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Gate	Time	Destination	Flight	Gate
12	20:30	MADRID	XZ 8332	18
45	20:45	RIO DE JANEIRO	DN 9145	23
18	20:46	AMSTERDAM	BQ 8873	19
34	20:50	SANTIAGO	DD 7258	34
17	20:58	MEXICO CITY	9Q 8932	20
56	21:05	STOCKHOLM	TY 9148	56
33	21:18	AMSTERDAM	BQ 9873	17
04	21:20	SANTIAGO	EB 7258	05
20	21:30	CARACAS	XJ 8582	23
25	21:35	MONTEVIDEO	DV 9145	45
28	21:40	AMSTERDAM	BQ 9873	25
13	21:45	MOSCOW	ED 8258	12



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Illustration by Kerry Randolph
©Getty Images/eugeneharnam/3DMAVR

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If you like wheelchair sports and recreation,
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Preview online at sportsnspokes.com

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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.

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PN (ISSN 0031-1766) is published monthly by Paralyzed Veterans of America, Inc., 7250 North 16th Street, Suite 100, Phoenix, AZ 85020-5214. Periodicals postage paid at Phoenix, Ariz., and additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *PN*, 7250 North 16th Street, Suite 100, Phoenix, AZ 85020-5214. Subscription rates: \$21 annually. Foreign orders: \$33 (U.S. funds drawn on a U.S. bank).



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AUGUST

Editor's DESK

It's the heart of the dog days of summer, and while that might mean some things slow down a bit, PVA Publications has been busy with changes, along with our regular production of *PN* and *SPORTS 'N SPOKES* magazines.

In the May issue of *PN*, we told you about longtime staff members Ann Garvey and Suzi Hubbard calling it a career. Well, the folks hired to take over for them are here and already hard at work. You'll be seeing them listed in the magazine masthead, but we wanted to go beyond a name and tell you a bit about them.

Dave Hostetler is our new director of art and production and comes to us with an impressive background in graphic design. An Ohio native, Dave was salutatorian of his graduating class in design school and has 35 years of award-winning experience with weekly newspapers, magazines and books.

Meanwhile, the other addition to our office is Cindy Mazanyi. Cindy is the person you'll most likely speak with first when calling the office, and she'll ensure you get *PN* on time each month. Her experience in the health care industry has given her firsthand experience with our readers' needs, equipping her with the patience and problem-solving abilities essential to helping you.

Dave and Cindy are each taking key roles with us, and their talents are a great addition our team. This is their first full issue with us, and we hope you enjoy all the great content they helped us bring to you.



Andy Nemann, Managing Editor

contributing to this issue...



Jen Kirby
(p. 28)



Lisa Elijah
(p. 14)

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- Reduce respiratory complications
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- Improve sleep for both the user and the caregiver
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ROBERT L. THOMAS JR.
NATIONAL PRESIDENT

PVA from the TOP

Learn, Network & Collaborate

What are some fun facts about the city of Anaheim, Calif.?

Well, it's the second-largest city land-wise in Orange County, Calif. It has notoriety for being the home of Disneyland, the National Hockey League's Anaheim Ducks and Major League

Baseball's Los Angeles Angels — not to mention the diverse culinary scene there. Something interesting to note is that Anaheim is also a type of mild chili pepper.

This month, however, the city is going to be known for much more than all of that. Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) will be hosting its annual Healthcare Summit + Expo Aug. 25–28 at the Anaheim Marriott in California.

The Summit is PVA's biggest health care event, with health care professionals from within and outside the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) attending from all across the country. We're happy to bring the event to California for the first time.

The Birmingham Veterans Administration Hospital, where the first veterans with spinal-cord injuries (SCI) in World War II received rehabilitation and treatment and where PVA was born, is just an hour north of Anaheim.

This learning experience is incredibly important, and it's another way PVA opens the door to make our lives better.

As always, we will have four education tracks, with two on SCI, one on multiple sclerosis (MS) and one on amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS). This year, we're pleased to have three full days of MS sessions and two full days of ALS sessions. This is the only gathering in the U.S. to provide continuing education for all three diagnoses at one conference.

There will be presentations given by keynote speakers, including remarks by VA Undersecretary for Health Shereef Elnahal, MD. There will also be four preconference sessions, including one called Planes, Trains and Automobiles: Tips and Tricks for Travel for Providers and Individuals with SCI/D (spinal-cord injury and disease). This is an important topic for PVA members and others who travel with wheelchairs.

In addition, I hope you have seen something about brain-computer interface (BCI) technology in the news. Some BCI technology allows people with SCI/D to receive an implant that allows them to communicate and perform computer-based tasks at home.

David Putrino, PT, PhD, the director of Rehabilitation Innovation at Mount Sinai Health System in New York, will kick off the Summit with an overview of this exciting technology, how it works and, most importantly, the impact BCI has on the lives of those who use it.

The expo is an important part of our Summit every year, and I'm always fascinated by the new things I see. This year, we'll have our largest expo hall featuring new treatments, technologies and assistive equipment.

As an individual living with SCI, I'm so grateful that PVA had the mindset to begin hosting a conference that provides clinicians working in the field of SCI/D with the most up-to-date research and technology. This learning experience is incredibly important, and it's another way PVA opens the door to make our lives better.

I hold great appreciation and pride for the lengths this organization goes to help not only me, but all of our members live our lives to the fullest capacities. These events are mind-opening, and I'm excited to see where these will go in the future.

For more information on the PVA Healthcare Summit + Expo, visit summitpva.org. ■



Shereef Elnahal, MD

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Something Of A Triumph

Over the past 77 years, *PN (Paraplegia News)* has documented the history of Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) and those living with spinal-cord injury and disease (SCI/D).

Brando wrote that he observed a close camaraderie amongst the patients, and the help they offered each other was impressively generous and sincere.

The PVA Publications office has become a repository for articles, documents, photographs and random ephemera. Recently, I came upon some things relating to PVA's once-cozy relationship with Hollywood legends. I found a letter from Cecil B. DeMille thanking PVA for a birthday card he received and another one from Walt Disney expressing his concerns about wheelchair accessibility at his then-new amusement park called Disneyland. I even found an autographed picture of Jayne Mansfield. Who knew she had a thing for PVA?

But the most intriguing item I found in the office was an article that appeared in the April 1950 issue of *Varsity* magazine. It was authored by a then-emerging actor named Marlon Brando.

The article, *30 Days In A Wheelchair*, gives Brando's firsthand account of the intense preparation for his inaugural film, *The Men*. It's an interesting read, and I think it was his way of introducing himself to Hollywood.

He wrote about his upcoming role in the movie as an Army captain named Ken Wilocek who was paralyzed by a sniper's bullet. Brando wasn't paralyzed and never served in the military, but that wouldn't stop him from appearing genuine.

For the purpose of authenticity, Brando asked to be admitted to the spinal-cord injury (SCI) center at Birmingham Veterans Administration Hospital in Van Nuys, Calif. Pretending to be a patient, Brando lived amongst the 32 veterans with SCI for a period of 30 days.

In the article, Brando shares his goal to familiarize himself with a wheelchair and

figure out how to look like a veteran who had been paralyzed.

"My plan was to start immediately living without the use of my legs," Brando wrote in his article. "A wheelchair was ready for me, and I got into it. From then on and throughout my stay in the hospital, with very few exceptions, I lived and moved exactly as did the rest of the boys in the ward."

However, Brando knew that portraying a veteran with SCI was much more complicated than pretending his legs didn't work, using military jargon and being able to pop a wheelie in his wheelchair. He knew he had to gain access to the veterans' psyche and try to make sense of all that stuff in their heads.

Brando was known as a method actor, which meant he would dig deep to identify, understand and experience his character's emotions. He needed a person from whom to draw inspiration; but Capt. Wilocek was an imaginary character, so Brando would need to create him.

Making Brando's preparation more intimidating was the intense indoctrination engineered by the SCI center's chief, Ernest Bors, MD. Aside from Bors' command of all things SCI, I'm sure his Slavic accent, high and tight haircut and his tendency to lecture like a drill instructor intimidated Brando even more.

It wasn't until Brando met Pat Grissom, then-president of the local PVA chapter, did Brando begin to relax. Grissom was shot and paralyzed four years prior in Germany, so he was a great resource for Brando's preparation. He gave Brando a tour of the SCI center and introduced him to the other patients as if he were a fellow veteran with SCI.

At that time, only Bors and Grissom knew Brando was pretending to be a patient. However, while the nuances of legitimate paralysis are hard to spot by those who aren't paralyzed, they are quite apparent to those who are. With that said, Brando was quickly called out as a phony. But despite the initial deception, Brando was eventually embraced by the patients.

"What struck me most was the overwhelming spirit of cooperation," Brando wrote in his article. "Everyone was anxious to help me, to



Spinal-cord injury patients at the Birmingham Veterans Administration Hospital in California observe the way actor Marlon Brando, left, handles himself in a wheelchair while preparing for the film *The Men* in December 1949.

explain the efficient operation of a wheelchair, how to get in and out of beds and automobiles, how to dress and undress and how to take part in their sports and amusements.”

Brando went on to write that much was gleaned from the patients’ sense of humor. He added that he was in a constant state of observation, and the others were quick to point out his missteps or when he accidentally broke character. Matter of fact, it happened so often that the other patients began a routine of placing bets on his ability to feign paralysis.

Brando wrote that he observed a close camaraderie among the patients, and the help they offered

each other was impressively generous and sincere. As the days passed, the patients began to include Brando when sharing their feelings of sadness, fear and anxiety — an indication they had fully accepted him.

“For an actor to pass in this company is something of a triumph,” he wrote in his article. “I was accepted as a person.”

With the 30-day indoctrination completed, Brando was ready to begin filming. He concluded his article by writing, “In talking to the men, I sensed that the horror, fatigue, filth and desperation of battle do not breed heroism as great as that required of them when the uniforms and

speeches and decorations are forgotten and they must realize that they have to adjust to wrecked lives. It isn’t that they have courage greater than other men. I learned through them that people are not brave. It is just that some are less afraid than others.”

Brando had vicariously lived the lives of these men. He had developed empathy for those he was about to represent on the big screen. This revelation may have been an unintended consequence, but it certainly lent to his credibility as an actor.

As always, let me know what you’re thinking at al@pvomag.com. ■

House Hearing

For the second time

this year, leaders from Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) expressed their concerns over care for veterans with spinal-cord injury and disease (SCI/D) before congressional leaders.

PVA National President Robert L. Thomas Jr., and PVA CEO Carl Blake spoke June 13 before the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs in Washington, D.C., at a hearing, titled A Call to Action: Meeting the Needs of the Spinal Cord Injury and Disorders Veteran Community.

The House committee hearing came just a few months after Thomas testified before a joint session of the House and Senate Committees on Veterans' Affairs March 6 in Washington, D.C.

Both testimonies were part of PVA's annual Advocacy/Legislation Seminar, which moved from March to June this year.

While on Capitol Hill in June, Thomas and Blake fiercely advocated for several key policy priorities, as well as the importance of enabling and empowering the nation's veterans with disabilities, their families and caregivers.

Thomas took a more personal approach, detailing the dire need to preserve and strengthen the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) specialty care systems

due to the lack of comparable private options in the community, improve availability of home- and community-based services and pass the Senator Elizabeth Dole 21st Century Veterans Healthcare and Benefits Improvement Act.

Meanwhile, Blake addressed the policy side of those issues and highlighted current VA system deficiencies, such as the inexcusable VA staffing shortages, lack of access to long-term care ser-

ving degradations in the care veterans are receiving," Blake said at the hearing. "Based on our site visits, member reports and even concerns raised by center staff, we believe that the system sits on the precipice of significant decline. Two factors are adversely impacting its ability to properly care for veterans: insufficient funding and lack of sufficient staffing."

Together, Thomas and Blake encouraged the com-

enhance the lives of those who have selflessly sacrificed for our nation.

For more information on PVA's policy priorities, visit pva.org/policypriorities.

Advocating On The Hill

The annual Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) Advocacy/Legislation Seminar may have occurred in a different month than usual this year, but the mission remained the same.

Taking place in June rather than March, the seminar brought together roughly 125 PVA leaders from across the country to Washington, D.C., to receive training and hands-on practice in preparation for meeting with congressional leaders on Capitol Hill.

"Hosting our Advocacy/Legislation Seminar in June provides our chapters and members with an opportunity to put spinal-cord injuries and diseases (SCI/D), such as MS [multiple sclerosis] and ALS [amyotrophic lateral sclerosis], front and center for members of Congress," says PVA Chief Policy Officer Heather Ansley, Esq., MSW, in a press release. "Collaboration with strategic partners and other veterans service organizations can help amplify our overlapping messages, but there is immense value in getting our members' distinctive message concerning

COURTESY OF PARALYZED VETERANS OF AMERICA



Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) National President Robert L. Thomas Jr., left, and PVA CEO Carl Blake testify June 13 before the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs in Washington, D.C.

vices across the country and outdated restrictions related to the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

"Although the VA's SCI/D system is critical for our veterans, we have been forced on more than one occasion to raise concerns to VA central office regard-

ing the needs of disabled veterans by passing vital legislation, such as the Sen. Elizabeth Dole bill. They also reiterated PVA's willingness to continue working collaboratively with legislators to enact meaningful policies that



Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) leaders from across the country gathered in Washington, D.C., June 11–14 for PVA's annual Advocacy/Legislation Seminar.

SCI/D within the walls of Congress, as well.”

In addition to the training sessions, House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs Chairman Mike Bost (R-Ill.) delivered a keynote address supporting PVA and its mission to help all veterans with SCI/D regain their freedom and independence.

The seminar involved more than 265 congressional visits and an SCI/D-focused testimony before the House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs June 13 by PVA CEO Carl Blake and PVA National President Robert L. Thomas Jr.

“Having PVA chapters and members attend our

annual Advocacy/Legislation Seminar is not just important — it is essential,” says Ansley in the release. “This event provides them with a unique and powerful platform to engage directly with their members of Congress while in our nation’s capital. By sharing their personal stories and experi-

ences, they can advocate for policies that have a direct impact on their lives and communities. Their voices are crucial in shaping legislation that truly reflects the needs of those who have served and the disability community.”



Racing Tribute

Several late Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) members received a special tribute over Memorial Day weekend when their names were featured atop the Team Penske cars of Joey Logano, Ryan Blaney and Austin Cindric during the NASCAR Coca-Cola 600 May 26 at Charlotte Motor Speedway. Late PVA Publications Editor-In-Chief Tom Fjerstad was featured on Blaney’s No. 12 car (pictured), while late PVA National President Joe Fox Sr., was featured on Logano’s No. 22 car and late PVA Gateway Chapter President Stan Brown was featured on Cindric’s No. 2 car.

August Recess Is A Time To Advocate

The race is on as the nation speeds toward the November elections.

Members of Congress will use the August recess to travel home to their states and districts, which in turn creates a perfect opportunity for advocates to connect with them.

This time serves as a bridge between Capitol Hill and local communities, allowing legislators to reconnect with constituents, listen to their concerns and better understand their needs.

August is a prime opportunity to make your voice heard and influence policy decisions that are important to you. With the upcoming elections, congressional leaders are eager to

assure voters that they have their best interests in mind.

Use the August recess as a way to build relationships with your representatives and senators and become a voice for your community. Part of advocacy is building relationships.

The recess gives you an opportunity to have face-to-face time with your representatives and make a connection.

The following are a few ways in which you can advocate during the August congressional recess.

Find out who your members of Congress are and go to their town hall meetings. You can ask about their positions on Paralyzed Veterans of America's (PVA) policy priorities (pva.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/PVA-2024-Policy-Priorities.pdf).

Remember, congressional leaders consider it a privilege to speak with their constituents, as you're the reason they're in their position.

Town Hall Meetings

During June's PVA Advocacy/Legislation Seminar, a PVA member named Milton mentioned that he uses town hall meetings as a way to get to know his representatives and create lasting relationships. In fact, he's used past recesses as a chance to build a relationship with one of his state's U.S. senators.

Milton believes in the importance of community and that advocates should be a voice for those who need it.

One of the priorities of which he's particularly proud is the addition of

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wheelchair track and field events for his local high school.

He says students are the next generation, and we should strive to make things better for them. Milton also says grassroots, at its core, is about community — a movement of voices to uplift those around us.

Milton also says he's built a strong relationship with his state's governor. He uses his personal story and life experiences to help his state prioritize accessibility.

His relationship-building skills helped him advocate for funding for an initiative to improve opportunities for people with disabilities in his state. He saw the need for change in his state and used his life experiences and voice to create it.

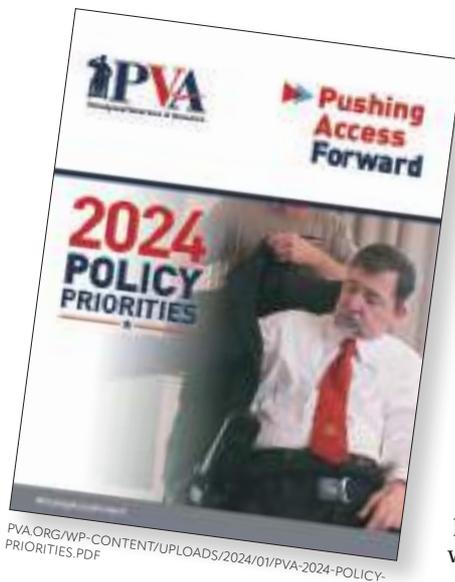
Milton is just one of the countless examples of PVA members using their experiences for the betterment of their community through relationship-building. The August recess creates a perfect opportunity for other members to speak on issues that need attention.

PVA Needs Your Voice

Every PVA member can be an advocate like Milton.

If you aren't involved in your PVA chapter, take this opportunity to become involved. See how you can contribute to your chapter's state and local initiatives, as well as work to promote PVA's national policy priorities.

PVA needs the voices of all our members, their families, friends and caregivers to ensure that elected



leaders at every level of government understand the issues veterans with spinal-cord injury and disease face on a regular basis.

There are also tools available to help you learn more about the legislative process and the best ways to be an advocate. PVA's five-part series, *The 5 W's: The*

Who, What, Where, Why, and When of Our Government and the Art of Advocacy, is available at pva.org/research-resources/disability-rights-advocacy/webinars.

By watching the videos and reviewing the tools, you can learn more about the fundamentals of government, the legislative process, stakeholders of advocacy, understanding the issues and becoming a change agent and connecting the dots.

A number of congressional leaders are up for reelection this year, and they're putting a heavier emphasis on getting out into the community to learn what their districts and states need.

Also, you can keep up with PVA's 2024 policy priorities by signing up for PVAction Force at pva.org/research-resources/pva-action-force.

PVA needs you to help advocate by using your life experiences and being a voice for your community.

Lisa Elijah is PVA's grassroots advocacy manager in Washington, D.C. She can be reached at LisaE@pva.org. ■

Life changing science

Our Research Center of Excellence, housed at the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine, is dedicated to finding effective treatments, improving the quality of life of individuals with spinal cord injuries, and ultimately, finding a cure for paralysis.

To be considered for current and future research studies, please visit our website: themiamiproject.org to complete our intake form or call our offices and request a copy of the form by mail.

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Tatyana McFadden, below, will try to add to her total of 20 Paralympic medals, including eight gold, while Jaydin Blackwell, right, will aim for his first one.

2024



Paralympic Lowdown

As the Paralympics head to Paris later this month and into September, here's a preview of what and who to look out for at the Games.

by Luke Hanlon/Red Line Editorial

Jaydin Blackwell had never

been out of the country before putting the para track and field world on notice last summer in Paris. Racing at his first major international championship, the teen from Oak Park, Mich., charged to a pair of world titles in the men's T38 100- and 400-meter events, setting a new world record in the latter.

"Just everything about it was really good," he says.

Born with cerebral palsy, the now-20-year-old Blackwell will be hoping for an even better experience this month when he's likely to return to Paris for the 2024 Paralympic Games. After defending both of his world titles this spring in Kobe, Japan, he is one of several athletes who could be primed for massive performances at the Paralympics, which run Aug. 28–Sept. 8. Many of the U.S. team's selections didn't come until mid-June or later, which just missed the deadline for this month's issue of *PN*.

Coming off a pair of pandemic-restricted Games in Tokyo (2021) and Beijing (2022), the Paralympics will be back in a big way this summer.

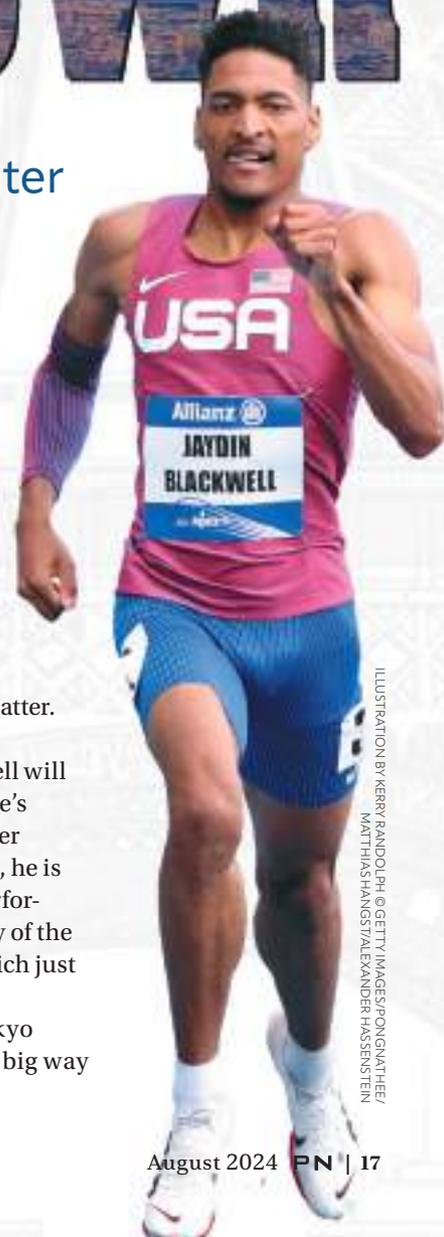


ILLUSTRATION BY KERRY RANDOLPH © GETTY IMAGES/PONGNANTHEE/MATTHIAS HANSEN/ALEXANDER HASSERSTEIN





© GETTY IMAGES/GRANT HALVERSON

U.S. swimmer Jessica Long will try to move up to second on the all-time Paralympic medal list. She has 29 overall medals and trails Switzerland cyclist Heinz Frei by six.

Organizers are expecting more than 4,400 athletes to compete in 549 medal events, though no new sports have been added to the 2024 program. Meanwhile, the International Paralympic Committee is aiming to sell 2.8 million tickets, which would break the record of 2.7 million from the 2012 Paralympics in London.

Like at the Olympics, which began July 26 and run through Aug. 11, Paralympic athletes will get to experience some of Paris' most iconic venues, including the opening ceremony Aug. 28 on the Champs-Élysées and at Place de la Concorde. From there, track and field will take place at the Stade de France, the largest stadium in the country and host of the 1998 men's World Cup soccer final. Wheelchair tennis players will compete at Roland-Garros, home of the French Open. Other stunning venues include the Grand Palais (taekwondo and wheelchair fencing), the Château de Versailles (equestrian) and the Eiffel Tower Stadium (five-a-side soccer).

Meanwhile, fans not able to travel to the French capital will have unprecedented viewing opportunities from home, with NBCUniversal planning to air more than 140 hours of

Paralympic television coverage on NBC, USA Network and CNBC — including six hours of prime time coverage on NBC. On top of that, around 1,500 hours of coverage on all



Chuck Aoki will be the first four-time U.S. Paralympian in wheelchair rugby.

© GETTY IMAGES/HARRY HOW



Susannah Scaroni (U.S.) has qualified for the wheelchair marathon at this year's Paralympics.

pic career as a swimmer in 1992, winning six medals. By 2008, she switched to cycling, and she's continued to rack up medals — including three golds in Tokyo.

Veteran U.S. athletes Oksana Masters and Tatyana McFadden, both 35, have been similarly prolific. Masters' 14 Nordic skiing medals make her the most decorated U.S. Winter Paralympian, while her Summer

© GETTY IMAGES/HARRY HOW

22 Paralympic sports will be streamed live on Peacock. According to NBCUniversal, this will be “the most comprehensive coverage of the Paralympics in U.S. media history.”

Aiming For More

Held every four years since 1960, the Paralympic Games have experienced tremendous growth in the past several years.

At the forefront, of course, are the athletes. Team USA is coming off a strong performance in 2021 in Tokyo, where American athletes won 37 gold medals and 104 total medals, ranking third and fourth in each category, respectively. China topped both lists with 96 golds and 207 total medals, extending that country's streak to five Summer Games atop the medal race.

U.S. teams will continue to be announced throughout the summer, though big names such as Chuck Aoki (wheelchair rugby), Steve Serio (men's wheelchair basketball), Susannah Scaroni (wheelchair marathon), Kendall Gretsche (para triathlon), Blake Haxton (para canoe) and Ian Seidenfeld (para table tennis) have already secured their spots.

Some of the most decorated Paralympians ever will be looking to add to their trophy cases this summer. No active Paralympian has more medals than Jessica Long's 29. The U.S. swimmer won her first medals as a 12-year-old at the 2004 Athens Games. Now 32, she's just six shy of Swiss cyclist Heinz Frei for second all-time. Sarah Storey trails Long by one in the total medal count, but the British star, now 46, leads in gold medals with 17 to Long's 16. Storey began her Paralymp-



© GETTY IMAGES/FRIEDEMANN VOGEL

The U.S.' Oksana Masters, in front, won two gold medals as a handcyclist at the 2021 Paralympics.

Games record includes a 2012 bronze medal in rowing and a pair of golds as a handcyclist in Tokyo. Among McFadden's 20 Paralympic medals from six previous Paralympics are three from Tokyo, including a gold in the universal relay. The wheelchair racing star secured her Paris spot in the marathon and is expected to qualify again on the track, too.

The most dominant active Paralympian, however, might be Markus Rehm. The German

has set a new long jump world record 14 times in a career that contains three Paralympic gold medals and seven world titles, including the most recent one in May in Kobe. Known as “The Blade Jumper” and now classified in the T64 division, Rehm has a current personal best of 8.72 meters and says he’s aiming to break the world record of 8.95 meters set by American Mike Powell in 1991.

History could be made in several team sports, too. The U.S. is aiming to become the first men’s wheelchair basketball team to three-peat at the Paralympics, while the U.S. women’s sitting volleyball team, which is ranked No. 1 in the world, is looking to join China (2004 to 2012) with a three-peat in that sport. An Iran win in men’s sitting volleyball would also clinch a three-peat. The Iranians have played in every gold-medal game since 1988, winning seven. It’s a mark of excellence surpassed in recent years only by Brazil, which has won all five gold medals in five-a-side soccer (for visually impaired athletes) since the sport debuted at the 2004 Paralympics.

Germany’s Markus Rehm will aim to break the long jump record of 8.95 meters set by American Mike Powell in 1991.



© GETTY IMAGES/PAUL MILLER

In Tokyo, the U.S. wheelchair rugby and women’s goalball teams each won silver medals, while the women’s wheelchair basketball team won bronze. Team USA has medaled in wheelchair rugby at every Paralympics since the sport debuted in 1996 but last won gold



© GETTY IMAGES/ADAM PRETTY

U.S. men’s wheelchair basketball captain Steve Serio, with ball, hopes to lead the team to the first men’s wheelchair basketball gold medal three-peat at the Paralympics.



2024 Paralympics Schedule

in 2008. For the first time in the Paralympics, the team will have a woman on the roster in Sarah Adam. Women's hoops last won gold in 2016, while in goalball, the U.S. is seeking to return to the top of podium for the first time since 2008 (women) and 1984 (men).

Possible Emerging Stars

One of the most exciting experiences in sports is watching a new star emerge. There are plenty of candidates in 2024.

Three years ago, cyclist Samantha Bosco was training for her second Paralympics when a training accident left her with two skull fractures and a traumatic brain injury. She's managed to come back even stronger. The Claremont, Calif., resident, now 37, has been almost unstoppable in the C4 classification, especially on the road.

eters to win gold. The 23-year-old from Decatur, Ill., won another world title in Kobe with a throw nearly a meter farther than the runner-up. Despite the U.S. taking a smaller team to the 2024 world championships in Kobe, Americans still won 24 medals, with six of them gold.

In the pool, Americans Olivia Chambers and Noah Jaffe combined to win 10 medals in their world championships debut last summer in Manchester, England. The 21-year-old Chambers, of Little Rock, Ark., won six of those medals in the S13 classification for visually impaired athletes.

A Carlsbad, Calif., resident who turns 21 this month and has cerebral palsy, Jaffe won the world title in the men's S8 100 freestyle and currently



© GETTY IMAGES/MICHAEL REAVES

U.S. swimmer Noah Jaffe holds the world title in the men's S8 100-meter freestyle and the world No. 2 ranking in the event behind Australia's Callum Simpson.

She should be a strong favorite to add to her two bronze medals from 2016.

Blackwell wasn't alone in his breakthrough para track and field world championships debut last year. Fellow American Noelle Malkamaki, who was born without a right hand, broke her own women's shot put F46 world record multiple times in Paris, finishing with a mark of 13.32

holds the world No. 2 ranking in the event behind Australian teen Callum Simpson, who could also make his Paralympic debut in Paris.

Luke Hanlon is a sports writer and editor based in Minneapolis. He is a freelance contributor to PN on behalf of Red Line Editorial, Inc. ■

Prepare

Flying with a wheelchair isn't easy, but these tips and tricks can help mitigate issues and potential damage.

Paralyzed Veterans of America
Immediate Past National President Charles Brown thinks wheelchair users should video their experiences on airplanes.

ILLUSTRATION BY KERRY RANDOLPH © GETTY IMAGES/EUGENE HARNAM / COURTESY OF PARALYZED VETERANS OF AMERICA

For Takeoff

Paralyzed Veterans of America Immediate Past National President Charles Brown had his wheelchair's wheels and casters, top right, front headlights, middle, and handle, bottom right, damaged during a recent flight.



by John Groth

Over a recent 12-flight

stretch, Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) Immediate Past National President Charles Brown had his power wheelchair damaged in some way by airlines. It's a ridiculous streak — even longer than when it happened seven consecutive times while he was president years ago.

He's so disgusted with it, he's now advocating for others to bring a videographer with them.

"Bring somebody that is willing to video the whole thing. If people say you can't video, then say, 'I want your [complaint] resolution officer [CRO] here. I want them to witness everything,'" Brown says. "I want them to see how poorly we're treated and things are done ... I want them to verify how the treatment is getting off the aircraft and how my equipment looks when it's delivered to me. I want everyone to know that they need to be 100 percent accountable for things. And if they won't let us do it by video, then they need to put people in place to watch it."

Continuing Problem

That's just one tip Brown, along with PVA and other wheelchair users, recommend when flying.

Wheelchairs getting damaged during air travel or by airlines continues to be a problem — one that's not improving much at all.



THREE PHOTOS COURTESY OF CHARLES BROWN

Just three months ago, an airline made national news for taking wheels off multiple wheelchair basketball teams' wheelchairs, leaving players with headaches prior to the National Wheelchair Basketball Association (NWBA) Adult Division championships.

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Wheelchair users can look into using bubble wrap to protect their wheelchairs when storing them inside an airplane.

According to the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT), in 2023, U.S. airlines transported 835,327 wheelchairs and other mobility aids, with 11,527 damage reports being filed or claimed. That's a rate of 1.38 devices damaged per 100 carried, which is slightly down from 1.41 per 100 in 2022.

And in the DOT's *Air Travel Consumer Report* for 2021, published in February 2022 and revised in 2023, it found U.S. operating carriers mishandled nearly 20 wheelchairs and scooters on average per day. Additionally, a 2023 DOT report shows that disability-related complaints have jumped 200% since 2019.

PVA is one organization trying to spearhead solutions to help airlines and travelers reduce issues and mitigate damage to wheelchairs. A few years ago, PVA created

its Accessible Air Travel tips and resources website (pva.org/research-resources/tips-tools-resources) for travelers in wheelchairs to submit their problems and also started up a #JustPlaneWrong (pva.org/justplanewrong) social media movement for wheelchair users to tag and share issues.

PVA Chief Policy Officer Heather Ansley, Esq., MSW, also recommends looking at the DOT's Airline Passengers With Disabilities Bill of Rights under the Air Carrier Access Act (www.transportation.gov/airconsumer/disabilitybillofrights) to understand and know what rights wheelchair users have.

Constant Communication

One of the most vital ways wheelchair users can help themselves is by communicating with everyone who will be handling their wheelchair.

That means calling ahead to let the airline know you'll be flying with a wheelchair (or multiple chairs, if you're a team), and then continuing to inform airport personnel as soon as you get to the airport. Talk to the gate agent and the airplane personnel who will be handling your wheelchair and make sure they know where and how you want it stowed, how you want to be transferred and what seat you'll be comfortable being transferred into.

Wheelchair users should make sure to advocate for themselves, as well. If you don't want your wheels to come off, tell personnel — repeatedly. If you don't want something done or have an alternate idea, speak up. Every airline is required to have a CRO, either in person or by phone, so if there's an issue, make sure to request one. And if something is broken, make sure to file a claim within 24 hours.

"But the most important thing is to let them know as soon as you possibly can about what you're bringing, what you're going to need, and then that day, provide as much information as you can and take as much as you can into the cabin," Ansley says.

Marine Corps veteran Donald Burns learned a new tidbit last year. A 44-year-old left-leg below-the-knee amputee, he had his wheelchair broken in mid-July 2023 by an airline at Dallas Fort Worth International Airport



Wheelchair users should make sure to communicate with everyone handling their chair.

after arriving for a University of Texas-Arlington military veterans wheelchair basketball camp.

While going through the process of getting his wheelchair replaced, Burns talked to an airline gate agent who told him the best way to travel with a sports wheelchair was to take it all the way to the gate and to check it at the gate.

“So, that way it’s less distance that the chair has to travel through the airport to get to where it needs to be, so that’s the first thing off the plane when you get off the plane,” Burns says.

Wheelchair Stowage & Storage

Wheelchair users aren’t just limited to storing their wheelchairs in the belly of the plane. There are other places they can be stored, including in the cabin and even strapped in a seat next to you.

Ansley says you have the opportunity to stow your wheelchair — or at the very least, pieces of your wheelchair, such as your cushion, wheels or joystick if it’s a power wheelchair — in the cabin. Wheelchair users can take them off, put them in an oversized bag and store the bag in an overhead bin or in the front closet if it’s not being used.

Seat-strapping is also a possibility. Ansley says airlines have a seatstrap that they can use to secure a manual wheelchair, regardless if it displaces another passenger. If it won’t

displace another passenger, then they are required to strap up to two wheelchairs.

According to Spinalpedia, a disability services and support organization in Bethesda, Md., if you ask, some airlines will actually reserve the empty seat next to you for you to strap your wheelchair in and avoid it being handled by baggage handlers.

“So, it could be strapped into the seat in the cabin,” Ansley says.

Power wheelchair users can also use some do-it-yourself ideas to protect their wheelchairs. If your power wheelchair allows it, you can detach the joystick, controller and

Power wheelchair users can protect their chair’s joystick by putting plastic or velcro bands, top, or a plastic container over it, bottom.



COURTESY OF BENEFICIAL DESIGNS



COURTESY OF BENEFICIAL DESIGNS

“I like labeling personally, because when we end up in situations where there’s multiple chairs, like, that’s the only way you’re going to get it done in a quicker manner, right?” — Desiree Miller



Wheelchair users can buy a wheel bag like this one off amazon.com.

even the headrest, take them with you and store them in one of your personal bags on the plane. Ansley also knows of a PVA member who put a Tupperware container over the joystick and bungee-corded it tightly to try to keep it safe and minimize any damage.

Additionally, wheelchair users can check out some airlines’ websites to see which flights can best accommodate their wheelchair. In March, United Airlines unveiled accessibility features on its website that allow users to find flights that are best equipped to handle the size of their wheelchairs. A user inputs the dimensions of his or her wheelchair or mobility device in a filter on the booking page, and the flight results prioritize the itineraries with the planes that are best able to carry the wheelchair or mobility device.

Labels, Labels, Labels

Another tip — be a label maker.

Navy veteran and Golden State Road Warriors wheelchair basketball player Steven Davis dealt with a frustrating flight recently heading into Richmond, Va., for the NWBA Adult Division Wheelchair Basketball National Championships.

After flying into Denver International Airport in Colorado in April, the 44-year-old says he repeatedly told airport and airline personnel to not remove the wheels from his wheelchair. They said they needed to do so to get it through an elevator — he obliged, but then told them to put them back on once they were through.

But once he boarded the airplane, he instead watched helplessly at a maddening sight.

Airline personnel had taken the wheels off of his and other athletes’ wheelchairs, leading them to an hourslong puzzle-sorting process once they arrived in Richmond.



ILLUSTRATION BY KERRY RANDOLPH

“Now, I’ve learned from this experience that I’m going to put my names on every wheel I have. I’m going to put my name on the chairs. So, that way when this situation does happen, because it’s not going to be avoided — this is going to happen again — it’ll be



Wheelchair users can keep their wheels together by putting packing tape around them and labeling them or using zip ties.

easier just to match the chairs to the wheels,” Davis says.

Count U.S. Paralympic women’s wheelchair basketball assistant coach Desiree Miller among the labeling fans. A two-time Paralympian and Paralympic gold medalist, she has flown all over the world and knows all about the frustrations of flying and mishandling of wheelchairs.

She says the U.S. Paralympic women’s wheelchair basketball team spends extra time labeling their equipment before they leave for a flight. So, she suggests grabbing some labels, masking tape or duct tape and permanent markers, markers or pens to label each wheel and each piece of equipment that’s going on the plane.

“I like labeling personally, because when we end up in situations where there’s multiple chairs, like, that’s the only way you’re going to get it done in a quicker manner, right?” says Miller, who’s served as an assistant coach the past three years.

Travel Differently

Wheelchair users can also choose to use a different airline, or driving is always an option, too. That’s what Brown ended up doing.

Brown’s April trip from West Palm Beach, Fla., to Washington, D.C., for a PVA Education Foundation meeting and the PVA Igniting Change Gala resulted in damaged leg and seat elevation devices and a degrading and humiliating moment.

As passengers were deplaning, he was in an aisle chair, and two people seated next to him couldn’t get off without climbing over him. They

didn’t feel comfortable doing that. So, airline personnel moved Brown to another aisle chair. In the process, and since he says they lifted him incorrectly, his pants started falling off. Once personnel lifted and transferred him to his wheelchair, it didn’t get much better.

“The feet elevation was not working smoothly. I hesitated and shook my head. This is not going to happen again. I’m not going to have another broken chair,” Brown says. “I was all by myself, my pants were half-off my bottom again. [Later,] my caregiver was able to get to me, and I was able to position my pants on better privately.”

Brown decided to cancel his flight back home and called a friend, who drove Brown’s accessible van from Florida to Washington, D.C., to help him. Brown then drove to Georgia to do a PVA chapter visit and then later drove home.

PVA Mid-Atlantic Chapter member Jeff Dolezal has resorted to that, too. In 2014, the 63-year-old Air Force veteran was so frustrated after having his bags and items inside them get soaked by rain from Baltimore/Washington International Thurgood Marshall Airport to Harry Reid International Airport in Las Vegas, that he hasn’t flown since.

Now, he elects to drive. He’s driven from Fairfax, Va., to Las Vegas multiple times and also drove from Fairfax to Minneapolis for May’s PVA 78th Annual Convention.

“I drive everywhere,” Dolezal says. ■

CLAIM PREDAT

Despite countless ads, a veteran's best place for help with benefits is with a veterans service organization.

ILLUSTRATION BY DAVID HOSTETLER © GETTY IMAGES/JESSICAHYDE/VLADIMIRS/STILLFX

When Mike Sheets

first speaks to a veteran or a veteran's family, he starts with small talk.

Sheets, himself a Marine Corps veteran, wants to get to know them, and for them to learn a little about him. He'll ask about the veteran's service years and branch.

"We try to develop that rapport so we can build trust and common experiences," Sheets says.

That trust is essential for Sheets' job as a Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) national service officer (NSO).

He's one of dozens of PVA NSOs whose job is to help veterans apply — free of charge — for benefits from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).

Sheets is part of a nationwide network of accredited veterans service officers who assist and advocate for veterans at no cost to them.

by Jen Kirby



BOOTS

“When I explain that to veterans and as my team explains that, that’s at the top of everything we do: It does not cost you anything at all,” Sheets says.

Sheets wants to make this clear to the veterans he assists: Not only will it not cost you anything, but veterans or their families should never have to pay to file an initial claim for a disability or service-related injury with the VA.

“The system is designed in a way that veterans should not have to give up any of their benefits in order to get the benefits that they’ve earned,” says David Barrans, chief counsel for benefits law in the Office of the General Counsel of the VA.

None Of It Is True

Yet there’s a rise in law firms and other groups promising to maximize disability benefits in

Experts say “claim predators” can cost a veteran \$5,000 or much more for services that should be free.

exchange for fees or a cut of the benefits targeting veterans.

Ads from those firms can be seen and heard on a seemingly never-ending basis on TV and the radio. This is especially true as legislation such as the Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics (PACT) Act expands benefits eligibility. Some of these firms are exploiting legal loopholes, frustrations or trepidations about the VA claims process to profit off veterans and their families.

“We call them ‘claim predators,’” says Maureen Elias, a senior benefits official with the VA. “What they’re doing is promising that they can get [benefits] faster, that they’ll give [veterans] a higher rating, that they’ll be given more priority. And none of that is true.”

Veteran advocates estimate that these firms can cost veterans between \$5,000 and \$10,000, though charges can sometimes reach \$20,000 or higher, all for a service that, according to the law, should be free.



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Unlike NSOs such as Sheets and his colleagues, these firms and their representatives lack accreditation from the VA. That accreditation provides oversight and ensures those assisting veterans meet certain ethical standards and are up to speed on the latest rules.

“We have rigorous training and regulations that we have to abide by to maintain that accreditation, and that accreditation gives us inside access to make stuff as streamlined as possible for the veteran,” Sheets says.

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Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) National Vice President Josue Cordova, left, talks with PVA Associate Executive Director of Veterans Benefits Peter Gaytan.

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VA



U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

But right now, there's little the VA, or federal or state governments, can do to stop these so-called "claim predators." In 2006, Congress removed criminal penalties for charging vet-

"We call them 'claim predators.' What they're doing is promising that they can get [benefits] faster, that they'll give [veterans] a higher rating, that they'll be given more priority. And none of that is true."

— Maureen Elias

erans to file initial claims, making it all but impossible to enforce the law. It's a bit like violating the speed limit, and instead of getting a ticket, always getting off with a warning.

"The VA can essentially tell you, 'Hey, knock it off, and I mean it,' and that's it," says Patrick Murray, director of national legislative affairs with Veterans for Foreign Wars (VFW), which is among the network of veterans service officers helping people access benefits for free.

Elias says even if some of these firms do get fined for shady practices, the penalties are often far below the profits they make from veterans' claims, so the financial incentive outweighs any costs.

All The Same System

The PACT Act may have helped supercharge the industry, as the legislation represents one of the largest expansions of VA health care and benefits in decades.

It requires the VA to hire and train thousands of new staff on new procedures, a transition that's led to both backlogs and errors in veterans' claims. For-profit companies took a real problem and tried to sell themselves as the solution, seizing the opportunity to

COURTESY OF PARALYZED VETERANS OF AMERICA



Paralyzed Veterans of America national service officers go through "rigorous training and regulations" to be accredited by the Department of Veterans Affairs.

attract veterans who were overwhelmed by the process. *PN* reached out to some of these companies and the National Association for Veteran Rights, an industry lobbying group, to ask about their business practices, but none returned a request for comment by press time.

VA officials and advocates acknowledge some of the hurdles the PACT Act created, but they insist that paying for services won't help any veteran get ahead.

"Everybody's going through the same system in terms of filing," says PVA Chief Policy Officer Heather Ansley, Esq., MSW. "If you have a legitimate claim, you're not going to be able to get it faster by using one of these groups."

The VA says it's addressing this backlog with hiring. It's also trying to more quickly pay out veterans for disabilities as soon as they're approved, rather than waiting for an entire claim to be processed.

Still, the length of time can vary, depending on the claim's complexity, so NSOs like Sheets try to explain the realities of the process and manage expectations. Murray says it typically takes

about five months for veterans to get approved and receive benefits, which he stressed was just OK.

“But paying these companies five, 10, 20 grand, they’re not going to make that any less time,” Murray adds.

These companies sometimes, as Elias puts it, do a “less than good job,” because some can charge more for appeals or a claim review.

“I can tell you through experience, I’ve seen some stuff that some individuals have paid a claims rep to do that we’ve gone back to fix — and done that for free,” Sheets says.

An Intimate Relationship

On Sheets’ list of priorities, after getting to know his clients and informing them that his help is free, is giving veterans a form to sign that makes PVA their accredited representative.

This gives PVA access to records and documents and allows PVA to help veterans prepare and present a benefits claim. It means PVA is

helping the veteran every step of the way. If the veteran or veteran’s family gets a letter, so does Sheets, so they can go over it together.

It also protects veterans. Because NSOs are accredited, the VA can hold them accountable if something goes awry. Those guardrails don’t exist for those who seek assistance from for-profit companies, which means veterans, not necessarily the claim predators, are on the hook if information is, even unintentionally, falsified or misrepresented.

Advocates fear that veterans may bear the brunt of some unsavory practices by such firms. The VA is trying to increase both education and awareness of scams of all types through its Veteran Scam and Fraud Evasion Task Force. But because many of these claim predators operate in something of a legal gray zone, actual enforcement is very difficult.

Many of these for-profit companies say they’re trying to do right by veterans and are providing a necessary alternative. VA officials

COURTESY OF PARALYZED VETERANS OF AMERICA



Paralyzed Veterans of America national service officers are accredited and can be held accountable by the Department of Veterans Affairs.



COURTESY OF PARALYZED VETERANS OF AMERICA

and advocates admit there's always more to do, especially when it comes to education about the claims process.

"It does become a very intimate relationship over the years because we get to know them. They're family, and we're family."

— Mike Sheets

But governments and nonprofits, such as PVA or VFW, don't have unlimited resources to advertise. It's hard, they admit, to compete with a flood of social media ads and all those Camp Lejeune TV commercials.

One fix, of course, is to give the VA the power to enforce the law. A handful of states, such as New Jersey, have passed legislation to establish clear terms for charging veterans. Congress also introduced the Governing Unaccredited Representatives Defrauding VA Benefits Act of 2023, which would reinstate criminal penalties for unaccredited agents who charge veterans fees for filing initial claims.

But that legislation is stalled in Congress and is competing with another bill, the Preserving Lawful Utilization of Services for Veterans Act of 2023, which would bring for-profit companies into the accreditation system but would still allow them to charge for initial claims.

Sheets, who has worked as an NSO since 2010, sees the initial benefits claim as the first step. If a client gets denied or needs to appeal, he walks him or her through it, trying to ease the stress. He and his colleagues check in with veterans or surviving spouses at least once a year.

These relationships become lifelong ones; Sheets will help a veteran, and then maybe that veteran's kids will go into the military, and he may help them, too. When it's time for survivor benefits, Sheets will help the spouse.

"It does become a very intimate relationship over the years because we get to know them," he says. "They're family, and we're family."

As Sheets and other veterans groups emphasized, their services are available to all veterans, whether or not they're a member of a certain organization. Veterans can call PVA's hotline at 866-734-0857 to connect with an NSO or contact one from the roster on page 44.

"There are people out there volunteering to protect this country," Sheets says. "We should have free services to take care of them and protect them." ■

Paralyzed Veterans of America national service officers assist veterans with filing for their benefits for free.

viewpoint

JASON SPOHN

Heroes Still Exist

Air travel can be particularly stressful for wheelchair users, with concerns not only about the safety of their equipment, but also about the process of transferring from their wheelchair to an aisle chair and then to the airplane seat.

Unfortunately, incidents of travelers being injured during transfers or mishandled by inexperienced airport staff aren't uncommon.

Taxing & Hazardous

In May, our chapter embarked on a journey from Baltimore/Washington International Thurgood Marshall Airport (BWI) in Baltimore to PVA's 78th Annual Convention in Minneapolis.

From the outset, Peeling made it clear to airport staff, including the airline crew, that he would need transfer assistance to his seat in the front row of the airplane due to his inability to stand.

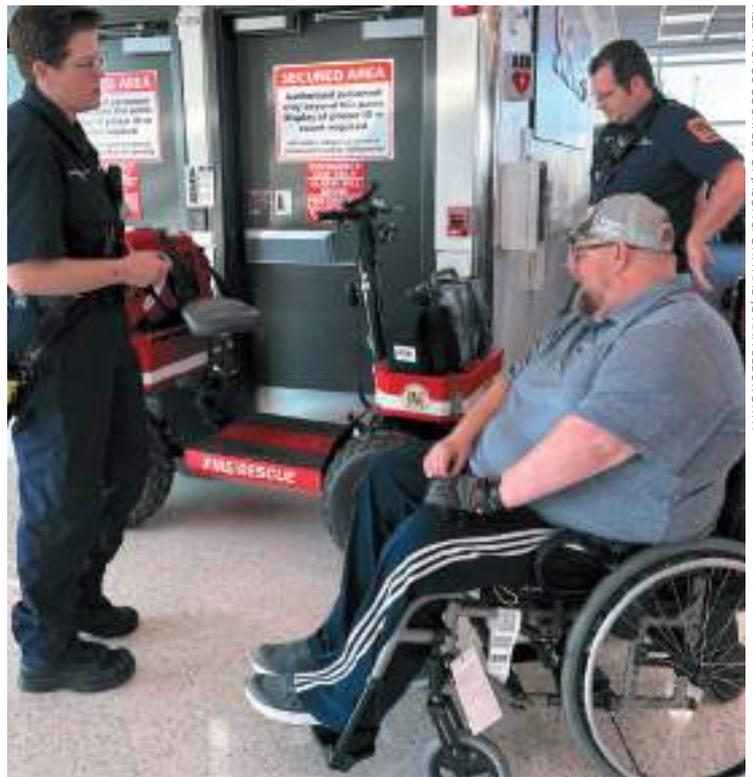
Despite assurances of adequate assistance, the boarding process

Such situations can be mentally taxing and potentially hazardous, prompting the question of why airports lack sufficient personnel trained in assisting passengers with mobility needs.

Upon arrival at Minneapolis-Saint Paul International Airport (MSP), the immediate concern was whether there were personnel capable of properly and safely transferring Peeling off the plane. Within minutes, the airport fire department



Minneapolis-Saint Paul International Airport Fire Department personnel transfer Matt Peeling off an airplane.



Matt Peeling, seated, talks to Baltimore/Washington International Thurgood Marshall Airport Fire & Rescue personnel.

However, there have been recent instances that shed light on positive experiences, thanks to the efforts of Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) Colonial Chapter President and National Director Matt Peeling.

proved challenging. Initially, there was a shortage of staff available to help. The combined efforts of several travelers and chapter members allowed Peeling to eventually transfer to the aisle chair and settle into his seat.

arrived equipped with the necessary tools and personnel.

Using a specialized strap with handles, they swiftly and securely transferred Peeling from the airplane to his wheelchair. The relief on his face

ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF JASON SPOHN AND JO ANN BEDSWORTH

was palpable, prompting reflection on why such assistance isn't universally available across the United States.

The airport fire department assured us of their availability and encouraged us to notify the terminal in advance for seamless assistance.

Professionalism & Compassion

A week later, as we prepared to depart from Minneapolis to Baltimore, Peeling's anxiety was alleviated thanks to the proactive efforts of Southwest Airlines employee Daniel Hanigar.

Hanigar not only met the chapter in the Minneapolis terminal, but he had notified the fire department there about the assistance that was required, as well as called ahead to BWI.

The transfer process was efficient and stress-free in Minneapolis, ensuring a comfortable journey home. True to Hanigar's word, BWI had coordinated with its Fire & Rescue department, which provided a smooth transfer upon arrival.

The professionalism and compassion demonstrated by the airport staff in Minneapolis and at BWI made a significant difference in Peeling's travel experience. Their dedication to mitigating potential hazards and ensuring the safety and comfort of passengers with mobility challenges is commendable.

"Over the years, I have battled panic attacks and anxiety in the days leading up to my plane travels," Peeling says. "These feelings stemmed from past experiences of improper transfers to and from airline seats, broken wheelchairs and disrespectful treatment. I anticipated the same struggle this time around, but however, I was pleasantly surprised. The lift and transfer into my wheelchair was executed with remarkable expertise and sensitivity. Southwest

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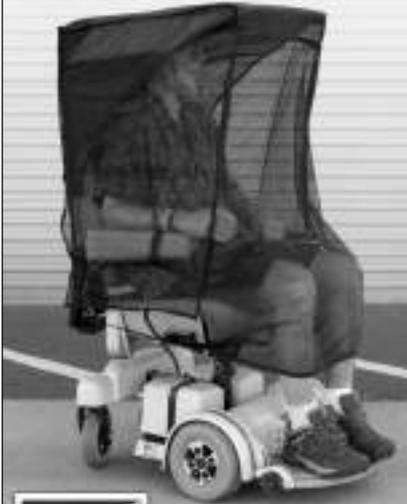
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Matt Peeling, seated, with Minneapolis–Saint Paul International Airport Fire Department personnel after his arrival.

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Airlines, particularly at MSP and BWI, demonstrated an exceptional commitment to safety and respect through the process. Their high service standards

for individuals with mobility challenges were evident, and the team from both fire departments was truly outstanding. Both ensured my comfort and safety to reaffirm my sense of dignity.”

A heartfelt thank you is extended to everyone at MSP and BWI for their assistance in facilitating safe air travel for passengers like Peeling.

Their commitment to going the extra mile for passengers with mobility limitations underscores the importance of advocating for oneself and seeking appropriate assistance.

Special recognition is reserved for the airport fire department personnel, whose actions truly exemplify heroism in ensuring the safety and well-being of travelers.

Jason Spohn is the marketing director for the PVA Colonial Chapter in Newark, Del. ■



Fire department personnel transfer Matt Peeling into an aisle chair to deplane.



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

Air Guns

Winter Air Gun National Tournament	December, 2024	Colorado Springs, CO
Central Florida Air Gun Tournament	February 8-9, 2025	Orlando, FL
Wisconsin Air Gun Tournament	March 21-22, 2025	Racine, WI
Texas Air Gun Tournament	May 31-Jun 1, 2025	San Antonio, TX

Bass Fishing

Okie Open Bass Tournament	September 13-15, 2024	Eufaula, OK
Southeastern Challenge Bass Tournament	September 27-29, 2024	Appling, GA
Bayou Gulf Coast Bass Tournament	October 11-13, 2024	Westwego, LA
Citrus Slam Bass Fishing Tournament	April 4-6, 2025	Kissimmee, FL
Bluegrass Bash Bass Tournament	April 11-13, 2025	Kuttawa, KY
Location TBD	May 2-4, 2025	TBD
Capital Clash Bass Tournament (Year-End)	June 6-8, 2025	La Plata, MD

Basketball

PVA Basketball Camp	August 8-11, 2024	Lawrence, KS
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Billiards

Great Plains Billiards Tournament	September 19-21, 2024	Omaha, NE
Mid-South Billiards Tournament	October 11-12, 2024	Memphis, TN
Mid-Atlantic Billiards Tournament	March 14-16, 2025	Midlothian, VA
Mid-America Billiards Tournament	April 10-12, 2025	Oklahoma City, OK

Boccia

West Virginia Boccia Tournament	November 1-2, 2024	Charleston, WV
New England Boccia Tournament	November 16-17, 2024	Brockton, MA
Bayou Gulf States Boccia Tournament	February 1-2, 2025	Gulfport, MS
Long Beach Boccia Tournament	March 29-30, 2025	Long Beach, CA
Puerto Rico Boccia Tournament	May 3-4, 2025	San Juan, PR

First-Of-Its-Kind SCI Study

Scientists at Shirley

Ryan AbilityLab in Chicago are behind a first-of-its-kind study which could potentially impact the lives of nearly 300,000 people in the U.S. who have a spinal-cord injury (SCI).

Current treatment options to maximize functional recovery typically are limited to surgery and rehabilitation. But Shirley Ryan AbilityLab is studying an investigational treatment,

NVG-291 works by promoting natural repair processes to improve the connections disrupted by a SCI.

As a result of these findings, NVG-291 has received Fast Track designation by the Food and Drug Administration and has been shown to be safe and well-tolerated in a Phase 1 trial. The study is testing its safety and effectiveness in people with SCI.

The two-part trial will enroll a total of approximately 40 individuals with chronic and subacute cervical SCI. The trial is designed to measure the electrical “connectivity” of nerve pathways to monitor recovery of motor function.

To learn more study details, visit connectscistudy.com.

Best & Worst States For Vets

The personal-finance website WalletHub released its report on the Best & Worst States for Military Retirees in 2024.

To help military personnel plan their years after service, WalletHub compared the 50 states and the District of Columbia across 28 key indicators of retirement-friendliness for veterans.

The data set ranges from job opportunities for veterans to housing affordability to the quality of Department of Veterans Affairs hospitals.



The top five states for military retirees are:

- 1) South Carolina
 - 2) Florida
 - 3) Virginia
 - 4) Maryland
 - 5) North Dakota
- Rounding out the bottom of the list as the five worst places for veterans are:
- 47) Nevada
 - 48) District of Columbia
 - 49) Vermont
 - 50) New Mexico
 - 51) Oregon

To view the full report and your state’s rank, visit wallethub.com/edu/best-states-for-military-retirees/3915.

MS Treatment Strategy

A lab team from Philadelphia’s Wistar Institute has demonstrated how B cells infected with the Epstein-Barr virus (EBV) can contribute to a pathogenic, inflammatory phenotype that contributes to multiple sclerosis (MS). The group has also shown how

these problematic B cells can be selectively targeted in a way that reduces the damaging autoimmune response of MS.

Findings from Paul M. Lieberman, PhD, and the lab team led by senior staff scientist and first author, Samantha Soldan, PhD, were published in May in *Nature Microbiology* in the paper, Multiple sclerosis patient derived spontaneous B cells have distinct EBV and host gene expression profiles in active disease.

EBV — a usually inactive, or latent, herpesvirus — affects most of the human population; more than 90% of people carry the virus as a passive, typically symptomless infection. However, EBV infection has been linked to several diseases, including MS.

The Lieberman lab, in seeking to understand how EBV contributes to the development of MS, collaborated with Steven Jacobson, PhD, of the neuroimmunology branch at the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke, who contributed cell line samples from patients. The research team analyzed spontaneous lymphoblastoid cell line (SLCL) cell samples from a healthy control group; a group of patients with active MS (as opposed to so-called stable MS; the disease is characterized by unpredictable periods of flare-ups and eased symptoms); and a group of patients with stable MS.



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called NVG-291, which targets the body’s natural inhibitors of nervous system repair.

Specifically, preclinical studies suggest that NVG-



A team led by researchers Samantha Soldan, PhD, left, and Paul Lieberman, PhD, has demonstrated how B cells infected with the Epstein-Barr virus can contribute to a pathogenic, inflammatory phenotype that contributes to multiple sclerosis.

Lieberman and his team conducted genetic analyses of the SLCLs and confirmed that the MS-positive sample groups showed greater expression of genes associated with lytic EBV (“lytic” describes when latent viruses like EBV become active); they also saw increased inflammatory signaling and expression of the FOXP1 protein, the latter of which was shown to promote lytic EBV gene expression. As a whole, the group’s findings suggested a mechanism of lytic EBV in MS that promoted inflammation and disease.

Lieberman’s group also tested several antiviral compounds on all SLCL groups and found that one, TAF, reduced lytic EBV gene expression without killing the cells. TAF also significantly reduced the

expression of inflammatory cytokines like IL-6 in the SLCLs from the patients with active MS. Finally, when cultured SLCLs from active MS, stable MS and controls were administered TAF in the presence of antiviral T cells, the T cell response was reduced in SLCLs from patients with MS but not reduced in the control SLCLs — an indication that TAF treatment has potential as a selectively cytotoxic anti-lytic treatment for MS.

“Our work with these SLCLs shows that the problematic inflammation signaling from lytic EBV can be selectively targeted in a way that demonstrably reduces damaging immune responses,” says Lieberman in a May Wistar Institute release. “We’re excited about expanding this concept fur-

ther; we have the potential to see whether TAF or other inhibitors of EBV might be a viable treatment for multiple sclerosis that can stop the autoimmune damage without causing wide-ranging and dangerous cell death.”

Access To Good Jobs For All

The Department of Labor announced that its Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) has chosen Access to Good Jobs for All as the theme for National Disability Employment Awareness Month (NDEAM), which will be observed in October.

NDEAM annually celebrates the contributions of the nation’s disabled workers and showcases supportive, inclusive policies and practices that benefit employees and employers alike.

“Our theme in 2024, Access to Good Jobs for All, speaks to our commitment to expand the number of employment opportunities for people with disabilities and the quality of those opportunities,” says Assistant Secretary for Disability Employment Policy Taryn M. Williams. “Good jobs change lives and all workers — including disabled people — deserve the opportunity to prepare for success in high-quality, good-paying jobs in workplaces free of discrimination.”

In 1945, the nation first designated a national week to recognize the contributions of people with physical disabilities. Designated by Congress as NDEAM in 1988, the commemoration evolved to acknowledge the importance of increasing the number of people with disabilities in the workforce. In 2001, ODEP was created

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and given responsibility for NDEAM and for selecting and helping promote its annual theme.

Learn more about NDEAM and how organizations can participate by visiting dol.gov/agencies/odep/initiatives/ndeam.

Therapy For Chronic Pain

A study led by University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) Health and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) found chronic pain among older adults could be significantly reduced through a newly developed psychotherapy that works by confronting past trauma and stress-related emotions that can exacerbate pain symptoms.

Published in *JAMA Network Open* on June 13, the study compared the newer therapy, known as emotional awareness and expression therapy, or EAET, to traditional cognitive behavioral therapy, or CBT, in treating chronic pain, as well as mental health symptoms such as depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among older veterans.

The study found that 63% of veterans who underwent EAET reported at least a 30% reduction in pain — a clinically significant reduction — after treatment compared to only 17% of veterans who underwent CBT. Pain



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reduction was sustained among 41% of EAET participants six months after treatment compared to 14% of CBT patients. Additionally, EAET patients reported greater benefits for addressing anxiety, depression, PTSD and life satisfaction.

Cognitive behavioral therapy has long been the “gold standard” for psychotherapeutic treatment of chronic pain among veterans, says lead author Brandon Yarns, an assistant professor at UCLA Health’s Department of Psychiatry and Biobehavioral Sciences and psychiatrist at the VA Greater Los Angeles, in a June UCLA Health release. However, studies so far have shown CBT produces modest benefits for relieving pain. For chronic pain, patients undergo a treatment package with some similar exercises to those used to treat depression or anxiety such

as guided imagery, muscle relaxation, cognitive restructuring and activity pacing. The end goal is for patients to improve their ability to tolerate their pain, Yarns says.

By comparison, EAET has one primary intervention: experiencing, expressing and releasing emotions.

Developed in the 2010s, the therapy aims to show patients that the brain’s perception of pain is strongly influenced by stress-related emotions. Patients are asked to focus on a stressful interaction, from anything as mundane as being cut off by a driver to severe traumas such as sexual assault. Yarns says the purpose is to have patients experience these emotions both in mind and in body. The patients then work to confront these emotions, express their reactions and ultimately to let go.

In the study, researchers recruited 126 veterans —

predominantly men — ages 60 to 95 with at least three months of musculoskeletal pain. More than two-thirds of participants had a psychiatric diagnosis, with about one-third having PTSD. The study was the first full-scale clinical trial of EAET among older adults, older men and veterans, with past studies being largely made up of younger, female participants, Yarns says.

Half of the participants underwent in-person CBT, while the other half concurrently underwent in-person EAET over nine sessions, which included one personal session and eight small-group sessions.

Patients were asked to rate their pain levels using a 0 to 10 scale in the Brief Pain Inventory before starting treatment, at the end of the nine sessions and six months after the sessions ended.

Yarns says he is now studying whether similar positive results could be replicated using virtual group sessions, which will compare EAET, CBT and also include a mindfulness therapy cohort. Additionally, Yarns says neuroimaging studies will be pursued to understand the brain changes among participants in EAET versus CBT therapies.

To read the original release, visit uclahealth.org/news/release/confronting-trauma-alleviates-chronic-pain-among-older. ■



Bowling

West Virginia Bowling Tournament	August 9-11, 2024	Kanawha City, WV
Nevada Bowling Tournament	December 5-8, 2024	Las Vegas, NV
Florida Gulf Coast Bowling Tournament	January 16-19, 2025	Tampa, FL
Texas Bowling Tournament	April 30-May 2, 2025	San Antonio, TX
PVA Bowling National Championship	June 26-29, 2025	Omaha, NE

Paracycling

PVA High Performance Racing Camp	August 12-21, 2024	Crested Butte, CO
Off-Road Handcycling Championship	August 18-20, 2024	Crested Butte, CO
Pocahontas Off-Road Fall Camp	September 11-15, 2024	Chesterfield, VA
Adaptive Off-Road Cycling Adventure	October 23-27, 2024	Bentonville, AR
PVA Racing High Performance Racing Camp	January 25-31, 2025	Tampa, FL
Pocahontas Off-Road Spring Camp	April 9-13, 2025	Chesterfield, VA
PVA Off-Road Classic	April 12, 2025	Chesterfield, VA

Pickleball

California Pickleball Tournament	October 19-20, 2024	Long Beach, CA
Texas Pickleball Tournament	November 9-10, 2025	San Antonio, TX
Colonial Pickleball Tournament	June 14-15, 2025	Perry Point, MD

Trapshooting

North Central Trapshoot Tournament	September 6-8, 2024	Sioux Falls, SD
Vaughan Trapshoot Tournament	May 23-25, 2025	Elburn, IL
Iowa Trapshoot Tournament	June 20-22, 2025	Cedar Rapids, IA
Wisconsin Trapshoot Tournament (Year-End)	June 27-29, 2025	Green Bay, WI
Trapshoot Tournament	TBD	TBD

Rugby

PVA Rugby Invitational	Feb 14-16, 2025	Louisville, KY
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National Veterans Wheelchair Games

43rd National Veterans Wheelchair Games	July 25-30, 2024	New Orleans, LA
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Boccia Finale

Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) Florida Chapter member Raul Acosta doubled up on titles at PVA's season and national year-ending boccia tournament in May.

Held May 18-19 in San Juan, Puerto Rico, the tour-

nament featured individual and pairs divisions.

An Army veteran, Acosta won both the individual and pairs titles. He won the individual title over Craig Caffro (Florida) and Marine Corps veteran Kenny Roberts (Florida) and teamed up with Caffro as the Florida II team

to take the pairs title over the Puerto Rico V team of Army veteran Margarita Hernandez (Puerto Rico) and Luis Rivas (Department of Veterans Affairs staff, public relations) and Florida I team of Army veteran Charles Corley (Florida) and Roberts.

creating an expansive and elite adaptive sport program that exemplifies LA28's commitment to elevating the Paralympic Movement," says LA28 Chief Athlete Officer Janet Evans in a June 12 press release.

Meanwhile, the International Surfing Association (ISA) acknowledged it was disappointed that adaptive surfing, which was vying with para climbing for the LA Games, didn't make it. Only one new sport could be added.

"We are, of course, disappointed in this news, but as surfers, when we miss a wave, we turn and paddle just as hard for the next one, and we will do the same now with the

Paralympic Moves

Adaptive surfing is out of the running for the 2028 Los Angeles Paralympics, while the LA28 Olympic and Paralympic Games have approved para climbing to be added to the 2028 Paralympic Sport Program by the the International Paralympic Committee (IPC).



COURTESY OF USA CLIMBING

The LA28 Olympic and Paralympic Games made the proposal June 12, becoming the first organizing committee in Games history to propose additional sports for both the Olympic and Paralympic Sport Programs. The proposal was approved June 26.

"We see this as a unique chance to give more athletes the ability to compete on the world's biggest stage, while

hope of seeing para surfing included in Brisbane in 2032," says ISA President Fernando Aguerre in a June press release. "Para surfers are amazing athletes, full of hope and resilience in the face of life's challenges. We take inspiration from their love of this sport and reaffirm our commitment to them and to this sport. Just as was the case with Olympic surfing, we will



COURTESY OF PARALYZED VETERANS OF AMERICA

Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) Florida Chapter member Raul Acosta won two titles at the May 18-19 PVA season and national year-ending boccia tournament in San Juan, Puerto Rico.

continue to advocate and promote para surfing as being worthy of a place on the highest para sport stage — the Paralympic Games.”

David Wins

Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) Wisconsin Chapter member and Marine Corps veteran Dave David captured the PVA Vaughan Chapter Trap Shoot, held May 24–26 at the St. Charles Sportsmen’s Club in Elburn, Ill.

It was a 300-target trapshoot with 100 singles, 100 handicap and 50 pairs of doubles.

David finished with the high score for a PVA member (255). He hit 86 out of 100 targets in singles, 84 out of 100 in handicap and 85 out of 100 in doubles. PVA Mid-America Chapter member and Navy veteran Tom Richey had the high overall score (242), hitting 82 out of 100 in singles, 77 out of 100 in handicap and 83 out of 100 in doubles. ■



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pva service office roster

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.

ALABAMA

VARO, Montgomery
334-213-3433

ARIZONA

VARO, Phoenix
602-627-3311

ARKANSAS

VARO, North Little Rock
501-370-3757

CALIFORNIA (Hawaii, Manila)

VAMC, Long Beach
562-826-8000, ext. 23774

VARO, Los Angeles
310-235-7796

VAMC, Mather
916-843-2602

VAMC, Palo Alto
650-493-5000, ext. 65046

VARO, Rancho Cordova
916-364-6791

VAMC, San Diego
858-552-7519

VARO, San Diego
619-400-5320

Veterans Career Program

San Diego
202-733-8807
(covering AK, AZ, CA, HI, ID, NV, OR, WA)

COLORADO (Wyoming)

VARO, Denver
303-914-5590

DELAWARE

VARO, Wilmington
302-993-7252

DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

PVA National Office
202-872-1300

FLORIDA

VAMC, Lake City
386-755-3016, ext. 2236

VAMC, Miami
305-575-7180

VAMC, Orlando
407-631-1000, ext. 11835

VARO, St. Petersburg
727-319-7470

VAMC, Tampa
813-978-5841

GEORGIA

VARO, Atlanta
404-929-5333

VAMC, Augusta
706-823-2219

Veterans Career Program

Atlanta
202-710-6437
202-304-8544
(covering AL, AR, FL, GA, LA, MS, NC, PR, SC)

ILLINOIS

VARO, Chicago
312-980-4278

VAMC, Hines
708-202-5623

INDIANA

VARO, Indianapolis
317-916-3626

IOWA

VARO, Des Moines
515-323-7544

KANSAS

VAMROC, Wichita
316-688-6875

KENTUCKY

VARO, Louisville
502-566-4430 / 4431

LOUISIANA

VARO, New Orleans
504-619-4380

MAINE (Vermont, New Hampshire)

VAMROC, Augusta
866-795-1911 / 207-621-7394

MARYLAND

VARO, Baltimore
410-230-4470, ext. 1020

MASSACHUSETTS

(Connecticut, Rhode Island)
VARO, Boston
617-303-1395

VAMC, Brockton
774-826-2219

Veterans Career Program

Boston
202-257-0144
(covering CT, DE, MA, ME, NH, NJ, NY, PA, RI, VT)

MICHIGAN

VARO, Detroit
313-471-3996

MINNESOTA

VAMC, Minneapolis
612-629-7022

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