathering spaces. The facility will incorporate a variety of physical, occupational and recreational therapy spaces, and access to dedicated interior and exterior recreation and gathering spaces will promote independence and enhance residents' quality of life. All of these common spaces are designed to foster a community within the facility.

Additionally, the project includes a recently completed parking garage, which provides dedicated SCI/D parking for both the acute care and long-term care centers. The parking garage will directly connect to

The new Department of Veterans Affairs spinal-cord injury and disease long-term care facility before, right, and at the start of construction, left.

Architect's exterior rendering of a resident neighborhood wing, below, at the new Dallas Department of Veterans Affairs spinal-cord injury and disease long-term care facility.



Aerial views, bottom left and upper right, and the main entrance, lower right, of the new San Diego Department of Veterans Affairs spinal-cord injury and disease long-term care facility.

the long-term care facility by a bridge. The project will also include expanded space for the acute care center, including a common entrance lobby, outpatient clinic and staff office space.

The initial 30-bed phase is scheduled for completion in October 2026, with the additional space for the acute care center expected to be completed in early 2027.

San Diego

Meanwhile, construction has been ongoing for the new facility in San Diego since 2021 and is nearing completion.

This new facility will replace the San Diego VA Medical Center's existing 30-bed SCI/D acute care center hub and will add a new SCI/D long-term care center with 20 resident beds, all in private rooms. This will more than double the available VA SCI/D long-term care resident beds in California.

The facility will have a full array of therapy spaces, including an aquatic center, physical and occupational therapy gyms and expansive indoor and outdoor recreational therapy

spaces. The PVA Cal-Diego Chapter will also have a home in the new facility.

The project includes a recently completed adjacent parking garage, which provides dedicated SCI/D parking for both the acute care and long-term care centers.



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Construction is approximately 90% complete and on schedule to open for veteran care in early 2025.

More Expansion

Even with the completion of these two new facilities, there still remains a shortfall of resident long-term care beds that are necessary to meet the demand of veterans with SCI/D. However, there's more expansion on the horizon.

Design of an expansion for the Long Beach SCI/D acute and long-term care center in California is scheduled to begin this fall. Meanwhile, the

VA is currently planning new or expanded SCI/D long-term care centers in Brockton, in the Boston area; Memphis, Tenn.; Minneapolis; and Palo Alto, Calif., in the San Francisco Bay area.

PVA continues to advocate for further expansion of the long-term care system, while PVA Architecture serves as an integral part of the planning, design and construction of all new projects.

The goal is to have state-of-the-art VA SCI/D long-term care centers available in all geographic areas, similar to the nationwide VA system of SCI/D acute care hubs. ■



A full-scale mock-up of a patient room, above left, and the indoor therapy pool, above right, at the new San Diego Department of Veterans Affairs spinal-cord injury and disease long-term care facility.



A view from the third floor exterior balcony of the new San Diego Department of Veterans Affairs spinal-cord injury and disease long-term care facility.



BIG GAMES IN THE BIG EASY

The athletes will be the ones marching in when the National Veterans Wheelchair Games return to New Orleans.

by Andy Nemann

An amazing and distinct

array of music, food, culture, competition and camaraderie wrapped in a party atmosphere await this month as the National Veterans Wheelchair Games (NVWG) return to New Orleans.

Back in the Big Easy for the first time since 1990, the 43rd NVWG are set for July 25–30, with most events taking place at the New Orleans Ernest N. Morial Convention Center set along the Mississippi River. Hundreds of athletes from across the country will take part in 23 sports, with wheelchair football debuting as an exhibition sport.

Co-sponsored by Paralyzed Veterans of America and the Department of Veterans Affairs, the NVWG provide plenty of good, hard competition. But the Games are about far

more than sports. They're also about friendship, participation, better health and effort.

This year's Games also offer an opportunity to explore one of America's most legendary cities. Influences from Europe, the Caribbean, Africa and elsewhere make New Orleans a melting pot of history, culture and traditions. Tantalizing bowls of gumbo, sultry sounds of jazz music and a vibrant nightlife help the Big Easy provide something for everyone.

Party On

Any article about things to do and see in New Orleans has to begin with a legendary neighborhood and one of the most famous (or possibly infamous) streets in the world.

Best known as the focal point for the city's yearly Mardi Gras celebration, Bourbon Street





ILLUSTRATION BY KERRY RANDOLPH © GETTY IMAGES/ SENSVECTOR/ ALLARD SCHAGER/ JOEL CARILLET

stretches 13 blocks from Canal Street to Esplanade Avenue in the heart of the famed French Quarter. It's a noisy, often raucous and vibrant mix of bars, restaurants, neon lights, music and lots of people.

While the party atmosphere on Bourbon Street gets a great deal of attention, the French Quarter has much more to offer. Founded in 1718, the Quarter includes historic homes, Jackson Square, museums dedicated to jazz and voodoo, the open-air French Market, as well as bars and restaurants to suit every taste and budget.

Bourbon Street and the French Quarter are can't-miss attractions in New Orleans, but they can present challenges for people using wheelchairs or other mobility devices. Be prepared for older buildings that have stepped entrances, narrow doors and no elevators. Additionally, be



Bourbon Street in the French Quarter is a major hub for New Orleans' nightlife.



JOYCE BRACEY/NEWORLEANS.COM



The official cuisine of Louisiana, gumbo is a thick stew with sausage and/or seafood.

PAUL BROUSSARD, NEWORLEANS.COM



A staple of New Orleans, beignets are fried dough doused with powdered sugar.

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A po'boy is a stuffed sandwich piled high with a variety of meats or fried seafood.

aware that sidewalks can be narrow, get crowded (particularly on Bourbon Street) and be cracked or broken.

For more information, visit neworleans.com or frenchquarter.com.

Eat Up

Whether it's for business or pleasure, a trip anyplace without good food is boring. Luckily, New Orleans has you covered and then some.

Few cities in the world can go toe-to-toe with the delicacies found in the Big Easy. French, Spanish, Italian, African, Native American, Cajun, Chinese and Cuban influences create very distinctive flavors and dishes. Toss in some of the freshest seafood in the country and a touch of New Orleans flair, and you have an amazing dining experience.

Local specialties not to be missed include sweet favorites such as beignets (pronounced ben-yays), which are square-shaped fried pastries, and bananas Foster. For a bigger meal, make sure to try a po'boy, an overstuffed sandwich served on French bread, with oysters, boiled crawfish, jambalaya or gumbo.

Besides the abundance of cuisines, you'll also find a plethora of options for atmosphere and budget. Quick serve, street food, fine dining, local places, national chains and everything in between can easily and quickly be found no matter where you're staying.

For more information, visit neworleans.com/restaurants.

Head Out The Door

Most of NVWG activities will be taking place at the New Orleans Ernest N. Morial Convention Center, and whether you're in between events or finished competing for the day, you'll find plenty of things to do and see right outside the center's doors.



Even though Mardi Gras took place several months ago, you can still get a feel for the famed celebration just outside the south end of the center at Mardi Gras World (mardigrasworld.com). Guided and self-guided tours provide a behind-the-scenes look at how artists and architects have been building floats for Mardi Gras and other parades at this massive studio since 1947.

If you're looking to get in some retail therapy, then the Outlet Collection at Riverwalk (riverwalkneworleans.com) has you covered. Located just behind the convention center along the Mississippi River, the outlet features



over 75 stores and services, including a Cafe Du Monde and several national restaurant chains.

Views of the mighty Mississippi River can be found just north of the outlets and convention center at the River Terrace at Audubon Aquarium. This is also where you'll find some of the area's top animal experiences at the

REBECCA TODD/NEWORLEANS.COM



Founded in 1718, the French Quarter is New Orleans' most famous neighborhood.

Audubon Aquarium and Audubon Insectarium (audubonnatureinstitute.org).

Meet At The Museum

A great way to take in some of New Orleans' key attractions is while also catching some of the Games, and one of those sites is only about a 10-minute roll from the convention center.

The National WWII Museum will host the Games' motor rally (trivia) event July 29. Featuring six pavilions and a theater over 6 acres, the museum looks at America's experience



© GETTY IMAGES/LOKIBAH0

The River Terrace outside of the Audubon Aquarium.

during World War II, including the prelude to world conflict, the beaches of Normandy, the Pacific theater and the home front.

The museum offers an immersive look at World War II through multiple exhibits, multimedia experiences and thousands of personal accounts. Among the museum's highlights are a reproduction of a Higgins boat landing craft, a restored Curtiss P-40 Warhawk fighter plane and the *USS Tang* Submarine Experience.

The National WWII Museum gives an in-depth look at the American experience during one of the biggest events in world history.



© GETTY IMAGES/ATLANTIDE PHOTOTRAVEL



The museum is fully accessible, and ticket prices range from \$25 to \$35.

For more information, visit nationalww2museum.org.

Park It

Another place to do two things at the same time is at one of the oldest and biggest public parks in the country.

New Orleans City Park will host the Games' cycling event on July 30. Located by Lake Pontchartrain about 7 miles north of the convention center, the 1,300-acre park has been around for about 170 years and has a lot to offer beyond a big, green and beautiful outdoor space.

The park features multiple themed gardens, several museums, biking and walking paths, live concerts, an amusement park and



Botanical Garden was added to the park in 1936 as a Great Depression Works Progress Administration project and has more than 2,000 varieties of plants.

For more information, visit neworleanscitypark.com.

Get On Board

There is so much going on in New Orleans, it's tough to take it all in, but a relaxing ride on a historic streetcar provides a fun way to see the sights.

Streetcars are iconic in the Big Easy and offer wonderful views of the city's beauty, charm and history for \$1.25, or just 40 cents



Created in 1854, the 1,300-acre City Park in New Orleans is one of the oldest and biggest city parks in the country.

the world's largest grove of mature live oak trees, with some more than 800 years old.

The New Orleans Museum of Art houses an impressive collection of American and French art, photos and glass, as well as an 11-acre sculpture garden. The New Orleans





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Located in City Park, the New Orleans Museum of Art features more than 40,000 objects.

for seniors and riders with disabilities. There are multiple lines that cover much of the main downtown area, including stops right in front of the convention center.

The New Orleans Regional Transit Authority (RTA) says all the red street cars that travel Canal Street are compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act and have a lift at the middle door. The RTA says some of the green street cars that travel the St. Charles Avenue line are accessible.

The Canal Street line travels past many lovely neighborhoods, famous restaurants and shops.

© GETTY IMAGES/F11PHOTO



At Canal Street and Carrollton Avenue, it splits into two branches. The branch that continues up Canal Street ends at an area of historic cemeteries. The other branch finishes at City Park.

For more information, visit norta.com.

Find More To Explore

Obviously, there's far more to a place like New Orleans than could possibly fit in a couple pages of *PN*.



COURTESY OF AUDUBON NATURE INSTITUTE

An Asian elephant, Jean, is one of the more than 2,000 animals to be seen at the 58-acre Audubon Zoo in New Orleans.

The Audubon Zoo is consistently ranked as one of the top 10 zoos in the country. There are tours that cover swamps, cemeteries, food, cocktails, history and more, and the North Shore (visithenorthshore.com) across Lake Pontchartrain is a beautiful and unique stretch of waterfront communities.

For more information on New Orleans, visit neworleans.com. ■

All the red street cars that travel Canal Street are accessible and only cost 40 cents for people with disabilities.

Convention

The PVA Board of Directors handled important issues at the 78th Annual PVA Convention in Minneapolis.



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For the 78th year, Para-

lyzed Veterans of America (PVA) held its annual convention focused on its mission of improving the lives of veterans with spinal-cord injury and disease (SCI/D).

by Brittany Martin

The PVA Executive Committee, PVA staff and PVA Board of Directors representing 31 of the organization's 33 chapters gathered virtually and in person May 14–18 at the Hyatt Regency Minneapolis in Minnesota.

The convention featured approval of the fiscal year 2025 budget and several resolutions, as well as a historic moment for the PVA Executive Committee and visits from Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz, Sen. Amy Klobuchar (D-Minn.) and Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Secretary Denis McDonough.

VA SCI/D Care

McDonough spoke candidly about some of the challenges the VA is facing, especially in the areas of budget, staffing and facilities, and he took questions from the board of directors.

He says the VA is investing in modern facilities to expand access, thanks to authorizations and funding from the Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics Act of 2022. The department also grew its SCI/D team by 6% over the past three years and has added 14,000 nurses across the system since December 2021, bringing the total to 122,000.

"Whether there's a budget cap or not, what's unshakable is our shared commitment to serving vets at VA," McDonough says. "We

Highlights



COURTESY OF PARALYZED VETERANS OF AMERICA

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believe that we have a team in place to get vets with SCI/D and all vets the world-class care they need wherever and whenever they need it. Local VA leaders remain empowered to hire the providers they need. We'll be communicating to them over the course of the next week that SCI/D remains a priority for them. The bottom line is that if I need to go back to our partners in Congress to ask for new hiring tools or additional



COURTESY OF PARALYZED VETERANS OF AMERICA

Department of Veterans Affairs Secretary Denis McDonough, right, meets with Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) leaders prior to speaking to the PVA Board of Directors in Minneapolis.



Department of Veterans Affairs Secretary Denis McDonough, standing right, answers questions from the Paralyzed Veterans of America Board of Directors.

money, I will, because there's nothing more important — nothing — than saving veterans' lives and improving veterans' lives."

McDonough says it's a critical moment for shaping and securing the future of veterans' health care in America, and he appreciates PVA's demand for accountability from the VA and from Congress. He says it was important to speak to the board in person this year because he wanted PVA members to know how much he respects them.

"I love all my engagements with PVA, including the virtual ones, but there's something — this is a selfish part of my answer — something very inspiring to be in the same room with these veterans," he says.

McDonough says PVA leadership has been vigilant in making sure the VA doesn't underinvest in SCI/D at a time of major changes in VA care.

"The most important thing PVA does is it gives voice to the concerns of its members and ensures that we at VA hear those voices and are held accountable to those voices," he says. "We can't be the high-reliability organization we intend to be without a very concerted and clear signal-based voice of the veteran, including our PVA veterans, and that is the most important thing that PVA does."

PVA CEO Carl Blake appreciated that McDonough took the time to engage with the members about their specific concerns and committed to ensuring the overall VA policy in terms of staff reduction wouldn't impact the SCI/D system of care.

"Usually, if he says something, he means it, but sometimes there's a little bit of a disconnect between what the central office gives as guidance and how the local levels choose to implement that guidance," Blake says. "So, we'll still have to be vigilant in tracking what happens at the local hospitals and VISNs [Veterans Integrated Services Network] because sometimes they do what they want to do regardless of what the VA secretary says."



Paralyzed Veterans of America CEO Carl Blake, center, addresses the board.

Elections

Besides hearing from McDonough, the board of directors elected the PVA Executive Committee for fiscal year 2025, which begins this month.

Robert Thomas Jr., who ran unopposed, was reelected by acclamation for his second consecutive term as national president.

“Initially joining the Army, I wanted to be a lifelong soldier, but that opportunity was drastically cut short,” Thomas says. “So, just running for PVA from the very first time, starting as a parliamentarian and moving through each and every position at PVA besides secretary and treasurer, you know, it’s that willingness and that drive to continue to serve.”

This year, Thomas hopes to make more progress on the VA’s caregiver programs to ensure caregivers receive proper benefits, as well as continue to advocate for adequate staffing in VA SCI/D centers.

In addition, National Vice President Tammy Jones, who ran against National Vice Presidents

Ken Ness and Anne Robinson, was selected to be national senior vice president — marking the first time in PVA history that a female has held the position. This will be her seventh year serving on the executive committee.

Returning to the same city where she was first elected to the executive committee in 2018, Jones says she felt humbled and honored. She believes she can provide a different perspective as a woman.

“One, the board said that they trust me, and they believe in my ability to do the job. And two, the first woman to hold the position — that’s wow,” Jones says. “Now, our other lady members know that they are welcome to join us on the dais and at the table. You know, this is their table, too.”

Josue Cordova, Ness, Robinson, Lawrence “Louie” Mullins Jr., and Marcus Murray ran for the four open national vice president positions, and Cordova, Ness, Robinson and Mullins were selected. Cordova (fourth term), Robinson

COURTESY OF PARALYZED VETERANS OF AMERICA



The Paralyzed Veterans of America Executive Committee for fiscal year 2025 is, from left, National Secretary Marcus Murray, National Vice President Josue Cordova, National Senior Vice President Tammy Jones, National Vice President Ken Ness (standing), National President Robert Thomas Jr., National Immediate Past President Charles Brown and National Vice Presidents Anne Robinson and Lawrence “Louie” Mullins Jr. National Treasurer Tom Wheaton isn’t pictured.



Speedy Award

At the Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) 78th Annual Convention's closing awards brunch May 18 in Minneapolis, late PVA Publications Editor-In-Chief Tom Fjerstad was honored with PVA's Speedy Award in the posthumous category. His twin sons, Ben, left, and Noah, right, and former wife and caregiver, Cindy Mazanyi, not pictured, accepted the award on his behalf. Fjerstad lost his 16-month battle with leukemia Dec. 9, 2022.

(second term) and Ness (second consecutive term and fourth overall) have previously served as national vice presidents, while Mullins has served as PVA parliamentarian for the past six years and as interim national secretary since taking over for Murray partway through the last fiscal year.

Murray, who was voted in by acclamation, will rejoin the executive committee as national secretary, a role he held from 2019 to this year before taking a hiatus for personal reasons. Tom Wheaton was also reelected by acclamation as national treasurer and has served in that role since 2014.

Budget & Patients' Rights

The board of directors also passed the fiscal year 2025 budget.

After some debate, the PVA Great Plains Chapter was successful in garnering enough support to increase the proposed budget to cover expenses associated with expanding its bowling tournaments to PVA members with multiple sclerosis (MS) who can play while standing. PVA Great Plains Chapter National Director David Nelson Jr., says the increase will



Special Presentation

During the convention, Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) Texas Chapter President Frank Daebelliehn, wearing hat, presented an American flag from his Dec. 7, 2023, scuba dive on the *USS Arizona* at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii to the PVA Executive Committee.

Resolutions

During May's Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) 78th Annual Convention in Minneapolis, the PVA Board of Directors passed the following resolutions:

24-M-2: Changes To PVA's Acknowledgement Of Code Of Ethics And Standards Of Conduct Form

Submitted by: PVA Executive Committee

This resolution amends ambiguous language in PVA's Code of Ethics and Standards of Conduct form that PVA officers and national committee members are required to sign.

24-M-3: Changes To Submitting Bob Webb Excellence In Newsletter Award Nominations

Submitted by: PVA Executive Committee

This resolution streamlines the process for chapters to submit nominations for the Bob Webb Excellence in Newsletter Award, including allowing chapters to submit electronic copies of their newsletters for consideration.

24-M-4: Whistleblower Policy Revisions

Submitted by: Audit Committee

This resolution revises and updates PVA's whistleblower policy to incorporate the procedures that advise PVA employees on how to report concerns or complaints using PVA's reporting platform and the process the Audit Committee will follow upon receiving reports.

24-M-5: Eliminate A Requirement Within Chapter Grant Criteria

Submitted by: PVA Executive Committee

This resolution alters a requirement for PVA chapters to limit unrestricted liquid net assets in relation to their annual expense budgets in order to continue receiving the annual grant from PVA national.

24-M-6: Membership/Transfer of Membership Applications Changes

Submitted by: PVA Executive Committee

This resolution makes changes to processing times for new membership applications and transfer-of-membership applications and requires chapter membership officers to make inquiries to determine if a transferring member is in good standing with the chapter(s).

24-M-7: Updates to PVA Program Policy Manual (Blue Book)

Submitted by: PVA Executive Committee

This resolution updates the PVA Program Policy Manual, which explains PVA's programs through the national office, to ensure it is current, accurate and in compliance.

24-M-O-1: Patient Bill of Rights

Submitted by: PVA Cal-Diego Chapter

This resolution requires the PVA national staff to review and identify areas where patient rights are being violated in Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) facilities due to restrictions and operating procedures that have remained in place since the beginning of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic in 2020. It also calls for PVA to send a letter to the secretary of Veterans Affairs identifying the patient rights violation and requiring the VA to remove policies that violate patient rights.

help offset some of the lane rental fees and cost of providing food.

"This will be the first year of the standing MS division, and this will be the first tournament to have it. We like to be the first in everything," Nelson says. "The more chapters that know about it can get it out to their MS community, because there's not a lot of sports programs since it's just a new SCI/D partner. So, this will be some way they can get it, and it might be a stepping stone for other sports."

The board also approved a resolution submitted by the PVA Cal-Diego Chapter concerning the SCI patient bill of rights for those admitted to VA facilities. The resolution calls for PVA leadership to use all its tools, up to and including writing letters to the VA secretary, to advocate for patients' rights in light of the VA's post-novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic policies and new routine operations.

PVA Cal-Diego Chapter National Director Louis Irvin says COVID-19 has changed

THREE PHOTOS COURTESY OF PARALYZED VETERANS OF AMERICA



Paralyzed Veterans of America members arrive at Target Field in Minneapolis.



Paralyzed Veterans of America members watch a Minnesota Twins vs. New York Yankees game May 15.



From left, Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) CEO Carl Blake, PVA National President Robert Thomas Jr., and PVA COO Shaun Castle prepare to raise the Twins Territory flag prior to a May 15 Minnesota Twins baseball game against the New York Yankees.

2024 Awards

The Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) 78th Annual Convention in Minneapolis honored many outstanding individuals, PVA chapters and businesses for their dedication and support of PVA's mission to improve the quality of life for veterans and all people living with spinal-cord injury and disease. The following award winners were recognized during this year's convention:

Speedy Award (non-member category)

Carol Moore Hayes

Speedy Award (posthumous category)

Tom Fjerstad

Individual Giving Patriot Award

Ryan and Karen Lake

Corporate Giving Patriot Award

Mildred "Millie" Crespin-Croegaert

Cliff Crase Award for Professionalism

Robert Arciola

Richard Fuller Outstanding Achievement in Government Relations

Scott E. Griffith

Harry A. Schweikert Jr., Disability Awareness Award

Joan Lynch

Membership Development Award

PVA Wisconsin Chapter

Chapter Volunteer Service Award

PVA Colonial Chapter

Center for Development and Civic Engagement Award Glen Davis (540 hours at the Department of Veterans Affairs Salt Lake City Healthcare System)

Dwain Taylor Volunteer Service Award (member category)

Matthew Peeling (1,850 hours, PVA Colonial Chapter)

Dwain Taylor Volunteer Service Award (non-member category)

Belinda Scoggins-Kokendoffer

Gilford Moss President's Award

PVA Cal-Diego Chapter



Thank You

At the closing of the Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) 78th Annual Convention in Minneapolis, a motion was made that, "The Board of Directors of the Paralyzed Veterans of America assembled at this convention directs the editor of *PN* magazine to publish in a conspicuous place ... a thank-you quoting the sincere appreciation and gratitude of the members of Paralyzed Veterans of America to the caregivers and friends of PVA, without whose help and support we could not have accomplished all that we have this week."

the culture in the SCI centers. For example, he says, in many areas, recreational therapy can't take patients out of the hospital anymore. Patients also aren't allowed to move freely around campus or get out of bed, whether it's due to restrictions or whether it's due to a new culture that's been established because the policies have been in place for so long.

"COVID was a worldwide pandemic, and at the time, it was important to restrict patients' movements and visitors to protect the health and safety of everyone. This pandemic is over. It is time that all policy remains of the pandemic be removed," Irvin says. "COVID is in the community and will always be. Operations at the SCI centers that were augmented because of COVID need to be changed back to pre-COVID processes. This resolution provides latitude for the national staff to advocate for the protections of patient rights. I also request the approach to this issue be taken with support for general counsel to lay the foundation for legal arguments if resistance is met with our request."

Irvin says he was happy with the result of the vote and the board's support.

"But I'm going to be more interested to see how the organization carries the idea forward," Irvin says. "It's not a matter of us saying we want changes. It's a matter of actual change happening. And that's what I hope this will start that train rolling down the track, that we can encourage, influence and advocate and leverage the VA to remove COVID restrictions in the spinal-cord injury system and bring us back to pre-COVID operations and renew the culture that is so important in the spinal-cord injury system, for mental health, physical health, the ability to have a quality rehab experience, the ability for patients to be encouraged to come in for treatment."

For more convention coverage, visit pnonline.com. ■

Breaking The Biz Podcast

Success in the entertainment industry often relies heavily on who you know. Building a network of contacts within the industry can be challenging, especially for those who are just starting out. And due to societal stereotypes, building a network is particularly challenging for creatives with disabilities.

The team at Yes I Can Unity Through Music & Education (YIC), a nonprofit organization dedicated to providing training and employment services to people with disabilities who are pursuing careers in the entertainment industry, understands that creating opportunities for disabled creatives requires breaking down barriers and stereotypes to help connect them with the industry.

Breaking the Biz Podcast originated from the nonprofit's weekly industry guest speaker sessions that provide creatives with disabilities in the program the chance to interact and network with industry professionals and directly ask questions. Available on all major podcast platforms, including iHeartRadio, Amazon Music, Spotify and Apple Podcasts, Breaking the Biz Podcast features candid discussions with industry veterans, with and without disabilities, sharing personal experi-

ences and advice for aspiring actors, musicians, writers, filmmakers, animators and other creatives.

"Creating networking opportunities for creatives with disabilities in the entertainment industry is crucial



COURTESY OF YES I CAN UNITY THROUGH MUSIC & EDUCATION

for equal access and promoting inclusivity, diversity and equal representation," says Kirsten Fitzpatrick, deputy director of YIC, in an April release. "Breaking the Biz Podcast shatters stereotypes and helps with promoting equal opportunity, which will ultimately result in enhancing diversity in storytelling and changing perceptions within the entertainment industry."

The podcast provides a platform for advocacy and offers opportunities for disabled creatives to demonstrate their skills, ultimately challenging misconceptions and promoting inclusivity in the industry.

Entertainment industry professionals interested in being guests on Breaking the Biz Podcast should

email blieberman@yicunity.org. For information on YIC and its programs, visit yicunity.org.

Chemicals Link To ALS Risk

A University of Michigan (UM) Medicine study found that storing chemicals in a garage at home may associate with an increased risk of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS).

The results are published in the journal *Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis and Frontotemporal Degeneration*.

Storage containing volatile chemicals in garages is extremely common, whether it's in a car or motorcycle, equipment like a chainsaw, or solvents, cleaners, paints and other items.

Investigators assessed exposures in the residential setting from a survey of more than 600 participants both with and without ALS. Through statistical analysis, they found that the storage of chemicals — including gasoline and gasoline powered equipment, lawn care products, pesticides, paint and woodworking supplies — were significantly associated with ALS risk.

All of the reported chemicals linked to disease development were volatile with toxic components. Most participants reported storing several of the items in their attached garage.

Storing chemicals in a detached garage, however,

did not show as strong of an association with risk.

Researchers say the flow of air and airborne pollutants from attached garages to the living space may explain the finding.

"Especially in colder climates, air in the garage tends to rush into the house when the entry door is opened, and air flows occur more or less continuously through small cracks and openings in walls and floors," says Stuart Batterman, PhD, senior study author and professor of environmental health science at the UM School of Public Health, in an April Michigan Medicine release. "This makes sense that keeping volatile chemicals in an attached garage shows the stronger effect."

The latest building codes, Batterman notes, tackle this problem by specifying measures to reduce or eliminate these air flows.

"We are beginning to see risk factors across multiple settings that may associate with a greater ALS risk; we also see some relationships across the studies, for example, woodworking and woodworking supplies and gardening and lawn care supplies," says first author Stephen Goutman, MD, MS, director of the Pranger ALS Clinic and associate director of the ALS Center of Excellence at University of Michigan. "This begs the question: Is it the activities that associate with ALS risk or the exposures to related

products? This requires further research.”

In 2016, the research team found that people with ALS had higher concentrations of pesticides in their blood compared to people without the condition.

A subsequent study published in 2019 linked organochlorine pesticides and polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCBs, to worsening survival for ALS.

“We now need to build on these discoveries to understand how these exposures increase ALS risk,” says senior author Eva Feldman,

MD, PhD, director of the ALS Center of Excellence at UM and James W. Albers Distinguished University Professor at UM. “In parallel, we must continue to advocate to make ALS a reportable disease. Only then we will fully understand the array of exposures that increase disease risk.”

Risk Of MS For Immigrants

Immigrants to Canada who have spent a greater proportion of their lives in Canada have a greater risk

of developing multiple sclerosis (MS) than people who have spent a smaller proportion of their lives there, according to a study published in the April 24 online issue of *Neurology*, the medical journal of the American Academy of Neurology. The study does not prove that an increased proportion of life in Canada causes MS; it only shows an association.

“Other studies have shown that immigrants tend to have better health than long-term residents, which is thought to be because healthy people are more

likely to choose to immigrate,” says study author Manav V. Vyas, MBBS, MSc, PhD, of St. Michael’s Hospital in Toronto and a member of the American Academy of Neurology. “We wanted to see if the lower risk of MS declines over time as people adopt some of the unhealthy lifestyles of their new country or are exposed to other environmental factors that increase their risk.”

The study involved 1.5 million immigrants who arrived in Canada between 1985 and 2003 and were covered by health insur-



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ance for at least two years with no diagnosis of MS. The people were then followed through 2016.

During that time, 934 people were diagnosed with MS. This is a rate of 0.44 cases per 100,000 person-years. The overall rate of MS in Canada based on previous research is estimated to be 15 to 17 cases per 100,000 person-years. Person-years represent both the number of people in the study and the amount of time each person spends in the study.

The person's age at arrival in Canada and the amount of time since they immigrated were used to determine the proportion of life spent in Canada. Overall, people had spent an average of 20% of their lives in Canada.

Researchers found that people who had spent 70% of their lives in Canada were 38% more likely to develop MS than people who had spent 20% of their lives there. This result took into account other factors that could affect the risk of MS, such as sex, age and other health conditions.

The researchers did not find any differences between men and women or based on which of Canada's immigration classes people belonged to: family, refugee or economic.

"Our data did not include information on various environmental factors associated with MS, but our theories include that this increase in the risk of

MS over time may be due to lifestyle factors, such as higher rates of smoking and changes in diet, environmental factors, such as sunlight exposure and biological factors, such as the composition of the gut microbiome that have been previously associated with an increased risk of MS," Vyas says. "Some immigrants may be more susceptible to these risk factors due to social determinants of health such as income, education, neighborhood and access to nutritious food."

A study limitation is that new cases of MS were determined by use of the health care system, and immigrants may differ from non-immigrants in seeking care for their symptoms by cultural background, age, time spent in the country, familiarity with language or other factors related to the health care system.

The study was supported by the MS Society of Canada and the Consortium of Multiple Sclerosis Centers.

To read the original release, visit aan.com/PressRoom/Home/PressRelease/5166.

MS Research Grant

Alexander Gow, PhD, professor and associate director of the Center for Molecular Medicine and Genetics and professor of pediatrics and neurology



Alexander Gow, PhD

COURTESY OF WAYNE STATE UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF MEDICINE

at the Wayne State University School of Medicine in Detroit, received an award from the National Multiple Sclerosis (MS) Society for a study into the causes of MS.

The three-year, \$644,827 grant for his study, Metabolic Stress and Oligodendrocyte Pathophysiology, will explore the early roots of MS in patients that Gow believes may begin years — perhaps even decades — before symptoms become apparent.

Gow is studying the disease's effects on oligodendrocytes — a type of neuroglia whose main functions are to provide support and insulation to axons within the central nervous system — that may provide new insight on the development and origins of MS within patients.

"MS is commonly defined as a primary autoimmune disease," says Gow in an April Wayne State University release. "However, at diagnosis, many patients show previous disease activity in MRI scans (asymptomatic). Thus, disease begins

long before diagnosis (years, perhaps a decade or two), so no one knows how it starts. Maybe it is autoimmune, but maybe something else leads to autoimmunity. This broader perspective of MS is central to us. We know of disease processes in oligodendrocytes from MS patients that are not directly linked to autoimmunity. Could these processes contribute to disease? That is our question."

Gow will focus on processes involved with oligodendrocyte metabolism and how it may cause a type of damaging stress in the cells. This stress can also be associated indirectly to the activation of inflammatory cells in the brain and, by looking at MS from this new perspective, Gow and his team may develop improved treatments for the disease.

"We have identified a protein in oligodendrocytes, called Trb3, that might be a good drug target for this," Gow says. "In this project we will test whether Trb3 can reduce disease in oligodendrocyte. We will also characterize two other proteins that interact with Trb3 because they are known to control metabolism in cells."

Contributor:

Brendan Losinski, research communications officer, Wayne State University in Michigan ■

For assistance, please refer to the directory below to identify the PVA Service Office nearest you. Also, you may contact the PVA Veterans Benefits Department located at our headquarters in Washington, D.C., at 866-734-0857.

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334-213-3433

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VARO, North Little Rock
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VAMC, Long Beach
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VAMC, Mather
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Veterans Career Program

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302-993-7252

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202-872-1300

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386-755-3016, ext. 2236

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407-631-1000, ext. 11835

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Veterans Career Program

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VAMC, Houston
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VARO, Houston
713-383-2727

VAMC, San Antonio
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206-768-5415

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304-399-9393

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VARO, Milwaukee
414-902-5655

Right Price At Bluegrass

Angler Doug Price took home the Individual Open Division title at the April 19–21 Paralyzed Veterans of America Bass Tour’s Bluegrass Bash in Kuttawa, Ky.

Price (Walnut, Miss.) won the Open Division title with 15.38 pounds, topping runner-up Arthur Hunt (Harrisburg, Ill.; 12.19 pounds) and third-place finisher Jack Barber (West, Texas; 7.19 pounds).

In the Team Division competition, angler Steve

Miller (Olmstead, Ky.) and boat partner Robert Jones won the title with 14.61 pounds. They finished ahead of angler Paul Stewart (Clover, S.C.) and boat partner Ken McBroom (11.72 pounds) and angler Cleveland Short (Brandon, Miss.) and boat partner Bill Chumbler (11.48 pounds).

Angler Christine “Peep” Parrish (Scottsburg, Ind.) won the Individual Bank title with 10.16 pounds, ahead of runner-up Damon Slaughter (Floyds Knobs, Ind.; 7.64 pounds) and third-place finisher Cynthia Hubble (Paducah, Ky.; 7.28 pounds).

Hubble, though, teamed up with angler John Thomas (Benton, Ky.) to win the Team Bank title with 17.73 pounds, ahead of Ruth Kult (Fairview Heights, Ill.) and Thomas with 12.58 pounds and Charles Hampton (Madison, Ill.) and Parrish with 4 pounds.

Adidas Creates Uniforms

Adidas, along with Adaptive Sports Northwest (ASNW), has launched a first — wheelchair basketball uniforms.

PNW Reign women’s wheelchair basketball team members wore the uniforms, designed specifically for wheelchair and seated athletes, at the April 26–28 National Wheelchair Basketball Association Women’s Division Tournament at the Plassman Athletic Center at Turnstone Center for Children & Adults with Disabilities in Fort Wayne, Ind.

The uniforms were developed by the Adidas Innovation team in Portland, Ore., in collaboration with ASNW, a nonprofit organization for adaptive

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The PNW Reign wore new adaptive basketball uniforms designed by Adidas and Adaptive Sports Northwest at the April 26–28 National Wheelchair Basketball Association Women's Division Tournament at Turnstone Center for Children & Adults With Disabilities in Fort Wayne, Ind.

athletics. Featuring ergonomic designs, the jersey and shorts are tailored for seated positions to reduce bulk and increase comfort, according to an April 22 Adidas press release. The uniform also has lightweight woven front panels for durability and full mesh back panels for breathability, according to the release.

Additionally, materials were selected based on detailed athlete feedback sessions and data analysis. Adidas plans to increase apparel availability in 2024, but future details around release dates and retail destinations are to be determined.

Wheelchair Rugby Camps

The WWAR Generals, NEP Wildcats and Portland Pounders each wheeled their way to 2024 U.S. Wheelchair Rugby Association national championships May 3–5 at Wiregrass Ranch Sports Campus in Wesley Chapel, Fla.

The WWAR Generals rolled past the Texas Stampede, 60–49, to win the Division 1 title. The NEP Wildcats edged out the WASA Lightning, 54–53, in overtime, to take the Division 2 championship, while the Portland Pounders knocked off the Las Vegas High Rollers, 50–38, to win the Division 3 title.

Title For Pierce

Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) Team member Robert Pierce captured the 2024 PVA Spring Classic adaptive handcycling off-road race title April 13 in Chesterfield, Va.

Pierce finished in 52 minutes, 4.7 seconds, taking the title over PVA Team members Eric Thompson (1 hour, 20.6 seconds), Ricky Jones (1:03:34.8), David Santamore (1:06:31.7), Amir Pishdad Jr. (1:16:47.3) and Roberto Briseno (1:24:11.2). ■

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STEPHANIE STRICKLAND, SENIOR NSO

Increasing Access

The Department of Veterans

Affairs (VA) made a move earlier this year that focuses on providing much-needed health care to veterans and expanding access to millions of veterans who fall into a broad range of categories.

At the direction of U.S. President Joe Biden, the VA announced in February that it's expanding health care eligibility to all veterans who served in the Vietnam War, Gulf War, Iraq War, Afghanistan and to all veterans who deployed in support of contingency operations for the Global War on Terror (Operation Enduring Freedom, Operation Freedom's Sentinel, Operation Iraqi Freedom, Operation New Dawn, Operation Inherent Resolve and Resolute Support Mission), or any other combat zone after Sept. 11, 2001.

The VA announced that all veterans who were exposed to toxins and other hazards while serving in the military, at home or abroad, became eligible to enroll directly in VA health care on March 5, 2024.

This means all veterans who served in the Vietnam War, Gulf War, Iraq, Afghanistan, the Global War on Terror or any other combat zone after 9/11 are eligible to enroll directly in VA health care without first applying for VA benefits.

Additionally, veterans who never deployed, but who were exposed to toxins or hazards while training or on active duty in the United States are eligible to enroll.

The expansion of VA health care eliminates the phased-in approach called for by the Sergeant First Class

© GETTY IMAGES/ OLEG SIBIRIAKOV/VECTORSHAPE



Heath Robinson Honoring our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics Act of 2022 (PACT Act), which means millions of veterans are becoming eligible for VA health care up to eight years earlier than previously established.

Enroll Directly

This is a critical step forward.

Veterans who are enrolled in VA health care are proven to have better health outcomes than non-enrolled veterans, and VA medical centers (VAMC) have dramatically outperformed non-VA medical centers in overall quality ratings and patient satisfaction ratings. Additionally, VA health care is often more affordable than non-VA health care for veterans.

In addition to expanding access to VA health care, this decision makes it quicker and easier for millions of veter-

ans to enroll. Previously, many veterans needed to apply to receive VA disability compensation or pension benefits prior to establishing eligibility for VA health care. With this expansion and other authorities, millions of eligible veterans can now enroll directly in VA care without a need to first apply for VA benefits.

This expansion also covers many veterans who never deployed as a part of a conflict, but who were exposed to toxins or hazards while serving in the U.S. Specifically, under this expansion of care, any veteran who participated in a toxic exposure risk activity (TERA), at home or abroad, is eligible for VA health care.

The VA has determined that veterans who were exposed to one or more of the following hazards or conditions during active duty, active duty for training or inactive duty training participated in a TERA:

- Air pollutants (burn pits, sand, dust, particulates, oil well fires, sulfur fi es)
- Chemicals (pesticides, herbicides, depleted uranium with embedded shrapnel, contaminated water)
- Occupational hazards (asbestos, industrial solvents, lead, paints, including chemical agent resistant coating, firefighting foams)
- Radiation (nuclear weapons handling, maintenance and detonation, radioactive material, calibration and measurement sources, X-rays, radiation from military occupational exposure)
- Warfare agents (nerve agents, chemical and biological weapons)

The VA is to use all available information to determine if veterans participated in a TERA, including military service and health care records.

Outreach

The VA is executing a nationwide campaign to ensure that as many veterans as possible enroll.

According to a March 2024 VA press release, the PACT Act outreach campaign has included more than 2,500 events nationwide, \$13 million in paid advertising, 88,000 earned media clips, more than 400 million emails and letters to veterans, the VA's first text messaging campaign, the creation of a one-stop-shop PACT Act website and more.

This is the largest outreach campaign in VA history, and according to the release, it has the main goal of ensuring all veterans and their survivors get the health care and benefits they deserve under the PACT Act.

This is great news, primarily because Veterans Health Administration (VHA) health care is a critical service provided to the nation's veteran population by the VA.

The VHA is the United States' largest integrated health care delivery system, serving more than 9 million enrollees at nearly 1,300 health care facilities.

In addition to providing health care to the nation's veteran population, VA health care covers care for physical and mental health. This includes a range of services from checkups to surgeries to home health care. It also includes prescriptions and medical equipment.

Any eligible veteran can enroll in VA health care online at va.gov/health-care/apply/applications/introduction or by calling 877-222-8387.

For more information on this program or help with other benefit issues, contact a Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) national service officer (NSO) from the roster on page 43.

A Navy veteran, Stephanie Strickland is a senior NSO in Detroit and has been with PVA for 19 years. ■

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Your Input Is Needed! Member Survey Launching This June!

Paralyzed Veterans of America is excited to announce its survey will launch at the end of June. **Your feedback is crucial in shaping how our programs evolve, including member benefits.** Please look for the survey invitation in your email. Thank you for your support!

For more information contact
National Membership Director Kim Goodman at KimG@pva.org.



Note: ** means this is not a PVA-sponsored event.

Air Guns

- **Wisconsin Air Gun Tournament**
March 8-9, 2024
Milwaukee, WI
- **Texas Air Gun Tournament**
May 4-5, 2024
San Antonio, TX

Bass Fishing

- **Citrus Slam Bass Tournament**
Hosted by Florida Gulf Coast PVA
April 5-7, 2024
Kissimmee, FL
- **Bluegrass Bass Bash Bass Tournament**
Hosted by Kentucky-Indiana PVA
April 19-21, 2024
Kuttawa, KY
- **Capital Clash Bass Tournament**
Hosted by PVA National
June 7-9, 2024
LaPlata, MD

Billiards

- **Mid-Atlantic Billiards Tournament**
March 15-17, 2024
Midlothian, VA
- **Mid-America Billiards Tournament**
May 23-24, 2024
Oklahoma City, OK

Bowling

- **Nevada Bowling Tournament**
November 30 - December 3, 2023
Las Vegas, NV
- **Florida Gulf Coast Bowling Tournament**
January 31-February 2, 2024
Tampa, FL
- **Texas PVA Bowling Tournament**
May, 8 2024
San Antonio, Texas

Boccia

- **Bayou Boccia Tournament**
February 2-3, 2024
Gulfport, MS

Paracycling

- **PVA Racing High Performance Racing Camp**
January 28-February 4, 2024
Brooksville, Florida
- **Swamp Classic****
February 3-4, 2024
Gainesville, FL
- **Valley of the Sun Stage Race****
February 17-18, 2024
Phoenix, AZ
- **PVA Pocahontas Off-Road Spring Camp**
April 10-14, 2024
Chesterfield, VA
- **PVA Off-Road Classic (PVA Off-Road Race)**
April 13, 2024
Chesterfield, VA
- **PVA Paracycling Learn to Race Camp**
June 21-22, 2024
Milwaukee, WI
- **US Paracycling Road National Championships**
(PVA High Performance Team)
TBD 2024
Location TBD

Trapshooting

- **Cal-Diego Trapshoot**
March 22-24, 2024
Redlands, CA
- **Vaughan Trapshoot**
May 24-26, 2024
Elburn, IL
- **Wisconsin Trapshoot**
June 7-9, 2024
Green Bay, WI
- **Iowa Trapshoot (Year End)**
June 21-23, 2024
Cedar Rapids, IA

Non-Series Events

- **PVA Rugby Invitational**
January 11-14, 2024
Louisville, KY
- **National Veterans Wheelchair Games**
July 25-30, 2024
New Orleans, LA

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Northern Exposure

Don Peters of the Alaskan Polar Rollers and a friend's grandson roll down the parade route during the 2006 National Veterans Wheelchair Games in Anchorage, Alaska. This month, the Games take place in New Orleans.



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