



MAGAZINE

JANUARY | FEBRUARY 2025

IN THE WAKE OF DISASTER

DAV members pulled together to help their fellow veterans and communities after last year's deadly storms | **Page 20**



2025 Mid-Winter Conference

Leading advocates to gather
in Washington, D.C., Feb. 23–26

One of the most highly visible demonstrations of DAV's fierce advocacy comes in February during the annual mid-winter conference in Washington, D.C. Each year, hundreds of DAV members and leaders gather to elevate the voices of our community and create meaningful change on Capitol Hill and beyond for veterans and their families.

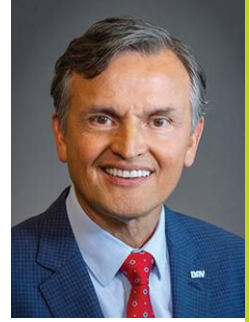
We invite you to lend your voice to the cause and join us Feb. 23–26 at the Crystal Gateway Marriott in Arlington, Virginia, as we confront the most pressing issues affecting veterans and their families, caregivers and survivors.

You'll stand alongside National Commander Daniel Contreras as he presents DAV's legislative agenda to Congress. You will also have the opportunity to meet face-to-face with your elected officials to share our critical policy goals for the 119th Congress.

Come join your fellow DAV members and leaders as we lift the voices of America's ill and injured veterans and their families and work to ensure policymakers in Washington listen to their needs. Together, we can achieve our legislative goals and ensure veterans get the benefits and health care they have rightfully earned. ■

For more information, visit
dav.org/events/2025-mid-winter-conference

From the NATIONAL COMMANDER DANIEL CONTRERAS



Advocacy starts with you

For over a century, DAV has led the way in advocating for the needs of our nation's disabled veterans. From working to protect veterans benefits to advancing care and programs that ensure promises are kept to veterans and their families, caregivers and survivors, DAV continues to be a powerful voice for those who served.

On Page 14 of this magazine, you'll read about DAV's critical policy goals—but you may not realize that some these goals originate from all of you at the chapter and department levels. This grassroots approach makes our advocacy efforts unique, as it requires direct input from our members to help us keep driving positive change.

DAV's legislative advocacy would not be possible without member engagement and participation in DAV's annual resolution process. DAV resolutions are the first step in supporting our veterans and their families and identifying the most pressing issues they face.

A good number of DAV resolutions originate with our professional staff and are further developed by our interim committees before being considered for adoption by our convention committees. But for DAV members, this process starts at the local chapter level before moving on to the state department level and then the national level, where resolutions are voted on during the DAV national convention each year. Adopted resolutions make up DAV's annual legislative program and allow the organization to endorse critical veteran-related federal legislation.

The resolution-making process provides a framework for advocacy throughout the year. Resolutions establish DAV's official stance on specific issues, promote unity and direction among our members, hold us accountable for progress, generate public awareness of veterans' issues, and empower DAV members by giving them a voice and platform.

If you are a DAV member and unfamiliar with how to create a resolution, we are here to support you. If you are attending our annual mid-winter conference in Washington, D.C., Feb. 23–26, I highly encourage you to attend the workshop on how to create a resolution. If you cannot attend in person, online training on the resolution process is available at dav.org/about-dav/legislation/legislative-webinars.

Besides being active in the resolution-making process, we must continue to show our strength in numbers so our elected officials understand our priorities and needs. Remember, the easiest way to stay informed about critical issues is through DAV CAN (Commander's Action Network) at davcan.org. You don't need to be a DAV member to be a part of DAV CAN, so please encourage anyone you know to join and lend a voice to our cause.

The future for veterans is not without its challenges, but together, we will accomplish amazing things for veterans and their families. ■

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Cover photo by The Associated Press

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From the NATIONAL ADJUTANT

BARRY A. JESINOSKI



Lessons from a lifetime of service

There's something about a visit to the South that makes sitting with an old friend and reminiscing incredibly special. When that friend is a DAV past national commander, World War II Army veteran and retired national service officer, it's that much better.

A few weeks before Veterans Day, I traveled to North Carolina to pay a long overdue visit to Past National Commander Billy Kirby. At 103 years old, Billy is our oldest living PNC. Our meeting was more than a conversation—it was a reflection on a lifetime of dedication to veterans.

After being wounded on the battlefields of Italy, Billy came home and eventually became a DAV national service officer in Waco, Texas. His passion and dedication for service were apparent, and he was recommended to serve as an adviser to the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, working on legislation to expand or fine-tune existing laws.

From World War II to today, Billy's insights are rooted in not only personal experience but also the collective history of DAV's growth as an organization that tirelessly advocates for those who served.

During our time together, we spoke about his journey from infantry soldier to civilian. For Billy, the battle never really ended—it just changed form.

"I was proud to be a (national) service officer," Billy told me. "The thing I enjoyed most was helping people. I enjoyed working with membership, working with chapters, organizing the chapters. We worked hard, and it felt good. I enjoyed going before the Board (of Veterans' Appeals) and arguing a case."

He also said that national service officers are "the backbone of the organization. They have to be involved with their departments and chapters."

I couldn't agree more. Service and membership should be in lockstep for the overall health and strength of our mission.

When Billy's service with DAV began, the focus was largely on compensation and pensions for disabled veterans. But as the years progressed and as he rose through the ranks to become national commander, the needs of veterans evolved. Health care, mental health, education and employment became equally important pillars of support, he said.

Billy's 1988–89 tenure as national commander came just after the establishment of the DAV Transportation Network, which has since become a cornerstone of our volunteerism efforts. It's hard to imagine a DAV without it. As a fellow service officer, I felt a deep sense of connection to Billy's reflections. Our visit was a reminder of the power of service, the importance of continuing the fight for veterans' rights and the strength that comes from being a part of an organization that serves veterans of all generations.

Billy's legacy is a testament to the fact that our work as DAV members is never done. ■

Ending the Wait

DAV and MOAA's *Ending the Wait* report is such an important conversation. While the PACT Act was a step in the right direction for toxic-exposed veterans, it's clear that more needs to be done to address the flaws in the system that lead to delays in care and benefits. The report presented by DAV and MOAA offers hope for a better, more efficient path forward for those who have sacrificed so much. Thank you to everyone involved in this crucial work—it's time we end the wait for our veterans.

Nick Guidry, Houston, Texas

You left out the Korean DMZ veterans from your *Ending the Wait for Toxic-Exposed Veterans* report. In Korea, Agent Orange was sprayed at 100% strength from the ground—not a 9% solution by air like in Vietnam. In Korea the drops were quickly absorbed in the ground before sunlight could weaken it, and its toxic effects can last 100 years.

Kevin Mason, Loudon, Tennessee

Editor's note: *Although, due to space limitations, the report could not list every location where military toxic exposures occurred, veterans who served in the Korean DMZ between Sept. 1, 1967, and Aug. 31, 1971, are already covered by the Agent Orange presumption and do not have to prove their individual exposure to be eligible for disability compensation for Agent Orange-related conditions. However, many other veterans are still seeking recognition and justice for their toxic wounds, and the recommendations contained in the report could help end their wait.*

Two weeks too late

Two weeks after his death, my dad received his total disability—after fighting for it for two years. The

doctors need to talk to each other to solve the problems. He fought in three battles in the South Pacific—Guadalcanal; Cape Gloucester, New Britain; and Peleliu. That should have never happened. He earned it! He was involved with DAV. These veterans deserve everything. **Becky Denzinger, Louisville, Kentucky**

Vetrepreneur support

I didn't personally serve in the military, but I've always been passionate about honoring those who did. I'm a business and executive coach. I recently traveled to Washington, D.C., to volunteer for the DAV Patriot Boot Camp entrepreneur program. The initiative is incredibly effective and brought tremendous value to the veterans and spouses who participated in the cohort. Giving back was extremely rewarding. I hope more veterans will use this incredible program and more mentors get involved. **John Zurborg, Independence, Kentucky**

Hurricane Helene relief

I wanted to say thank you for the assistance you gave me in North Carolina. The money you gave me was put to good use. It was neighbors helping neighbors to ensure we were all safe, and we combined perishables to keep them cold using our generator. The money was used for buying gas, propane, food and other supplies to keep us sustained until the linemen were able to get to us. We had only one road left that was passable to get to a neighboring town that was spared from the storm to obtain

these supplies. God bless you and DAV for all you have done. I also am a disabled veteran and always have been proud to have served this great nation. **Richard Royer, Rowan County, North Carolina**

Thank you DAV. Hurricane Helene devastated our neighborhood and yet, as far away as you were, you made an immediate difference. We were scheduled to attend DAV Patriot Boot Camp for entrepreneurs so we could be better equipped to support our business, Ebony Tree Farms. Our power had been out for 12 days, and we were contemplating not going because we could not absorb the cost of travel with the impact that Hurricane Helene had on our lives. DAV Disaster Relief came at just the right time, and we were able to attend the event and take care of the immediate needs we faced after the storm. With gratitude and appreciation, God bless you! **Frederick and Anna Griffin, Evans, Georgia**

Disabled American Veteran of the Year

Terry Hillard's story has inspired me to apply for the service-connected disability I suffered in 1973, more than 51 years ago, that has affected almost every aspect of my life. Thank you, DAV and Terry Hillard, for the courage to let veterans know that it's never too late to take that first step by overcoming the resistance to filing a claim. Veterans are proud and oftentimes hesitate in asking for help, although they are always ready to help others. **Reydel Sonny Santos, Miami, Florida**

WRITE TO US Please send feedback to DAV Magazine, 860 Dolwick Drive, Erlanger, KY 41018, or via email to feedback@dav.org. We also welcome feedback on our social media pages. We regret we are unable to acknowledge every letter due to the volume received. Letters are subject to editing for clarity, style, accuracy, space and propriety. Letters involving claims are referred to DAV's Service Department.

VETERANS DAY HIGHLIGHTS



Top left: Washington Headquarters Executive Director Randy Reese and National Commander Daniel Contreras put DAV's flowers in place, symbolizing both the beauty and brevity of life, during the Veterans Day wreath-laying ceremony at Arlington National Cemetery. **Top right:** DAV's wreath at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial wall in Washington, D.C. **Above:** Contreras finishes the DAV 5K in Cincinnati (left) and poses with Nicole Rush of team Brave Endurance (right). Rush finished the race with teammates Jerome Johnson, Josiah Johnson, Adryenne Rush, Alayna Glashauser and Jason Rush.



DISMISSED NO MORE

Jennifer Williams enlisted in the Navy when she was 18, inspired by her family's military service and eager to see more of the world.

After 30 years and multiple VA denials, Navy veteran worked with DAV to get recognition for PTSD related to military sexual trauma

By Elizabeth DePompei

When Navy veteran Jennifer Williams started working with DAV benefits advocate Don Inns, she suggested he put a note in her file.

"I said, 'You can put a little note on there that I will be 105 years old on my deathbed signing another appeal. I'm not giving up,'" Williams said.

Williams had applied for disability benefits for post-traumatic stress disorder related to military sexual trauma, or MST, and been denied multiple times. Having silently lived with the trauma for three decades, she was determined to get the validation and benefits she deserved.

A night out for dinner proved serendipitous. She met someone who worked for DAV and referred her to Inns, now the national service office supervisor based at DAV National Headquarters in Erlanger, Kentucky.

"And that man was phenomenal," Williams said. "He just listened to my story and said ... 'You're not going to get denied again.'"

DISMISSED INTO SILENCE

Williams was 18 when she enlisted in the Navy, inspired by her father's military service and following in the footsteps of her brother. Growing up in rural Alexandria, Kentucky, she was also eager to spread her wings.

Ultimately, Williams served three years on active duty and four years in the reserves, spending most of that time between San Diego and Virginia Beach, Virginia. As a yeoman, Williams worked for the admiral of the U.S. Pacific Fleet, providing administrative support and soaking up everything she could.

"It was very exciting," she said of the opportunities she had in service. "I'm so grateful that I did it."

But before her service truly began, Williams experienced the lowest point of her military career. After basic training, she was sent to Meridian, Mississippi, for occupational training.

"It was our first little bit of freedom that we had had in a long time," she said. "On the weekends, my friends would get a hotel room so we could stay off base."

It was during one of those weekends when Williams was violently sexually assaulted by a man who identified himself as a fellow service member. Williams said she was scared to death, but she immediately left the hotel with a friend and saw a nurse to get physically examined.

"I told her what happened ... and she said, 'You seem like a smart, strong young woman, and I think you are going to be OK,'" Williams said, adding that she was covered in bruises from the assault. The nurse told her to go back to class.

The outright dismissal and lack of care left Williams questioning whether she was to blame. So for the next 30 years, she kept what happened to herself.

'SHE NEVER GAVE UP'

Over the years, Williams struggled with depression and other PTSD symptoms, including hypervigilance, and found herself in abusive relationships. At times, she was unable to work, debilitated by unaddressed trauma.

Around 2015, after the end of another toxic relationship, Williams was ready to break the cycle. She sought out a counselor through the Department of Veterans Affairs and, for the first time, was asked if she had been sexually assaulted while enlisted.

For the next few years, Williams fought to get her PTSD service-connected so that she could access necessary benefits. She learned to advocate for herself, refusing to accept anything less than what she deserved. When she met Inns, she found someone willing to fight just as hard.

"He kept in such great contact with me," Williams said, adding that Inns was proactive, often checking on the status of her claim and updating her.

Williams still gets emotional when she remembers the day Inns told her that her claim was finally approved.

"I wasn't being dismissed anymore," Williams said.

But Inns wasn't finished. He pushed back against an error and had Williams' rating increased to the appropriate level.

"Ms. Williams' tenacity stands out to me. She never gave up," Inns said.

Today, Williams continues counseling and credits it with helping her cope with her PTSD symptoms.

"I did it for myself, yes," Williams said of seeking her earned benefits. "But I became very tenacious and determined because there were so many other women that I had met that the same thing had happened to, and they just said, 'It's just too much.' I also fight for them."

According to the VA, 1 in 3 women and 1 in 50 men report experiencing MST. Williams said she refers other veterans to DAV for claims assistance and regularly shares her story in hopes of encouraging other MST survivors to advocate for themselves.

"You are not alone," Inns added. "Follow Ms. Williams' example and let a DAV benefits advocate fight the good fight for and with you." ■



Learn More Online

If you'd like to talk to a DAV benefits advocate about filing for VA disability benefits, visit benefitsquestions.org to find the nearest office.



Soon after boot camp, Williams was violently sexually assaulted by a man who identified himself as a fellow service member. Thirty years later, DAV benefits advocate Don Inns (above) helped her get the validation and benefits she earned.

The American
Veterans
Disabled for
Life Memorial



Their Courage Endures

Disabled Veterans' Life Memorial Foundation President Dennis Joyner speaks to guests attending the 10th anniversary ceremony about how the memorial is a testament to veterans' resilience and resolve for justice.



A DECADE OF HONOR

Veterans, renowned actors mark anniversary of disabled veterans memorial

By Brian Buckwalter

In 2014, Dennis Joyner—a DAV past national commander, combat-wounded Army veteran of the Vietnam War and triple amputee—bared his soul during the dedication ceremony for the American Veterans Disabled for Life Memorial.

Joyner was barely a month into his deployment to the Mekong Delta in Vietnam when a land mine explosion caused the loss of three of his limbs.

“[At the memorial ceremony] I admitted for the first time publicly that, at the time of my traumatic amputations, I had screamed to my fellow soldiers the words ‘Let me die!’” Joyner said. “I still vividly remember those moments.”

But his fellow soldiers never left his side and encouraged him to fight to stay alive.

More than a half-century later, as the president of the Disabled Veterans' Life Memorial Foundation, Joyner spoke from the same spot he did in 2014 to commemorate

the 10-year anniversary of the memorial that represents all veterans from all eras and branches who have been forever changed by their service. More than 100 invited guests attended the event co-sponsored by the DAV Department of Virginia.

“Some monuments and memorials get forgotten over time, but I don’t see that happening with this one,” said DAV Department of Virginia Adjutant Lisa Gregory. “I think it’s a part of us.”

During his speech, Joyner reflected on what the memorial has come to mean for him.

“Our memorial is a physical reminder of the human cost of war—a tribute to the sacrifices of past, present and future generations,” he said. “At the same time, it’s a testament to our resilience and resolve for justice. Justice for our brothers and sisters. Justice for our families. Justice for our survivors. It is a place of us, by us and for us.”

After Joyner spoke, attendees listened to a live dramatic reading of Sophocles’ “Philoctetes,” a Greek play written more than 2,500 years ago. Actors Chad Coleman, an Army veteran best known for his roles on “The Walking Dead” and “The Wire”; David Strathairn, Academy Award-nominated star of “Good Night, and Good Luck,” “Nomadland” and “Lincoln”; and Ato Blankson-Wood,

David Strathairn (left) participated with other actors and a chorus of veterans in a live reading of Sophocles' play "Philoctetes." A guided discussion of the play's themes as they relate to the disabled veteran experience followed.



The memorial sits on a 2.4-acre site within view of the U.S. Capitol and features a star-shaped reflection pool and glass etchings that convey the universal story of the journey toward healing that disabled veterans take after being forever changed by service.



a Tony-nominated Broadway actor who appeared in "BlacKKKlansman" and "Detroit," performed alongside a chorus of veteran leaders from the DAV community who included Anthony Swofford, author of the book "Jarhead." The reading was directed and facilitated by Bryan Doerries, founder and artistic director of Theater of War Productions.

Although an ancient text, the story of a wounded soldier stranded on an island and forced to deal with the effects of war resonated with the audience. Following the performance, Theater of War facilitated a guided discussion for attendees to reflect on the play's themes and how they relate to modern-day veterans.

"I looked around the audience and saw people relating, saying 'That's like me; I dealt with that,'" Gregory said, adding that the veteran chorus helped drive that point home.

One of those veterans was DAV Assistant National Communications Director Kevin Miller, a Marine combat veteran. During the discussion, he compared Philoctetes' rescuer, Neoptolemus, to the work DAV does. Neoptolemus stayed by Philoctetes' side through his trials and injuries and helped him out of a terrible situation.

"You've got to continually engage with folks, no matter how much, how often or how long, to get them to where they actually need to be and live successful, sustainable lives," Miller said.

Deb Olson, a department service officer and member of Chapter 85 in Malden, Massachusetts, attended the

ceremony. Every time she's in Washington, D.C., to speak with lawmakers as a DAV representative, she visits the memorial. With its close proximity to the U.S. Capitol, she likes to spend time there to remind herself why she advocates for veterans.

"It's a place where people can go and just sit and think," Olson said. "It's a way to review and reflect on what we do to help."

She said this visit was especially poignant because the guided discussion after the Theater of War presentation brought back memories of all the veterans she's helped as a benefits advocate over the past 20 years.

For Joyner, the memorial represents more than the sacrifices of those who've served; it represents the ongoing effort to ensure promises are kept to veterans and their families. He praised DAV's advocacy work over the past decade, which has made significant strides in ensuring veterans have the benefits and care they've earned from service.

"The historic wave of veterans returning from war to a nation ill-prepared to welcome them home is less likely to repeat itself now than in any previous time," Joyner said. "We are stronger. We can clearly see progress in our combined efforts to help veterans confront the invisible injuries of war." ■



More information

The memorial, located at 150 Washington Ave. SW, Washington, D.C., is open to the public year-round. A virtual tour is available at avdlm.org.



Team Frederick's Footsteps after crossing the finish line at the DAV 5K in Cincinnati.

A race for all generations

Community joins together for the DAV 5K to honor the sacrifices of those who've served

By Nikki Herrmann

When Marine veteran and DAV life member Brandon Marchioni first participated in the DAV 5K over a decade ago, he didn't realize how many cherished memories he would make. What began as a way to give back to ill and injured veterans like himself evolved into a meaningful family tradition. And with traditions come lifelong memories.

One memory that still resonates with Marchioni involved his Navy veteran grandfather, Cliff Deyer.

In the early years of the DAV 5K, Deyer would accompany his grandson to celebrate his fellow veterans.

"The last year he could participate, he was in a wheelchair," Marchioni recalled. "As we neared the last quarter mile, motorcycle groups were lined up, cheering everyone on. My grandfather told me to stop because he wanted to thank them for their service. So I helped him out of the wheelchair, and he shook every person's hand, telling them thank you."

Though he may not have realized it then, that moment solidified for Marchioni why the DAV 5K is so important to him and the veteran community.

"It's so cool, right? I mean, just the situation's importance and neatness," he said. "The 5K has always been a great family event, and that's why it's so important—it connects people of all backgrounds to the military community."

That generation-spanning connection continued during the 2024 DAV 5K, with first-time participants like Bryce McMullen, a seventh grader from Cincinnati. As a new and ambitious runner, Bryce saw the event as a great way to improve his running skills while also

“The 5K has always been a great family event, and that’s why it’s so important—it **connects people of all backgrounds to the military community.**”

—Brandon Marchioni

honoring our nation’s heroes—and one, in particular, who is close to him.

“It’s special to know this race is dedicated to veterans,” he said. “My grandfather is an Air Force veteran, so I feel like I am making him and my family proud by running.”

Bryce ran alongside his family and was eager to tell his classmates about the experience, hoping to encourage them to join next year’s race. He was just one of the over 2,400 in-person participants who walked, ran or rode to honor our nation’s heroes—including many loved ones.

Like Bryce, Tricia Oehler was running to honor veterans, though she was no newcomer to the 5K. A wife and daughter of Navy veterans, Oehler began participating over a decade ago after she spotted a billboard for the event in Cincinnati.

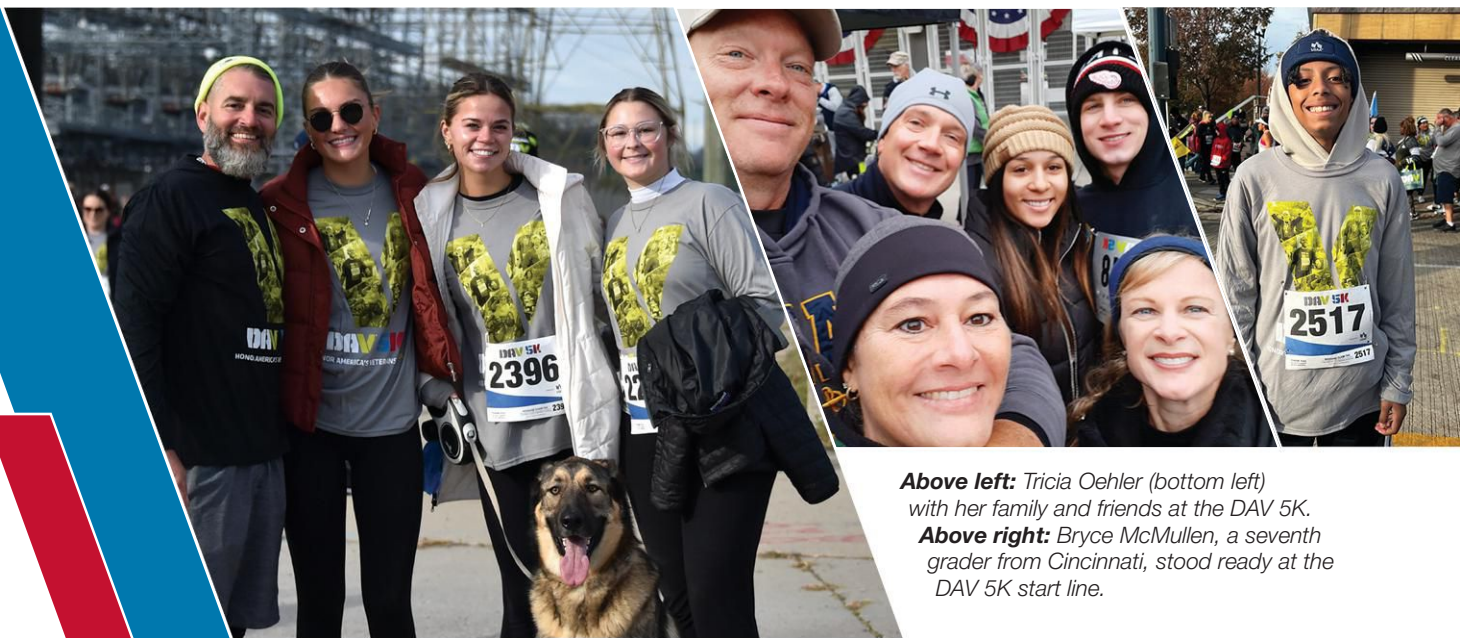
“My grandparents, cousins, uncles, father, stepfather and husband all served our country,” Oehler said. “Seeing that billboard excited me because it combined my passion for supporting veterans with my love of running.”

Oehler has participated in all but one DAV 5K since then, and in five years she raised over \$8,000 to support ill and injured veterans. Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, she remained committed to her mission by participating in DAV’s first virtual 5K.

“The virtual 5K was the most special year for me,” she said. “My stepfather, Robert Ewers, who was a Navy veteran, was suffering from Alzheimer’s at the time and was housebound. I planned my route so that I would end up at his house. When I arrived, I gave him the medal the DAV team had sent me. So it felt like he was able to participate with me.”

Over the years, Oehler has encouraged dozens of her friends and family members to join her. When inviting others to join the race, she shares why DAV is so important to her.

“I tell people that it’s just an incredible way to help our everyday heroes,” Oehler said. “Our nation’s veterans have sacrificed a piece of their lives to keep us free, so I love that I can give back by exercising and raising money.” ■



Above left: Tricia Oehler (bottom left) with her family and friends at the DAV 5K.

Above right: Bryce McMullen, a seventh grader from Cincinnati, stood ready at the DAV 5K start line.

Brandon Marchioni, a Marine veteran of the Iraq War, participated in the DAV 5K with his family.



From the NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE DIRECTOR

JOY J. ILEM

A fresh start

The new year signifies a fresh start. It is a time to reflect on the past, set new goals and embrace new opportunities. With a new administration and the 119th Congress set to begin, we have a chance to create a better future for our veterans and their families, caregivers and survivors.

For the 119th Congress, DAV's legislative priorities include strengthening Department of Veterans Affairs policies for toxic-exposed veterans; eliminating gaps in mental health care and suicide prevention efforts; prevent taxing, offsetting or reducing veterans benefits; modernizing survivors benefits; making dental care a health benefit for all service-disabled veterans; improving caregiver support and providing more long-term care options for service-disabled veterans; and establishing new funding mechanisms for VA infrastructure to sustain the VA's role as primary provider and coordinator of veterans health care.

We are also looking to build off the successes of our two most recent reports, *Women Veterans: The Journey to Mental Wellness* and *Ending the Wait for Toxic-Exposed Veterans*. In *The Journey to Mental Wellness*, we described the unique factors that contribute to the significantly increased rate of suicide among women veterans and provided over 50 policy and legislative recommendations intended to spark necessary and urgent change that can save lives. With *Ending the Wait*, we showed that, on average, veterans have to wait over 34 years post-exposure to receive access to the full range of health care and benefits they urgently need, and we provided a blueprint to dramatically reform the process and government handling of service-related toxic exposures.

Online advocacy has become a powerful tool to raise awareness, mobilize support, and influence legislation and policy. Our efforts through DAV CAN (Commander's Action Network) have grown tremendously over the last couple of years, but we still need to encourage friends, family members and other veterans in our networks to join at davcan.org. Last year, members and supporters took over 600,000 actions to support our legislative advocacy through DAV CAN.

While online platforms and social media have expanded our reach and increased our influence with elected officials, there is still no more effective form of advocacy than in-person engagement. With that in mind, I hope you join us for our annual mid-winter conference in Washington, D.C., Feb. 23–26.

Our mid-winter conference is the premier veterans advocacy event and provides DAV members with an opportunity to meet face-to-face with your elected officials and build stronger relationships with decision-makers. Your presence and meetings during our mid-winter conference put a human face on the most pressing issues affecting the veteran community.

In the year ahead, through advocacy, coalition building and strategic engagement, we can improve the lives of our nation's ill and injured veterans and their families, caregivers and survivors. ■

Veterans benefits

increase 2.5% in 2025



The adjustment is close to the average increase of 2.6% for the past decade

By Kevin C. Miller

On Oct. 9, 2024, the Social Security Administration announced a 2.5% boost in the cost-of-living adjustment (COLA), the smallest in the last three years.

The Department of Labor determines the annual COLA by measuring the Consumer Price Index (CPI). The CPI is based on a broad sampling of the costs of consumer goods and expenses.

Veterans, families and dependents eligible for VA benefits saw the new amount reflected in their monthly checks effective Jan. 1. The increase affects everything from Department of Veterans Affairs disability compensation to clothing allowances to Dependency and Indemnity Compensation and survivors benefits.

“Many veterans and their families rely on their VA benefits to help cover essential expenses like food, housing and utilities,” said DAV Washington Headquarters Executive Director Randy Reese. “The rising costs of consumer goods and other expenses the last several years have put a significant strain on veterans and their families, and the cost-of-living adjustment is intended to help counteract the impact inflation has on veterans benefits.”

The 2.5% increase for 2025 is well below the 3.2% in 2023, 8.7% in 2022 and 5.9% in 2021. However, this boost is still close to the average increase of about 2.6% for the past decade.

The 2025 adjustment means VA disability checks will go up about \$4.28 per month for those with a 10% rating and \$93.45 for those rated at 100% who don't have dependents. ■



Learn More Online

Learn more about VA disability ratings with our VA compensation calculator at dav.org/disability-calculator.





2025 LEGISLATIVE GOALS

How we keep our promise to America's veterans

By Kevin C. Miller

Each year, DAV members gather at the organization's national convention to help determine its legislative goals. These targeted issue areas serve as guideposts for DAV's legislative team members in Washington, D.C., who advocate for laws that will improve the lives of veterans and their families, caregivers and survivors.

"DAV's stance on legislative issues is determined by the adoption of resolutions each year at our national convention. With a united, engaged voice, we protect veterans benefits and fight to ensure the promise is kept," said DAV National Legislative Director Joy Ilem.

Several DAV resolutions originate with professional staff and are further developed by our interim committees before being considered for adoption by convention committees. But for DAV members, this process starts at the local chapter level before moving on to the state department level and then the national level, where resolutions are voted on during the annual convention. Adopted resolutions make up DAV's annual legislative

program and allow the organization to endorse critical veteran-related federal legislation.

In 2024, DAV members submitted hundreds of resolutions that shaped the year's advocacy agenda and legislative program.

This partial list of key resolutions adopted in 2024 will focus DAV advocacy efforts until the 2025 DAV and Auxiliary National Convention in Las Vegas. To see the full list of resolutions, visit dav.org/about-dav/legislation/dav-resolutions.

Disability compensation and other benefits

- Support legislation to provide service connection for disabling conditions resulting from toxic and environmental exposures.
- Support legislation to improve and reform Dependency and Indemnity Compensation.
- Support legislation to remove the prohibition against concurrent receipt of military retired pay and veterans disability compensation for all veterans.
- Support legislation that prohibits Special Separation Benefit payments from being withheld from Department of Veterans Affairs disability compensation payments.
- Oppose reduction, taxation or elimination of veterans benefits.

- Support legislation for studies and establishing presumptive diseases related to PFAS exposure.
- Support legislation to provide studies, health care and benefits resulting from toxic exposures at Karshi-Khanabad (K2) Air Base in Uzbekistan.
- Support legislation to increase disability compensation.
- Support oversight of VA practices in evaluating disability claims for residuals of military sexual trauma.
- Support legislation that would exempt the benefits paid to wartime-service-connected disabled veterans from the “PAYGO/CUTGO” provisions of the Budget Enforcement Act.
- Increase the grant and specially adaptive equipment rates for automobiles and other conveyances for eligible disabled veterans.
- Support legislation to ensure that total disability based on Individual Unemployability remains available for all veterans in need regardless of age or receipt of any other earned federal benefits.
- Support legislation to improve the VA Fiduciary Program.
- Increase the VA Home Improvement and Structural Alterations Grant.
- Support an increase in the VA burial allowance for service-connected disabled veterans, and provide automatic annual adjustments.

Medical and health care services

- Improve and enhance resources for VA mental health programs and suicide prevention.
- Enhance medical services and benefits for women veterans.
- Support equity in access to services and benefits for racial and ethnic minority service-connected disabled veterans.
- Provide comprehensive dental care to all service-connected disabled veterans within the VA health care system.
- Enhance long-term services and supports for service-connected disabled veterans.
- Support legislation to improve and provide comprehensive services for caregivers of severely wounded, injured and ill veterans of all eras.
- Strengthen and protect the VA health care system.
- Ensure a safe, secure and effective electronic health record for veterans that allows the VA to fulfill core missions of patient care, research and training.
- Support effective recruitment, retention and development of the VA health care system workforce.
- Ensure veterans have quality and timely access to health care from the Veterans Health Administration and Veterans Community Care Program providers.
- Support VA research into the medical efficacy of cannabis for treatment of service-connected disabled veterans.
- Support humane, consistent pain management programs in the veterans health care system.
- Support VA medical and prosthetic research programs.
- Support legislation to eliminate or reduce VA and Department of Defense health care copayments for service-connected disabled veterans.
- Support legislation directing the VA to research and make available effective psychedelic compounds for treating mental health conditions and traumatic brain injury.

General issues

- Support sufficient, timely and predictable funding for all VA programs, benefits and services.
- Support licensure and certification of active-duty service personnel.
- Provide adequate funding and permanency for veterans employment and/or training programs.
- Protect veterans from employment discrimination when receiving health care for service-connected conditions.
- Support renewed prisoner-of-war/missing-in-action discussions.
- Support legislation to strengthen and protect Service-Disabled Veteran-Owned Small Businesses.
- Support legislation to create, improve and reform federal programs for service-disabled veteran entrepreneurship.
- Support the continued growth of Veterans Treatment Courts for justice-involved veterans.
- Support veterans’ preference in public employment.
- Support adequate air travel accommodations for disabled veterans.
- Provide scam and fraud protection for veterans and their families, caregivers and survivors.
- Support legislation to regulate the VA’s use of artificial intelligence (AI) and automated tools in medical and benefit settings while requiring adequate oversight and transparency in the use and outcomes of AI implementation. ■



A day of EMPOWERMENT

Homeless Veterans Stand Down connects homeless and at-risk veterans with services

By Brian Buckwalter

Since 2016, DAV and the Cincinnati Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Center have partnered to host the annual DAV Homeless Veterans Stand Down.

Stand downs, like the one held in October, happen across the country to connect veterans experiencing or at risk of homelessness with programs and resources they've earned from their time in uniform.

Oscar Olguin, DAV's assistant national voluntary services director, welcomed nearly 250 attendees to the one held at DAV National Headquarters in Erlanger, Kentucky, and encouraged them to take advantage of the more than 60 organizations and vendors that participated.

"My hope is that today will be a reminder that we don't leave our brothers and sisters behind," Olguin said. "If you honorably wore the cloth of our nation and were forever changed by that service, DAV is here for you."

Cincinnati VA Executive Director Jane Johnson said the event continues to be an important one in the region for a population of veterans who may not know where to go for help.

"We love our partnership with DAV," Johnson said.

"It has been extremely helpful to serve veterans, especially veterans who are homeless and have multiple needs. Our relationship with DAV really is part of a partnership in the community that veterans need in order to continue their recovery and their journey."

The needs of the veterans who attended were both short and long term, and representatives from government and nonprofit organizations were there to address as many as they could.

Services included haircuts and manicures; flu and COVID-19 shots; medical screenings; and assistance with VA benefits, legal issues, Social Security, employment, housing, finances and substance use disorder.

Attendees also enjoyed a concert from world-renowned pianist and composer Eric Genuis and accompanying musicians. Genuis, a Kentucky resident, travels around the world for his Concerts for Hope—performances designed to uplift and bring hope, beauty and dignity back to marginalized populations.

Kroger provided hot meals, and everyone received a bag of clothing, hygiene supplies and a resource guide for further help.

"The stand down is a highlight of the year for many of us at DAV," Olguin said. "Not only does it remind an often-forgotten population of veterans that they are seen and known, it also serves as a reminder of why we do what we do. There are veterans walking out of this building today with a new outlook and a chance to live their lives with the respect and dignity they deserve." ■



At the movies

On screen, Black Americans' contributions to military history come to life and help correct the record

By Elizabeth DePompei

In 1892, Civil War veteran John Henry Murphy Sr. used \$200 in venture capital from his wife, Martha, to buy a printing press. It was an opportunity that would have been impossible before the war, when he was still enslaved.

The war gave Murphy—and nearly 200,000 other Black men—a pathway to freedom. As a free man, he created The Afro-American newspaper, now a media company known as the AFRO and the third-oldest Black-owned business in the country.

If his story sounds like the thing movies are made of, it's because it is. While Murphy's tale has yet to be adapted for the screen, hints of it can be seen in the iconic Civil War movie "Glory."

Starring Denzel Washington and Morgan Freeman, the 1989 film tells the story of the Civil War's first regiment of all-Black volunteers—both freemen from the North and men who had escaped enslavement in the South. With the Emancipation Proclamation, those men were officially allowed to fight for a country that had for so long denied them.

But as shown in "Glory," Black soldiers had to contend with racism, mistreatment and neglect. They were held to different standards than their white counterparts and presumed incapable of combat. They proved otherwise, on screen and in real life.



Frances “Toni” Draper is the publisher of the *AFRO*, a media company dedicated to telling stories of Black Americans.

“Anytime we can help people have a clear, full understanding of the African American experience as it relates to the military, that’s always a plus.”

—Chad Coleman, actor and Army veteran

“These stories of perseverance remind us of the often-overlooked role that Black [service members] have played in securing freedom and justice, not just for themselves but for future generations,” said Frances “Toni” Draper, Murphy’s great-granddaughter and publisher of the *AFRO*. “By bringing these narratives to light, we honor their unwavering commitment and the powerful impact they’ve had on our history and identity.”

Along with “*Glory*,” movies that have featured the experiences of Black service members across history include “*A Soldier’s Story*” (1984), “*Platoon*” (1986), “*The Tuskegee Airmen*” (1995), “*Buffalo Soldiers*” (1997), “*Miracle at St. Anna*” (2008) “*Red Tails*” (2012) and “*Da 5 Bloods*” (2020). In December, Netflix premiered “*The Six Triple Eight*,” the story of an all-female, predominantly Black unit that served overseas during World War II.

Although fictionalized, experts say these films have the power to recognize those who historically have been erased from history, help correct harmful narratives and resonate with a new generation of Black Americans.

MOVIES AS TEACHERS

Omotayo Banjo, a media studies professor at the University of Cincinnati, examines how race is portrayed in media and how Black communities use media to define their experiences. Historically, Black people have either been left out of the narrative or portrayed in a way that perpetuates negative stereotypes.

In movies centered around Black military experiences, Banjo noted, the Black service member often values and exemplifies honor—a stark contrast to the common portrayals of Black people as violent or criminal.

But when it comes to military history on screen, the mistake is often in leaving out the contributions and perspectives of Black Americans. Even in “*Glory*,” the story is told largely through the eyes of the white colonel leading the all-Black unit. As characters, the Black soldiers are almost secondary. And as of 2024, “*The Six Triple Eight*” is the first and only major film featuring Black female service members.

Marcus S. Cox, a historian who specializes in studying the sociological implications of African American military history, is reminded of the public spat between director Spike Lee and actor and director Clint Eastwood. Lee criticized Eastwood for not casting Black service members in either of his World War II epics, “*Flags of Our Fathers*” and “*Letters From Iwo Jima*.”

That lack of representation seems particularly pervasive when portraying World War II stories, the faces of which are most often white men. And as much as Cox is a fan of history books and documentaries, he knows that film and TV are primary vehicles for educating the masses about American history.

“We can’t blame media for everything,” Banjo noted, “but surely, in the absence of having your own personal experience, media is our reference.”

For example, someone who has never been to Paris might imagine it as a romantic, idyllic city, when in reality, Banjo said, “it’s as urban as New York,” smells and all.

Similarly, not including stories of Black service members’ contributions perpetuates an idea that military service and the values that come with it—honor, patriotism, bravery—are reserved for white people.

“We are relying on mediated messages to tell us what something is,” Banjo said. “And if they’re not portrayed fairly, justly or accurately, or broadly enough to honor the humanity of people, then all we’re left with are limited stereotypes that can be harmful.”

‘THIS IS OUR HOME’

Beyond recognizing real-life contributions and accurately representing history, movies can help us understand and appreciate others’ personal experiences. While no community is represented by a single experience, military service has historically meant something different for Black men and women.

“African Americans have always fought for the right to fight because it had broader implications in American society,” Cox said.

At one point, service was a means to obtain citizenship and all of its benefits, but more broadly, it allowed Black men and women to illustrate their capabilities and dedication to the nation in hopes of unlocking opportunities in society and gaining respect from their fellow Americans. This was particularly true in the World War II era.

“One of the fears was, if [Black Americans] do not fight and sort of pull our weight, after the war is over, politically, we’re not going to have opportunities, because people are going to use this against us,” Cox said.

For Army veteran Torrin Fields, an assistant video editor for Paramount+ with Showtime, his service similarly represented something deeper. Fields was a military police officer from 2001 to 2005, completing two tours in Iraq.

“It gave me my right of passage,” he said. “I don’t believe freedom is just given; it’s earned. And I believe I earned that freedom by serving this country.”

Fields also wanted to show other Black Americans that they could serve. He noted that in the Black community, and even within his own family, some struggle with the idea of serving a country that systemically oppressed people who looked like them.

“It was very important to show other Black men and Black women that, hey, this is our home,” he said. “Our ancestors built this, we built this, so I’m going to protect it.”

But Fields says experiences like his are rarely seen on screen. As a Black veteran working behind the scenes, he hopes to help usher in more diverse storytelling.

“Anytime we can help people have a clear, full understanding of the African American experience as it relates to the military, that’s always a plus,” said actor, Army veteran and DAV member Chad Coleman, known for his roles in shows like “The Walking Dead” and “The Wire.” “And then of course, there’s a pride ... to show that, in spite of all the setbacks, we love this country.”

STEWARDS OF HISTORY

While Murphy, the Civil War veteran who founded The Afro-American newspaper, hasn’t been portrayed on screen, he laid a foundation that helped ensure stories of Black service members would be.

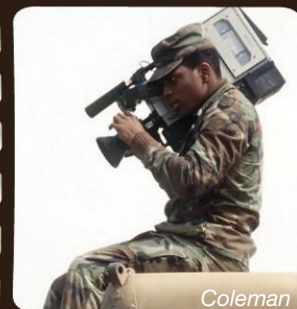
The newspaper reported on stories of Black Americans that very few, if any, other publications were telling. It sent the largest contingency of Black war correspondents to the front lines of World War II. It documented the real-life Six Triple Eight, becoming the go-to source about the women who served in the unit.

“The Black press in general, the AFRO in particular, we are stewards of that history,” Draper said. “We’re really proud to be a part of that history and to have the story that nobody else was covering.”

Her hope, shared by Cox, is that movies like “The Six Triple Eight” whet audiences’ appetite and push them to learn more.

“If you really want to know what happened,” Cox said, “read the book.” ■

Top to bottom: Marcus S. Cox is a historian of Black military history; Army veteran Torrin Fields works as a video editor for Paramount+; Actor Chad Coleman began his media career in the Army.



FROM COMBAT TO COMMUNITY

Veterans supporting their neighbors

‘There are no state lines
when it comes to DAV’

By Jonathan Kaupanger

In just 30 years, the federal government has allocated hundreds of billions of dollars to disaster response in the United States. While this spending provides crucial resources, it often overlooks the unique challenges faced by some of the nation’s most vulnerable individuals. Disabled veterans—many of whom live on fixed incomes and are unable to work—face a special kind of peril when their communities are devastated by natural disasters.

These men and women who once served their country now find themselves navigating destroyed homes, disrupted medical care and financial instability without the safety net of robust employment or savings. Yet, amid the sea of federal aid and staggering costs, the most inspiring stories often emerge not from the government’s efforts but from the resilience of everyday Americans—neighbors helping neighbors, veterans supporting one another and communities uniting to rebuild.

The one-two punch of hurricanes Helene and Milton last fall proved this once again.

“I live in East Tennessee where the hurricanes and flooding devastated so many areas,” said Kenny Belew, adjutant of Chapter 39 in Bluff City, where water and sewage systems were in total disrepair and people required airlifts to bring drinking water in for residents.

Belew and his chapter members mobilized their relief efforts.

“Commander Michael Harman of Chapter 39 immediately reached out to all chapter commanders in East Tennessee and set up a videoconference call to discuss what we needed to do for veterans in our area,” Belew said.

Because veterans in Chapter 39 operate a food pantry, their first step was to secure more food and then reach out to every chapter and Auxiliary unit member to see if anyone needed assistance. They distributed food, clothing, water and other much-needed supplies. The veterans who may not have power until spring received generators.

In North Carolina, some areas are expected to be without power until March or April. Hurricane Helene caused 1,400 landslides and damaged over 160 water and sewer systems. At least 6,000 miles of roads and over 1,000 bridges were ruined. “Right now, things are getting better,” said Commander Jim Hunter of the Department of North Carolina. “There’s a lot of grunt work going on out there, opening roads. So we’re finding pockets here and there that have not gotten everything that they would like, but we’re working to mitigate those.”

Coordination was key in the Tarheel State. At 6 a.m. the day after Helene hit, Hunter was coordinating with members of his department. Within hours, he was on the phone with the local Auxiliary commander as she



Above (from left): Monika Lamb, commander of Chapter 4 in West Columbia, South Carolina, and Synia and Zion Lamb, Unit 4 Junior Auxiliary members, helped to cook and serve over 100 meals to veterans and their families after Hurricane Helene knocked out power to Hopkins, South Carolina. (Photo by Heather Durant-McEady)



Above left: The drive-through aid station provided by Chapter 39 in Bluff City, Tennessee, made for a convenient moment in a rough situation. **Above right:** Chapter 18 in Bradenton, Florida, took in a mix of community members and veterans, totaling 90 people for two days during Hurricane Milton. The Manatee County chapter provided “three hots and a cot” for their guests during their stay.

was driving, trying to make her way through the mountains. Hunter, an assistant chief volunteer firefighter, used his connections to find a fire department in the mountains willing to take initial food and water donations.

Their efforts made it possible for the first truck of food and water to arrive within two days of the first storm. Once the initial process was set in the first area, they moved on to the next.

“Most of the places we go, we tap in either with our local chapter or a local Auxiliary member and we hand communication off to them. They take it from there to get where it needs to go,” said Hunter.

DAV North Carolina Department Adjutant Janice Weathers took things from there. She continues to manage the wish list for Hunter. “We don’t call it a 24/7 response; we call it a 25/8,” Weathers said. “It goes back to the (esprit de corps). It goes back to never leave your buddy behind. It goes back to I got your six.”

According to Hunter, being part of a national organization made relief efforts easier. Chapter commanders throughout the region were in constant communication to identify needs and resources.

“There are no state lines when it comes to DAV,” said Hunter. “I could not be prouder of a national organization, that we act as one.”

“In the military, we rely on each other for survival,” said DAV National Commander Daniel Contreras. “Many of our members had life-or-death experiences while on active duty. Relying on someone for your survival leads to a sense of collective identity, so when one hurts, we jump into action to help. Especially after devastation at this scale.”

Florida received catastrophic damage from both hurricanes, capping one of the most destructive hurricane seasons in recent history.

“Houses and cars are covered in either water and sand. The whole beach is destroyed—for about 80 miles,” said

Florida resident and Past National Commander Andy Marshall days after Hurricane Milton hit.

A member of Chapter 4 in New Port Richey, Marshall said many veterans throughout the state were hit hard. In Bradenton, a mandatory evacuation ahead of Milton closed two mobile home parks, leaving 90 people without a shelter. Chapter 18 housed the refugees for two days, providing three meals daily during their stay.

Back in East Tennessee, Belew and Chapter 39 continued reaching out to veterans in their area to determine their needs and offer assistance. They rented storage units to store and sort supplies coming in from as far away as Buffalo, New York.

“I cannot be prouder of the chapters reaching out to help,” said Shannon Sander, DAV Department of New York commander. “Helping our brothers and sisters when disasters happen is so vital to our mission.”

This aid was provided alongside disaster relief grants from DAV. All told, DAV benefits advocates were in affected areas providing more than \$1 million in disaster relief for veterans and their families from these storms alone, bringing the total distributed in 2024 to over \$1.5 million as of Dec. 1.

After Helene swept through Tennessee, Belew and his chapter helped a local veteran in need. Not too long after they left, he received the following text from the person they helped:

“Sir I want to personally thank you for what you did for me. I wasn’t expecting it as I’m getting ran around everywhere else up here. How do I become a member of DAV?”

For Belew, this makes all the hard work worth it. ■



The National Disabled Veterans Golf Clinic offers more than golf—it's helping veterans find normalcy in their daily lives

By Brian Buckwalter

Moving down the fairway of the 16th hole at the Blue Top Ridge Golf Course in Riverside, Iowa, Justin Hall forgot for a moment that he is paralyzed.

It wasn't the first time.

"Adaptive sports gave me life," Hall said. "Since getting paralyzed and being in a wheelchair, I've had opportunities I did not know or think I'd ever get."

Hall was only in the Army a year before he was medically discharged in 2010. While in training at explosive ordnance disposal school, he broke his ribs and began having issues with the muscles in his back. Doctors later attributed those injuries to the onset of Alexander disease—a rare, degenerative neurological disorder.

His condition worsened. He had migraines. Muscular issues made standing painful and difficult. Then in 2019, he developed meningitis, which left him paralyzed in his spine from his C2 vertebra to his sacrum.

He thought the active lifestyle he lived before paralysis was over until his recreational therapist at the Department of Veterans Affairs introduced him to adaptive sports.

Hall was one of more than 200 veterans who attended the 2024 National Disabled Veterans Golf Clinic, a weeklong adaptive sports program, co-presented by DAV and the VA, in Iowa last September.

Hundreds of volunteers, golf coaches and therapists facilitate the week that exposes veterans with blindness or low vision, spinal injuries, amputations and traumatic

"Learning how to golf and actually driving and being able to make some chips, that blows my mind."

— Justin Hall





2024 DAV FREEDOM AWARD RECIPIENT Dustin Tuller



brain injuries to the therapeutic benefits of golf and other activities, including kayaking, bicycling, bowling and shooting.

Hall's first adaptive sports experience was at the 2023 National Disabled Veterans Winter Sports Clinic, also co-presented by DAV and the VA, in Snowmass, Colorado. He said that's where he saw another paralyzed veteran tearing down a mountain on a sit-ski, changing his perception of what life after injury could look like.

From there, he sought other opportunities—pickleball, waterskiing, surfing and now golf—to help him adapt to daily life after paralysis.

This year was Hall's first golf clinic. He never grasped it before his injury, even though his brother played competitively. Through coaching and with the assistance of a specialized golf cart that allows him to remain seated while playing, he's now experiencing some success.

"Learning how to golf and actually driving and being able to make some chips, that blows my mind," Hall said. "I couldn't do that before ... being in a chair. I've been able to figure out things and play sports and feel normal again."

That sense of normalcy is a big part of the week, said DAV National Commander Daniel Contreras, who attended the clinic.

"As an avid golfer myself, I know how much the sport has enriched my own life," he said. "It's wonderful to see it made accessible to so many of my fellow veterans. The level of care the staff and volunteers put into this event is only outdone by the enthusiasm of the participants."

In 2003, Army veteran Dustin Tuller was deployed in Iraq when he was shot more than 200 times in his legs by enemy machine gun fire. Doctors had to amputate his legs to save his life.

To help cope with the physical and psychological effects of his injury, he took up competing in marathons using a hand cycle. He never thought he'd pick up a 9-iron.

"I always thought golf was a slow-paced sport," he said. "It didn't seem that interesting to watch it [or] to learn about it."

Attending the National Disabled Veterans Golf Clinic and discovering the challenge and skill the sport demands changed that assumption.

"The golf clinic has been exceptional," said Tuller, a DAV life member with Chapter 125 in Pensacola, Florida. "You get to learn a new sport you've never touched. You get to have camaraderie that you might be looking for or need."

Because he was the participant who best embodied the spirit of the golf clinic, Tuller was named its 2024 DAV Freedom Award recipient.

"Dustin is so deserving of this award," said DAV National Commander Daniel Contreras. "He's got an infectious personality. Despite all he's been through, he always has a smile on his face and is making those around him laugh."

You can watch more about Dustin's story at veteransgolfclinic.org.

You can see on their faces the joy it brings to be able to get out on the course and enjoy the day.”

Fostering that sense of normalcy are the transferable skills that adaptive sports provide veterans, said Suzanne Kenrick, a recreation therapist at the Augusta VA Medical Center in Georgia.

“We’re not trying to make an athlete out of anybody,” she said, emphasizing that the goal is to get veterans into independent, active lifestyles.

Kenrick’s role is to help make veterans comfortable while participating so they get the most out of the clinic regardless of disability.

Since each veteran’s case is different, she has to find ways to adjust and adapt mobility and sports equipment to best suit a person’s needs. She uses materials like straps, foam blocks, and even beachballs and pool noodles to manufacture solutions.

While at the driving range, Kenrick was cutting and shaping a foam block with a reciprocating saw to help alleviate foot and leg discomfort when one veteran swung a golf club from an assisted standing position.

“We want to protect these people and make them successful,” Kenrick said.

These low-tech solutions are simple, cheap and effective, making them ideal for on-site and one-off situations. But there is interest in innovating and advancing adaptive sports technology even further.

Engineering students from Johns Hopkins University came to this year’s clinic to meet veterans and gather observational research as a part of their multidisciplinary engineering design class capstone project. Their goal is to identify an adaptive sport need and create a tangible prototype solution.

Alex Tinana, a materials engineering senior; Kyungmo Choi, a mechanical engineering senior; Isabella Allen, a mechanical engineering junior; and Amy Liu, a biomedical engineering senior, spent three days talking with veterans, therapists and doctors to learn about current solutions and potential areas for improvement.

They chose to pursue this project, pitched to the school by DAV Voluntary Services Director John Kleindienst, from among several options because of personal connections they each have to the military and to people with disabilities.

Allen and Tinana were inspired by family members who served. Choi was in the South Korean army before



Recreation therapist Suzanne Kenrick shapes a foam block for a golf clinic participant to help alleviate their discomfort while swinging a club.

going to college and sees this as a way to continue to serve a community he has a lot of respect for. Liu and her family have experience as caregivers for her brother who uses a wheelchair, and she wants to help people in similar situations.

“Ultimately, we’re trying to help these people along their journey to not just recovery but achieving functional independence,” Tinana said.

The group members plan to come to the winter sports clinic in March to demonstrate and test a working prototype of what they develop.

Creating community is another aspect to the golf clinic and other adaptive sports clinics that goes beyond technology and individual functional independence. Hall, whose life changed after his first clinic, now shares the skills

and confidence he’s gained with other paralyzed veterans as a volunteer mentor at the Augusta medical center.

Veterans come to him for advice and insight on how he’s adapted to using a wheelchair and the ways he copes with the physical and mental challenges that come with disability.

“That’s the most rewarding thing to me out of all this, honestly,” Hall said, “is getting other people out of their heads and out here, because I know what it did for me.” ■



As part of their research for their capstone project, engineering students from Johns Hopkins University talk with a golf clinic participant about the adaptive equipment he uses.

From the AUXILIARY NATIONAL COMMANDER CHRISTOPHER J. EASLEY



Empowering future leaders

Bill Gates from Microsoft did it in 1973. Amazon's Jeff Bezos got his in 1982. Jerry Greenfield of Ben and Jerry's ice cream fame reaches back to 1969 for his. And a 17-year-old Oprah Winfrey earned hers in 1971.

These four famous entrepreneurs all began their careers with an educational scholarship. I mention this because the deadline for the DAV Auxiliary Education Scholarship is March 21, and we want to give the next generation of service-minded business tycoons a kick-start.

Full-time students (at least 12 credit hours per semester) may receive up to \$2,500 and part-time students (at least six credit hours per semester) can earn up to \$750. We consider students with less than six credit hours on a case-by-case basis, and they may also receive up to \$750. The requirements are to be at least a high school senior, have a GPA of 2.5 or higher, provide a 500-word essay on personal career or life aspirations, and list how you served disabled veterans or their families during the past two years.

Application forms are available at davauxiliary.org or by contacting Auxiliary headquarters at 833-368-1220. Last year, the Auxiliary awarded a total of \$40,000 in scholarships to 17 recipients.

Money for these scholarships comes from donors and a portion of dues from units and state departments, so when you bring in a new paid Auxiliary member, you're helping our scholarship fund grow as well.

Beyond growing the Auxiliary scholarship fund, bringing in new members builds our community, and the dues revenue supports operating costs and provides continuity for the next generation. Adding members to our ranks also builds our advocacy and representation when fighting on Capitol Hill for veterans and their families. So when you tell a potential new member about the dues, you're not just asking for money; you're giving them an opportunity to invest in a community, advocate for a cause, access resources and assert their belonging.

Now, I need to talk a little bit about volunteering. According to a U.S. Census Bureau survey, during the pandemic, less than a quarter of Americans volunteered. While that drop had an obvious cause, it was part of an already alarming trend. In 2002, the average volunteer donated 52 hours a year. In 2017, that dropped to 40 hours. By 2019, it had fallen to a miserable 26 hours a year. Last year, Americans spent just 25 hours a year paying it forward.

We need your help! Please go to volunteerforveterans.org and find a place where you can help make a difference for disabled veterans and their families. ■



A DINNER TO HONOR

Chapter members step up to support veterans in their communities during Golden Corral's annual Military Appreciation Night

By Nikki Herrmann

With over 350 Golden Corral restaurants participating in Military Appreciation Night last fall, DAV chapters nationwide eagerly seized the opportunity to engage their members by accepting monetary donations for DAV. The annual event brings veterans together for a meal and serves as a powerful fundraising effort that has, to date, raised over \$20 million for DAV chapter-led initiatives.

"Military Appreciation Night is a special night at Golden Corral," said Maria Santy, a Marine veteran and commander of Chapter 7 in Fredericksburg, Virginia. "It's a place where veterans greet, meet and share a dinner. A place where surprises always arrive, and by that, I mean you never know who will walk through those glass doors."

One familiar face from Chapter 7 who walked through the door was Army veteran Michael Johnson. He has attended the event since he became a DAV life member in 2005.

"I keep going back to the event because I like meeting other veterans and being able to give them information on DAV," Johnson said. "Many veterans come and want information on how they can file a claim for their disability, and I'm glad I can be there to tell them how DAV can help them."

While numbers from this year's event are still being finalized, during the 2023 event, Golden Corral served nearly 190,000 free meals to our nation's heroes and raised more than \$1 million for DAV. These funds support crucial chapter-led initiatives, such as purchasing vehicles for the DAV Transportation Network, a program where volunteers drive veterans to their Department of Veterans Affairs medical appointments. This service ensures veterans, particularly those who live in rural areas and other places far from their nearest VA clinic, have access to essential health care.



DAYTON, OHIO



Johnson, who regularly volunteers to drive veterans to their medical appointments, sees firsthand how these funds are making a difference.

"There are always veterans that need help," Johnson said. "I can help by picking them up and driving them to their VA appointments. The VA hospital is about 50 miles away, but I know how important it is that they have someone to drive them."

Johnson isn't the only chapter member who works tirelessly to care for veterans in his community. Gerald Tyler, a Marine veteran, had volunteered for several hours leading up to the event at his local Golden Corral, spreading the word about the partnership with DAV and encouraging donations.

"I serve about six hours daily on average," Tyler said. "When people come in, I tell them about DAV's relationship with Golden Corral and how Military Appreciation Night is important because it connects people of all military eras and reminds us of the importance of our sacrifices."

For Tyler, the event is about not only honoring those who have served but also making meaningful connections.

"We engage in dialogue and tell a few war stories. I would invite others to come out next year and enjoy a free meal, chitchat a little bit and have a good time."

DAV National Commander Daniel Contreras, an Army veteran, echoes the importance of events like Military Appreciation Night.

"Golden Corral hosts one of the largest military reunions in the world every November. They were the first to offer a nationwide thank-you meal, and the impact they've had supporting our mission at the grassroots level is unsurpassed," he said. "Military Appreciation Night is a lifeline for many who are underserved, bringing veterans of all backgrounds together to engage in camaraderie, connect with resources and know they aren't alone in their journey." ■

Right: DAV National Commander Daniel Contreras with Chapter 17 Adjutant Inez M. Dent at Military Appreciation Night in Landover, Maryland.



Above: Michael Johnson (left) and Gerald Tyler (right), life members of Chapter 7 in Fredericksburg, Virginia, at Golden Corral's 2024 Military Appreciation Night.

VA phone-based emergency care goes national

■ Emergency care is now available by phone for veterans enrolled in the Department of Veterans Affairs health care system. Tele-emergency care (tele-EC) gives veterans access to VA emergency care from anywhere.

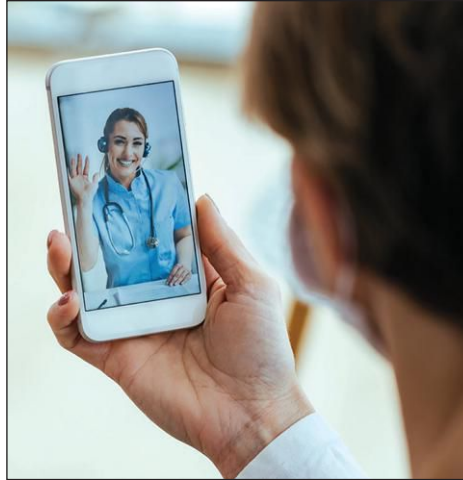
“Veterans can now be evaluated for possible emergencies from the comfort of their home,” said VA Under Secretary for Health Dr. Shereef Elnahal. “Sometimes you’re not sure whether what you’re experiencing is a minor emergency or not, and tele-emergency care can help you resolve those questions.”

As part of VA Health Connect, a clinical triage nurse evaluates veterans over the phone or through video chat. In cases

where there’s a life-threatening emergency, the triage nurse calls 911 and stays on the line until help arrives.

The program, piloted this year, has helped more than 60,000 callers so far and has a case resolution rate of 59.4%. Tele-EC does not replace the need for in-person emergency evaluation, but for veterans in rural areas or those with mobility issues, a call can save driving time, waiting and possible exposure to others’ illnesses. It also doesn’t require a copay.

Tele-EC is one of the many ways the VA is increasing veterans’ access to VA health care. To enroll in VA care, visit va.gov/health-care/how-to-apply.



VA invests millions in adaptive sports for veterans

■ The Department of Veterans Affairs is awarding \$15.9 million in grants so veterans living with disabilities can participate in adaptive sports, recreational activities and equine therapy.

Ninety-one national, regional and community-based programs in all 50 states; Washington, D.C.; Guam; and Puerto Rico are receiving money from the VA’s Adaptive Sports Grant Program.

“These grants give veterans life-changing opportunities to participate in adaptive sports in the communities where they live all across the country,” said VA Secretary Denis McDonough. “We know adaptive sports and recreational activities can be transformational for veterans living with disabilities, improving their overall physical and mental health and also giving them important community with fellow heroes who served.”

Adaptive sports include competitive or recreational sports and activities customized to the needs of each participating veteran. They include Paralympic sports,



archery, cycling, skiing, hunting, rock climbing and skydiving.

DAV is partnering with the VA on two adaptive sports projects: the National Disabled Veterans Golf Clinic and the National Disabled Veterans Winter Sports Clinic. Those programs do not receive grants for funding and are supported by DAV, its chapters and departments; sponsors; and individual donors. The next winter sports clinic is March 30–April 5, and the next golf clinic is Sept. 7–12.

Over the last nine years, the VA has granted over \$119 million through the Adaptive Sports Grant Program. A complete list of grant recipients is available at va.gov/adaptivesports.



Las Vegas to host 2025 DAV and Auxiliary National Convention

Aug. 9–12, 2025 | Paris Las Vegas

This year, DAV’s national convention heads to the largest city in Nevada and one of the fastest-growing areas in the country, Las Vegas. With over 40.8 million visitors in 2023, Las Vegas is one of the nation’s most popular vacation destinations.

The convention is an opportunity to advocate for ill and injured veterans, enjoy the camaraderie of fellow DAV members, and help shape the organization’s yearly agenda—while still managing to have a fun time.

Located in the Las Vegas Valley within the greater Mojave Desert, Las Vegas is an internationally renowned resort city, featuring gambling, shopping, fine dining and big-name entertainment. The city is known for its luxurious casino resorts and has more than 56 golf courses within 20 miles of the city limits.

Las Vegas is home to the largest glass pyramid; the largest hotel, with over 5,000 rooms; and one of the world’s tallest observation wheels, the 550-foot-tall High Roller.

Convention attendees will enjoy a special room rate at the Paris Las Vegas of \$159 per single or double. The Paris Las Vegas is known for its half-scale replica of the Eiffel Tower at 541 feet tall, which is the tallest reproduction of the original. ■



For more information and to make your hotel reservation in the DAV room block, scan the QR code or visit dav.org/events/2025-national-convention.



TRAVEL ASSISTANCE The Transportation Security Administration (TSA) can facilitate the screening of injured or wounded veterans. After making flight reservations, veterans (or their care coordinators) should contact a TSA Cares representative by calling toll-free 855-787-2227 weekdays from 8 a.m. to 11 p.m. and weekends and holidays from 9 a.m. to 8 p.m. Eastern time. A representative will either provide screening information relevant to the veteran’s disability or refer the veteran to experts at TSA for help through the screening process.



From the NATIONAL CHAPLAIN DEBRA VARNER DANCER

You are invited



During February, the Department of Veterans Affairs celebrates the National Salute to Veteran Patients to pay tribute to veterans who receive health care at VA medical facilities.

This year's celebration is Feb. 9–15. According to the VA, this observance was created for three main reasons: honor veterans, encourage people to visit and volunteer their services at veteran medical centers, and increase community awareness about the role of the VA's medical centers.

More than 9 million veterans receive medical treatment through the VA each year. This large number underscores the need for more helping hands in the program. While these medical centers, hospitals and outpatient clinics offer a wide range of medical services to veterans, the VA relies on volunteers to help keep these facilities running smoothly and provide comfort to veterans.

During the national salute, VA facilities across the country host various outreach events—including recreational activities and Valentine's Day gifting—to bring community awareness to their veteran patients. I encourage you to make it a point to help celebrate and appreciate the veterans whose selfless service has contributed to the safety and peace of our country. You can do this a few ways:

- **Become a volunteer.** Contact your local VA medical facility and volunteer in DAV's name, or visit DAV's [volunteerforveterans.org](https://www.volunteerforveterans.org) to learn about volunteer opportunities, including becoming a DAV Transportation Network driver. Even an hour a month can make a big difference in veterans' lives.
- **Visit a VA medical facility.** One visit can go a long way in brightening a veteran's day. It's amazing what engaging in a cheerful conversation, reading a book, playing cards or simply being present can mean to someone. The gesture doesn't need to be grand, just heartfelt.
- **Share your knowledge.** More people need to learn about the National Salute to Veteran Patients. As family isn't forgotten, veterans shouldn't be either. Celebrate this salute by telling others about it.

For this year's National Salute to Veteran Patients, I ask that we look at our fellow veterans as more than veterans. They are our family and friends, so let's celebrate and visit them as family and friends. Like the holiday season that just passed, it's a great opportunity to come together to express our love and share our joy.

I encourage you to be effective in the lives of those veterans who need a visit. Volunteer your time and resources, express your gratitude for their service, offer words of encouragement, and tell others about the sacrifices ill and injured veterans have made on behalf of all Americans. ■

National commander testimonial dinner

■ DAV National Commander Daniel Contreras is scheduled to deliver the national commander's annual testimony at a special event April 12 at The Hills Hotel in Laguna Hills, California.

Rooms can be reserved at a special guest rate of \$160 per night plus applicable taxes and fees. Call 949-586-5000 and mention the DAV event for this special rate, or visit thelagunahillshotel.com to make reservations. Rates are available three days before and after the April 9–15 meeting dates for those who want to stay longer and visit the area.

Local attractions include two golf courses, Laguna Hills Community Center and Sports Complex, numerous nearby hiking trails, and a variety of stores and restaurants to shop and dine at. Additionally, you are only a short drive from some of Southern California's most iconic beaches: Laguna Beach, Dana Point and Newport Beach.

Cost for the surf-and-turf dinner is \$65 per person.

For questions about the event, please contact Enrique Ramos at eramos@davcal.org. For questions about registration, please contact Marine Kirkland at mkirkland@davcal.org.



National Auxiliary commander testimonial dinner

■ DAV Auxiliary National Commander Christopher Easley's testimonial dinner is tentatively scheduled in conjunction with the Forget-Me-Not Luncheon on Monday, Aug. 11, during the DAV and Auxiliary National Convention in Las Vegas.

Details about accommodations and the event are forthcoming. Please stand by for updates.



National Caregiver Support Program Director

■ In November, Ron Minter, a service-connected disabled Navy veteran of the Gulf War era, was appointed as National Caregiver Support Program Director at DAV National Headquarters in Erlanger, Kentucky.

In this new role, Minter will oversee the development and delivery of resources to support caregivers and improve the lives of veterans and families.

“Having an experienced and dedicated professional in this critical role highlights DAV’s commitment to expanding services that empower the caregivers of our nation’s disabled veterans, addressing their unique challenges with innovative, evidence-based solutions,” said DAV National Adjutant Barry Jesinoski.

Minter will focus on building partnerships with health care providers, social services and community organizations and will also play an active role in assessing outcomes and adapting programs to meet the evolving needs of veterans



Minter

and their caregivers.

In addition to program development, Minter will serve as DAV’s lead representative to support the needs of caregivers. He’ll facilitate educational sessions on stress management, financial planning and navigation of the complexities of the health care system.

Since 2023, Minter had served as the deputy national voluntary services director. During his tenure, he helped oversee the DAV Transportation Network and DAV adaptive sports—initiatives that frequently

involved coordination with caregivers.

Minter enlisted in the Navy from his home state of Texas in 1990. He was medically discharged in 1995. In 1999, he left the Veterans Benefits Administration after being accepted into Class VIII of the DAV National Service Officer Training Academy in Denver.

He apprenticed at the service office in Waco, Texas, where he continued to serve until 2007 when he transferred to Baltimore. There, he was promoted to supervisor in 2009.

He is a life member of Chapter 3 in Waco, Texas.



REGISTRATION NOW OPEN

2025 National Disabled Veterans Golf Clinic

Sept. 7-12 | Riverside Hotel & Golf Resort

Veterans with blindness or low vision, traumatic brain injuries, amputations, spinal cord injuries and other qualifying disabilities who are accepted to attend the clinic will get to experience the therapeutic benefits of golf and other activities such as kayaking, biking and rock climbing during the weeklong event.

Dozens of coaches and hundreds of volunteers will be on hand to ensure each participant has an experience tailored to their needs. The casual atmosphere fosters opportunities for fellowship and camaraderie among the veterans—both returning participants and those discovering the benefits of adaptive sports for the first time. ■



Veterans must apply to participate. **Application period ends April 4.** Scan the QR code or visit veteransgolfclinic.org/participate.





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"As a 35-year member of DAV, I have included a gift to DAV in my estate plans."

—Herta Weber, Army and Navy veteran

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- Email giftplanning@dav.org.
- Return the attached postcard.
- Visit davplanmygift.org.

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When completing your legacy gift to DAV, please provide the following to your adviser:

- Legal name:
Disabled American Veterans
- Address: 860 Dolwick Drive,
Elranger, KY 41018
- Federal tax ID number:
31-0263158

Throughout her 23 years in service to our nation, Herta Weber developed a love and appreciation for those who sacrifice while serving in uniform.

An immigrant from Germany, her military career included enlistment in the Army as well as commissions in both the Army and the Navy. Her service included work as a physical therapist, which showed her firsthand that overcoming physical challenges can be a grueling process.

"Many veterans that I worked with during my career were disabled, and they hold a special place in my heart," she said.

Weber's path to military service wasn't an easy one. Her family fled Germany at the outbreak of World War II and sought refuge in Asia. Her formative years were spent mostly in India. As a teenager, Weber attended schools in Europe, graduating from high school in England.

At the age of 21, she immigrated to the United States and enlisted in the Army. After three years of honorable service, she became a U.S. citizen.

"Since I had no country to call my home, America with its vastness and its many populations—from many cultures—seemed a fascinating place to live."

Upon completion of her training as a laboratory technician at Fort Sam Houston, Texas, she was stationed at the Presidio in San Francisco. While there, she completed a Bachelor of Science and applied to the Army Officer Physical Therapy Program. Weber was sworn in as a second lieutenant and received orders to Fort Carson, Colorado. After serving there and later at the U.S. Public Health Service Commissioned Corps in Norfolk, Virginia, Weber received a grant from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill to obtain her master's degree in public health administration.

Weber then reentered the military, this time joining the U.S. Navy, just as the Vietnam War was heating up. She was stationed at U.S. Naval Hospital Portsmouth, Virginia, followed by a two-year tour at U.S. Naval Hospital Yokosuka, Japan. She returned to the states, serving at U.S. Naval Hospital Quantico, Virginia, and from there at Naval Medical Center San Diego. Her final duty station before retirement was U.S. Naval Hospital Long Beach, California.

After a lengthy, multiservice career serving across the globe, Weber settled into the next phase of her life—but she didn't forget the organization that helped her make the leap to civilian life.

"As a 35-year member of DAV, I have included a gift to DAV in my estate plans," said Weber. "I am forever grateful to the military for giving me a home; an education; and, last but not least, a wonderful career."

"This gift is a small measure of my gratitude." ■

Herta Weber died April 19, 2024, at age 91. Herta cared deeply about making a positive impact by supporting her fellow ill and injured veterans. We thank her for her years of service and for being a dedicated DAV life member for over 35 years.



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Applications for entrepreneurship program now open



Are you an entrepreneur or know of one who is looking to grow a for-profit business? DAV Patriot Boot Camp is a transformative program that empowers founders in the veteran and military community, including spouses, with comprehensive entrepreneurship education, one-on-one mentorship and a vital community committed to their success.

Through in-person events and digital programming, DAV Patriot Boot Camp taps in to the unique experiences and skills veterans bring to the table, channeling their exceptional leadership, discipline and adaptability into the realm of entrepreneurship.

Applications are now open for the next two DAV Patriot Boot Camp cohorts, to be held Feb. 5–7 at DAV National Headquarters near Cincinnati, and in the spring at a location to be determined. ■



Learn more and apply at patriotbootcamp.org.

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Camp Corral ★ is back ★

No-cost camp helps children of disabled veterans and fallen military members 'Just B Kids'

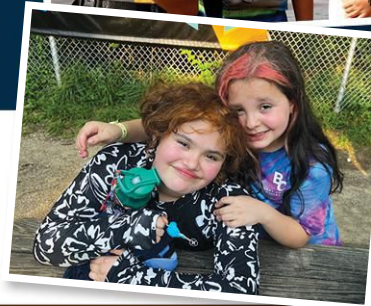
For the 13th year, the DAV-supported Camp Corral summer program will return to support the children of those who've served. Between June and August, Camp Corral will host 21 weeklong summer camps across the country, providing recreational opportunities and assistance to children ages 8 to 15 who have a parent who either is a disabled veteran or died as a result of their service.

DAV has been a long-standing champion for Camp Corral due to their programs designed to empower children who share in the sacrifices of military service. Through DAV's Just B Kids scholarship program, more than 6,800 children of ill, injured or fallen veterans and service members have attended Camp Corral programs at no cost to their families. This special camp gives them the opportunity to simply be kids while making connections, building coping skills and increasing self-confidence.

"In 2016, we began our partnership with Camp Corral to help expand the program's outstanding mission to support veterans and their families," said DAV National Adjutant Barry Jesinoski. "Children of disabled or fallen veterans have endured unique hardships and sacrifices due to their parents' service. We're grateful for Camp Corral's commitment to providing kids from around the country the joy of a week away at camp and a community with which they relate."

As a national leader and provider of educational resources, research and advocacy related to the challenges faced by wounded, ill and fallen military service members' children—many of whom provide caregiving duties within their families—Camp Corral partners with DAV to build life skills, resilience and independence. ■

APPLY TODAY! The application period opens Jan. 15. Mark your calendars; spots fill up quickly. To learn more about the Just B Kids scholarship program at Camp Corral, visit justbkids.org.



2025 Camp Corral Schedule

LOCATION	CITY	STATE	DATES
Triangle Y Ranch Camp	Oracle	AZ	June 8–13
Collin County Adventure Camp	Anna	TX	June 15–21
Camp Holiday Trails	Charlottesville	VA	June 22–27
YMCA Camp Carson	Princeton	IN	June 29–July 4
YMCA Camp Gorham	Eagle Bay	NY	June 29–July 4
YMCA Camp Hanes	King	NC	June 29–July 4
Eastern 4-H Center	Columbia	NC	June 29–July 4
YMCA Camp Manitou-Lin	Middleville	MI	June 29–July 4
Camp Southern Ground Week 1	Fayetteville	GA	June 29–July 4
Camp Wood YMCA	Elmdale	KS	June 29–July 5
4-H Memorial Camp	Monticello	IL	July 6–11
YMCA Camp Winona	DeLeon Springs	FL	July 13–18
YMCA Camp Seymour	Gig Harbor	WA	July 20–25
Camp Southern Ground Week 2	Fayetteville	GA	July 20–25
YMCA Camp Classen	Davis	OK	July 20–25
Camp Cole	Eastover	SC	July 20–25
YMCA Camp Shady Brook	Deckers	CO	July 27–Aug. 1
Camp Lakotah	Wautoma	WI	July 27–Aug. 2
YMCA Camp Weaver	Greensboro	NC	Aug. 3–8
YMCA Camp Marston	Julian	CA	Aug. 3–8
YMCA Camp Ernst	Burlington	KY	Aug. 3–9

Schedule is subject to change. Visit campcorral.org for updates and COVID-19 safety measures.

Camp Corral continues to partner with sites that meet the highest standards required by the American Camp Association, and camps will continue to update their safety measures based on local guidelines and recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.



justbkids.org



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