DAV® MAGAZINE
SEPTEMBER | OCTOBER 2026



UPHOLDING THE OATH

They did their duty in secrecy. Now they want the benefits and recognition they earned.

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DAV members elect Navy veteran John Donovan as national commander

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NATIONAL DISABLED VETERANS WINTER SPORTS CLINIC

2027



MARCH 27–APRIL 3

SNOWMASS VILLAGE, COLORADO

DAV | VA | U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

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Applications are available at **wintersportsclinic.org** and must be completely filled out and properly signed.

Mail applications to:
VA Western Colorado HCS
Alex Maitre/WSC
2121 North Ave.
Grand Junction, CO 81501

They can also be scanned and submitted to **alexandre.maitre@va.gov**.

APPLICATION DEADLINE IS NOV. 30.

The National Disabled Veterans Winter Sports Clinic is scheduled to return to the mountains of Colorado in 2027, and interested veterans can now submit an application to participate.

The annual event, co-presented by DAV and the Department of Veterans Affairs, will take place March 27 to April 3, 2027. The clinic is a leader in adaptive winter sports instruction for disabled veterans, promoting world-class healthcare at a one-of-a-kind rehabilitative event. Known as "Miracles on a Mountainside," the clinic offers veterans opportunities for self-development and challenge through sports therapy and rehabilitative adaptive activities, including Alpine and Nordic skiing, rock climbing, sled hockey, and scuba diving.

Participation is open to U.S. military veterans with qualifying disabilities such as spinal cord injuries, orthopedic amputation, blindness or limited vision, and certain neurological conditions. Veterans who currently have inpatient or outpatient status at VA medical facilities will have first priority. ■



From the NATIONAL COMMANDER
JOHN DONOVAN

Learning, leading and serving

When I was a young sailor, a warrant officer shared a simple piece of advice that stayed with me throughout my military career and has guided me ever since: "Watch one. Do one. Teach one."

At first, it sounds like a training method—and it is. You learn by observing. You gain confidence by doing. And you ensure success by passing that knowledge on to others. But over the years, I came to realize it's much more than that. It's a philosophy of leadership, service and responsibility.

As I begin my tenure as your national commander, I believe that same principle applies to our organization.

For more than a century, generations of DAV members have watched those who came before them fight for veterans and their families, caregivers and survivors. They learned how to serve, advocate and lead. Then they stepped forward and did the work themselves. Today, it's our turn to carry that responsibility and prepare the next generation to do the same.

DAV's strength has never come from any one individual. It comes from members helping veterans, chapters supporting communities, and leaders sharing their knowledge and experience with those who will follow them. That cycle of learning, service and mentorship is what has sustained our organization for more than 100 years and will continue to sustain it for the next century.

One of my top priorities as national commander will be addressing the tragedy of veteran suicide. Like many families, mine has experienced firsthand the challenges veterans can face when they struggle to access the care and support they need. Every veteran deserves hope, opportunity and a path forward. DAV programs and services change lives every day, and we must continue finding new ways to reach veterans before they reach a crisis point.

I'm also committed to strengthening DAV for the future by growing our membership. In 1984, Arkansas native and then-National Commander Chad Colley led DAV past the 1 million-member mark for the first time. As a fellow Arkansan, I would love to see us achieve that milestone again. But membership is about far more than numbers. Every new member brings new ideas, new energy and a new opportunity to extend DAV's mission to another veteran and family.

The challenges facing veterans continue to evolve, and we can't rely solely on the way things have always been done. We must listen to our members, encourage innovation and remain open to new approaches that help us better serve veterans.

I'm honored by the trust you have placed in me. Together, let's continue the work entrusted to us by those who came before—learning, leading and teaching—so that future generations of veterans will always have a strong voice and a place to turn. ■

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Photo: Library of Congress



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DAV MAGAZINE

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From the NATIONAL ADJUTANT/CEO
BARRY A. JESINOSKI

A transition built on strength

Each year, DAV entrusts its mission to a new leader, our national commander. That transition is never just a passing of the gavel. It's a moment to reflect on what we've accomplished and to look forward with intention at what comes next. This year, we have good reason for both.

Past National Commander Coleman Nee brought something to this office that can't always be quantified but is impossible to miss: a genuine sleeves-rolled-up commitment to the work. His steering of the ship meant engaging chapters and departments, and that engagement reinforced for our members, our volunteers and the veterans we serve why DAV membership matters and what an active leader looks like.

One moment that stands out that speaks to Commander Nee as a person came at the National Disabled Veterans Winter Sports Clinic. He didn't just attend. He came to play—for hours, including two full games of sled hockey, competing alongside the disabled veterans the clinic serves. That kind of participation isn't required of a national commander. That's the point, though. It was a choice that said everything about his approach to the role. The best way to honor veterans is to show up fully, not just symbolically. Commander Nee left it all on the ice, and veterans noticed.

He also brought a rare and valuable depth of engagement to DAV. His familiarity with our initiatives, our goals and the decisions that shape this organization has made him a true partner.

That has strengthened DAV in ways that will outlast his term.

I'd be remiss if I didn't also mention that Commander Nee made the work fun. Not in a way that ever minimized the seriousness of what we do, but in the way that only someone with real wisdom understands. Laughter is sometimes the best tool in the room. I'm grateful for that, and I'll miss it.

Now, we welcome National Commander John Donovan. He comes to this office as a longtime DAV leader, a department adjutant and a national line officer. He knows this organization inside and out. What sets Commander Donovan apart, though, isn't his resume; it's his character. Suicide prevention will be one of his top priorities as commander, and that's no coincidence. He's the kind of person who will stop whatever he's doing to sit with a veteran, truly listen and think carefully about how to help. That instinct, patience and sincerity are exactly what veterans in crisis need.

Commander Nee built on a strong foundation and made it stronger. Commander Donovan now inherits that momentum and carries forward the same mission that has always defined us: keeping our promises to the men and women who kept theirs.

DAV is in good hands. ■

LETTERS

Major Richard Star Act

Under current law, many disabled veterans are forced to forfeit a portion of the retirement benefits they earned through their military service in order to receive disability compensation related to those combat-connected injuries. During my deployment to Iraq, I was severely wounded when an IED detonated approximately 3 feet from my face and upper body. At the time, I was taking the blast in place of two of my soldiers. The injuries I sustained that day ultimately led to my permanent blindness as well as a multitude of other injuries. I was encouraged when it looked like we would finally see the Richard Star Act come to a vote to right this wrong. But when it was packaged in the "Take Care of America's Veterans Act" with a proposal to cut benefits for veterans with tinnitus and sleep apnea, I was disgusted. It could hurt more than a million and a half of our brothers and sisters. Veterans, our families and the people who support us deserve better. We should hold our politicians accountable for trying to fracture the veteran community and correct one injustice by committing another. ***Jason Pepper, San Antonio, Texas***

Why is DAV not pushing for amendments to the Major Richard Star Act to ensure that all medical retirees, not just combat-related medical retirees, receive both their DOD retirement pay and their VA disability compensation? The statements you have made about combat-related medical retirees apply with equal force to non-combat-related medical retirees. They've been promised action, and Congress has failed to deliver. If we don't strike when the iron is hot on the Hill, there is very little chance the non-combat-related medical retirees will get relief. If the Star Act passes this session, what is your plan to push Congress to ensure that non-combat-related medical retirees also no longer have to pay the disabled veteran tax? ***Brian Lewis, St. Paul, Minnesota***

Editors' Note: *DAV has also endorsed the Retired Pay Restoration Act (H.R. 303) and the Disabled Veterans Tax Termination Act (H.R. 333) and is actively working to get them enacted into law this year.*

An MOS-based, tiered presumptive approach may ultimately do more to reduce long-term strain on the VA system than constantly treating every claim like a brand-new investigation decades after service. The military already knows certain occupations and exposures carry elevated risks. Right now, the system often forces veterans to spend years proving what the government already largely understands. That creates backlog, appeals, inconsistent outcomes, administrative costs, distrust and instability for veterans and families alike. The Major Richard Star Act addresses an important compensation issue for medically retired combat-injured veterans, but a tiered presumptive framework could help address the structural problem upstream by reducing the burden of proving obvious service-connected conditions in the first place. ***James Willms, via Facebook***

Editors' Note: *DAV's* Ending the Wait for Toxic-Exposed Veterans *report contains comprehensive recommendations to reform the presumptive decision-making process to simplify the creation of commonsense presumptives such as an MOS-based approach.*

Plant medicines

Ibogaine is an important conversation. Many veterans aren't just dealing with visible wounds—they're navigating systems that weren't built to move at the speed their situations demand. Access, accountability and follow-through matter just as much as innovation. Appreciate seeing continued focus on getting this right for those who served. ***Sammie Young, Northport, Alabama***

Gratitude

Thank you, DAV, for being there for me throughout the whole process of transitioning to civilian life and for telling my story ("Beyond the Blast," May/June edition). I know there are many stories similar to my own, and I know it's difficult to overcome the mental and physical hurdles life after combat brings. Hopefully my story helps others reach out and get the help they need. ***RJ Adams, Muskogee, Oklahoma***

PTSD vs. moral injury

Thanks for the May/June "On the Cusp" article addressing moral injury. Differentiating PTSD and moral injury really helps veterans troubled in conscience who want to heal in ways beyond mental healthcare. I fully support DOD and VA efforts to foster mental health. But the article is spot-on in quoting Dr. Carter Check, we've "got to get into the arena that I think matters the most, which is moral health." The veterans presented exemplify both the quality of their military service as well as the impact of moral injury on mind, body and soul. Excellent article! ***Eric Wester, Jacksonville, 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.

Expanding dental care for disabled veterans



PHOTO BY SHANITA DORSEY/U.S. ARMY

Act would increase eligibility, improve access and support better overall health outcomes

By M. Todd Hunter

For many veterans, access to dental care remains one of the most significant gaps in Department of Veterans Affairs healthcare. The DAV-backed Dental Care for Veterans Act (H.R. 210) aims to help close that gap by expanding comprehensive dental coverage to all veterans enrolled in the VA healthcare system.

Introduced by Rep. Julia Brownley, the legislation would broaden eligibility for VA dental services by requiring the VA to furnish dental care in the same manner as any other medical service. Currently, only about 25% of VA-enrolled veterans qualify for dental care, leaving many service-disabled veterans without access to preventive and restorative treatment.

The need for expanded access is substantial. Recent survey data found that nearly 45% of veterans reported having teeth removed because of pain or infection after leaving the military. Research has also linked poor oral health to chronic conditions such as diabetes and heart disease, underscoring the important role dental care plays in overall health and wellness.

Although the Veterans Health Administration is the nation's largest integrated healthcare system, dental services remain limited. Those who don't qualify for VA dental benefits often must purchase coverage, pay out of pocket or go without care, and many veterans face challenges accessing treatment because of long travel distances or a lack of nearby providers. Veterans also often bear a greater financial burden for dental care, with research finding that they pay significantly more out of pocket than their civilian counterparts.

Expanding eligibility is only part of the solution. Additional investment in the VA's dental workforce, facilities and community care networks would help ensure veterans can receive timely, high-quality care closer to home.

"Dental care is healthcare," said DAV National Legislative Director Jon Retzer. "Too many veterans are unable to access the dental services they need because of outdated eligibility restrictions. The Dental Care for Veterans Act would help ensure veterans can receive preventive and restorative care that supports their overall health, quality of life and long-term well-being."

DAV has made expanding access to dental care a legislative priority and continues to work with lawmakers to advance solutions that meet veterans' needs. As Congress considers H.R. 210, DAV members and supporters have an opportunity to help move the legislation forward.

Veterans and their families can make their voices heard by contacting their elected representatives through DAV CAN (Commander's Action Network). The easy-to-use advocacy platform allows participants to send messages directly to members of Congress and encourage support for legislation that would improve veterans' access to dental care and other earned benefits. ■

Stay Informed To learn more and take action, visit **davcan.org** and tell Congress that veterans deserve access to the dental care they've earned.

A walk that changed everything

A daily stroll led to life-changing benefits for a Marine's unrecognized wounds from Vietnam

By Matt Saintsing

Every morning, Marty Patterson takes the same route with her dog through her Phoenix neighborhood, past familiar houses and quiet streets. One day, she noticed an older man sitting in a chair outside. Then she noticed that his license plate displayed a Purple Heart.

That was enough for her to stop and talk to Marine veteran Stephen Jameson. Marty listened and went back to her morning.

A few days later, Marty's husband made contact, and they spoke at length about Jameson's time in Vietnam. Two hours flew by.

"The stories just flowed out," said Kirk Patterson, a benefits advocate at DAV's Phoenix office. "He was talking about incoming fire, bullets on both sides of his feet, watching his buddy get hit."

Patterson was struck by how nonchalant Jameson was about his stories.

"He said it like it was nothing new," he added. "No emotion, just here's what happened."





Above: *Stephen Jameson with his daughter, Erin. She has been serving as her dad's caregiver since 2025. Erin said the benefits he now receives bring peace of mind.* ***Left****: Vietnam veteran Jameson takes a break in the field, blowing a bubble of gum while a fellow Marine rests beside him, with gear scattered in the nearby dirt.*

Jameson joined the Marines in June 1967—six days after earning an associate degree. The Marines wanted to screen him for Officer Candidate School. He turned it down. Instead, he was assigned to intelligence, where he served as an S-2 scout with 2nd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment, using his Vietnamese language skills.

For 13 months, he was in the jungles of Vietnam, rotating out for a day or two before heading back.

"It was combat every day," Jameson said.

He was present during the Tet Offensive in Hue City, running across a bombed-out bridge, half-blinded by his sweaty helmet sliding over his eyes. With a rifle in

"I actually started to cry."

—Erin Jameson

each hand, he navigated the holes blown beneath his feet. Jameson also stepped on two land mines during his tour. Neither one went off. He figured "someone up there was looking out" for him.

The day he earned his Purple Heart, his unit was moving up a hill when his friend stepped on a mine and died in the explosion. Another Marine who was sitting on a nearby rock was struck by shrapnel from his feet to his eyes. Jameson caught shrapnel in his legs. He was, as he put it, fortunate.

When Patterson pulled up Jameson's records, he saw service connections for illnesses related to Agent Orange exposure. Then, he looked at Jameson's DD-214. The Purple Heart was there. But Jameson had no rating for a combat wound.

"That caught my attention," Patterson said. "We had to do something about that."

Patterson filed a new claim. The PACT Act had changed the landscape for Vietnam veterans, and the Department of Veterans Affairs subsequently conceded that Jameson had been exposed to Agent Orange. New claims were approved for multiple conditions associated with his combat wounds and his toxic exposure while in Vietnam.

By May 2026, the VA's final decisions came through with life-changing news that left Jameson's daughter and caregiver stunned.

"I actually started to cry," said Erin Jameson, who was moving her daughter out of her college dorm when Patterson's call came through.



DAV benefits advocate Kirk Patterson (right) stands with Jameson. The two connected after hearing what Jameson had endured as a result of his service in Vietnam. Patterson helped to secure vital veterans benefits.

The need for a higher rating had become urgent after Jameson collapsed during a walk in September 2025. He had walked for an hour every morning and completed 165 pushups and 105 situps each day. A narrowing of blood vessels had cut blood flow to his brain. He fell, gushing blood from his scalp. His wife, Marylois Jameson, found him sitting in the living room, with blood on his face and no memory of what had happened.

The VA kept him for two days. Doctors told Erin she should consider placing Jameson in a facility. She brought him home instead.

Now legally blind and managing cognitive decline, Jameson can no longer drive, cook, use a microwave or dial a phone. Erin handles all of that, alongside her own job, children and household. The new rating means financial relief and the security of knowing that her dad's VA benefits will be there if he ever needs more care than she can provide.

"It released a huge load," Erin said.

For Jameson, the benefits are inseparable from something more difficult to name—a sense that what he carried for more than five decades had finally been seen.

For Patterson, the work is its own reward.

"You're able to get to the crux of what this veteran is actually going through," Patterson said, "and then get the VA to see that this veteran deserves the care he's earned."

Sometimes, a morning walk and a license plate are all it takes. ■

‘IRON SHARPENS IRON’

Veteran entrepreneurship program depends on key ingredient: a supportive community

By Elizabeth DePompei

Katherine Pratt has long felt called to serve veterans in unique ways, inspired by her own military family and her husband’s time as an Army Ranger.

As a driven problem-solver, Pratt naturally combined her calling with her more than two decades of experience in the corporate financial sector. In 2025, Pratt retired from what she called her “big girl” job and founded Synergistic Credit Union Solutions, a consulting firm with a mission to empower credit unions to best understand and serve the veteran community.

Soon after, she discovered DAV Patriot Boot Camp, an entrepreneurship program designed specifically for veterans and their spouses. The program’s flagship offering consists of a three-day boot camp packed with hours of learning, mentoring and networking. Through her cohort, she met two veterans and founders who helped her expand her reach through another venture, a nonprofit called National Credit Union Coalition for America’s Heroes. The goal is to connect veterans to financial literacy and wellness resources, something Pratt sees as critical to overall well-being and suicide prevention.

One of Pratt’s fellow alumni now sits on the nonprofit board, and one of her cohort mentors, a licensed therapist, serves as the mental health liaison. Plus, Pratt said, she stays in regular contact with other alumni and mentors.

“I would say Patriot Boot Camp really invigorated me to double down—like really double down,” Pratt said about her mission.

Pratt’s experience highlights the most essential ingredient of DAV Patriot Boot Camp: community. Through the program, founders meet dozens of people from across the country representing various industries and levels of expertise, including mentors who donate their time to help them succeed.



DAV Patriot Boot Camp inspired Army spouse Katherine Pratt to “double down” on her mission to reach more veterans with financial literacy and wellness resources.

"We put months of work into DAV Patriot Boot Camp's educational and training opportunities," said program director Matthew Feldhaus. "But time and again, it's the community built through each cohort that proves to be the most powerful asset for our founders."

Kisiah Cole, an Army National Guard veteran and founder of Calming Souls Massage, said that kind of community is the foundation for navigating what can often be the roller coaster life of an entrepreneur.

Cole learned about DAV Patriot Boot Camp through Aviatra, a Cincinnati-area nonprofit dedicated solely to helping women succeed as business owners. Aviatra founder Jill Morenz is a regular mentor for the program.

In 2025, DAV sponsored the Woman Veteran Entrepreneur of the Year Award as part of Aviatra's annual awards, for which Cole was a finalist. That ultimately funneled Cole into DAV Patriot Boot Camp, where she found yet another vibrant community.

"A lot of women vets, or a lot of women that are military members, tend to get overlooked, unfortunately," Cole said. "And so, it's nice to know that there is a space for us."

Cole, whose first experience diving into a community of founders was with Aviatra, said both programs have pushed her to let more people into her community so she never has to go at it alone.

"Partnerships like the one we have with Aviatra are crucial to the diversity and reach of our community," Feldhaus said. The program also works closely with the Robert Irvine Foundation, Owners In Honor and others.

Mika Cross learned early in the Army that "you're only as good as your weakest link."

"And sometimes that was me, and sometimes that might be someone else, and your role is to bring up somebody else," she said.

Cross is the founder of Strategy@Work, a company that provides consulting and training to help organizations build healthier, high-performing workplace cultures. The venture is a culmination of a long career spanning enlisted and commissioned military service, the federal workforce, and the private sector. It's also a reflection of Cross' passion to make teams and communities the best they can be—including the veteran community.

When Cross attended DAV Patriot Boot Camp, she had just started partnering with a Virginia-based company dedicated to equipping veterans, spouses and caregivers with AI tools that allow for economic autonomy. Cross was developing a program called AI Mission Ready. During her cohort, she met Jason Brooks, founder of Innovo AI, an intelligent automation company serving healthcare, finance and commercial enterprises.



Army National Guard veteran Kisiah Cole found community at DAV Patriot Boot Camp after going through a partner organization's program for female founders.

Their passions, missions and expertise aligned. Cross brought Brooks on as a founding faculty member. She also invited a fellow cohort alumna based in Virginia to participate in the first class of AI Mission Ready.

"On Demo Day, she really built an AI agent and assistant to help leverage her own business," Cross said.

The results illustrate what Pratt believes: "Iron sharpens iron."

"Watching our program alumni collaborate and make even greater impacts by working together is incredibly rewarding," Feldhaus said. "That sense of community is critical to the success of our program and the larger veteran entrepreneur space." ■

Learn More Online

Learn more about DAV Patriot Boot Camp and sign up for the community newsletter at **patriotbootcamp.org**.



The connections that Army veteran Mika Cross made at DAV Patriot Boot Camp helped build another community empowering veterans, spouses and caregivers with AI tools fostering economic autonomy.

A change of watch

New national commander takes the helm as DAV members unite at 2026 national convention to shape the year ahead

By M. Todd Hunter



More than a century after disabled veterans returned home from World War I to build an organization that would fight for those who served, thousands of DAV and Auxiliary members gathered once again to shape the organization's future.

The 2026 DAV and Auxiliary National Convention brought members from every corner of the nation to Orlando, Florida, where they celebrated another year of service to veterans and their families, caregivers and survivors while setting priorities for the year ahead. Through committee meetings, legislative discussions, educational sessions, recognitions and fellowship, members reaffirmed the mission that has guided DAV for 106 years: keeping our promise to America's veterans.

The convention also marked the beginning of a new chapter in DAV leadership as members elected service-connected disabled Navy veteran John Donovan as the organization's new national commander.

Donovan succeeded outgoing National Commander Coleman Nee after a year that saw DAV continue leading the way in advocating for veterans' earned benefits, expanding access to healthcare, strengthening support for caregivers and ensuring veterans' voices remained at the forefront of national policy discussions.

As he accepted the gavel, Donovan called on members to continue building on DAV's proud legacy while preparing the organization for the future.

"As I look ahead to the coming year, I believe our path is clear," Donovan said. "We need unity, and we need to grow our numbers, because those two goals are inseparable. The stronger and more united our membership becomes, the stronger our voice will be when we advocate before Congress, partner with the Department of Veterans Affairs and stand up for veterans in every community across this country."

Opening the convention

The convention officially began with the joint opening session of DAV and the DAV Auxiliary, bringing together members of both organizations to celebrate their shared commitment to serving America's veterans and their families.

The session featured remarks from VA Deputy Secretary Paul Lawrence, who addressed attendees on the department's priorities, ongoing efforts to improve services for veterans, and the critical partnership between DAV and the VA.

"Caring for veterans is more than VA's mission. Caring for veterans is how we fulfill our nation's promise to the men and women who have worn our uniforms," Lawrence said. "But we can never fully fulfill that promise without trusted partners like DAV committed to that promise, to that responsibility and to accountability."

Lawrence highlighted the organization's long-standing collaboration with the VA, including joint efforts to connect veterans with earned benefits and healthcare services. He also recognized the impact of DAV's nationwide network of service officers in helping veterans navigate the VA system.

"Your extraordinary service officers are the thread who get these veterans connected to VA," Lawrence said. "They

are doing extraordinary work helping veterans get to VA—helping veterans in ways that those same veterans may not fully recognize or appreciate for decades to come."

Bringing VA services directly to veterans

An impactful example of collaboration came through an expanded partnership with the VA that brought claims assistance directly to veterans in attendance.

Throughout the week, DAV benefits advocates worked alongside VA personnel to help veterans navigate the entire disability claims process—from filing a claim to, in some cases, receiving a rating decision before leaving the convention.

For the second time, VA staff developed claims on-site while compensation and pension exam vendors operated mobile medical units capable of conducting most required exams. Those results were immediately available to VA decision-makers, allowing some veterans to complete in days what can often take weeks or months.

"This is exactly what happens when DAV and VA work together to remove barriers for veterans," said DAV National Service Director Scott Hope. "Instead of veterans navigating multiple appointments over weeks or months, we were able to bring the people and resources they needed together in one place."

The collaborative effort assisted 282 veterans, resulted in 171 newly filed claims, and completed 120 compensation and pension examinations. Before the convention concluded, at least 46 veterans had already received rating decisions on their claims.

One such veteran was Navy Reserve Cmdr. Christina West, who was able to submit a disability claim for numerous service-related conditions, get her required examinations and receive a finalized rating decision from the VA in less than four days.



DAV benefits advocates assist veterans with submitting VA disability claims in the claims assistance office at the 2026 DAV and Auxiliary National Convention in Orlando, Florida. Nearly 300 veterans were assisted during the four-day event.

"The timeline that the process was turned around in, that was incredible," said West. "It's unheard of for a claim to be turned around that quickly."

The initiative reflected the VA's broader effort to meet veterans where they are through mobile clinics, telehealth and other technologies that make care and benefits more accessible.

"The response from veterans was overwhelmingly positive," Hope said. "It demonstrated what's possible when we bring services directly to veterans instead of expecting veterans to come to us. That's something we hope to continue building on at future conventions."

Members guide the organization's future

As always, the convention served as DAV's highest governing body, giving members the opportunity to debate and adopt resolutions that will guide the organization's legislative and policy priorities during the coming year.

Committees met throughout the convention to review proposed resolutions covering a broad range of issues affecting veterans, including healthcare, disability compensation, employment, education, long-term care, mental health, toxic exposures, caregiver support and other critical benefits.

The member-adopted resolutions will continue to shape DAV's advocacy before Congress, the VA and other federal agencies, ensuring the organization remains focused on addressing the evolving needs of disabled veterans and their families.

Members also heard reports highlighting the organization's work over the past year, including its legislative advocacy, benefits representation, employment initiatives, voluntary services, charitable programs and communications efforts.

Together, those reports reflected the strength of nearly 1 million DAV members working through chapters and departments across the country to improve the lives of fellow veterans.

Honoring extraordinary service

One of the convention's most inspiring moments came as DAV recognized Sam Juan as its 2026 Disabled American Veteran of the Year, honoring her extraordinary military service and continued advocacy on behalf of fellow veterans.

An Army veteran and former member of the Army's elite Cultural Support Teams, Juan served alongside U.S. special operations forces in Afghanistan, helping pave the way for women in some of the military's most demanding operational environments.

Following her service, Juan confronted the invisible wounds of war and the difficult transition to civilian life.

(Continued on Page 12)

After overcoming addiction and finding healing, she dedicated herself to helping other veterans do the same.

Today, Juan uses her artwork and her voice to advocate for veterans struggling with trauma, addiction and mental health challenges. She has also become a leading advocate for psychedelic-assisted therapies, drawing on her own experiences and speaking openly about the potential of emerging treatments to help veterans heal.

At the convention, Juan participated in the panel "Ibogaine-Assisted Therapy: Hope, Evidence and the Road Ahead," joining Robert Gallery, a former NFL offensive lineman; retired Rear Adm. Dr. James Hancock, former chief of the U.S. Navy Medical Corps and medical officer of the U.S. Marine Corps; and Bryan Hubbard, CEO of Americans for Ibogaine, whose remarks during the opening session stirred the audience through his unique and powerful oratory. Together with these experts and fellow veterans, Juan discussed the current evidence surrounding ibogaine, personal experiences with the psychedelic medicine and the evolving policy landscape for psychedelic-assisted therapy. The discussion explored its potential applications in treating post-traumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injuries and substance use disorders, underscoring Juan's commitment to advancing new approaches to healing for veterans.

The convention also recognized other individuals and organizations whose outstanding service has strengthened the veteran community through volunteerism, advocacy, employment, journalism and community leadership. The many stories recognized throughout the week illustrated a common truth: DAV's mission is carried forward by people who refuse to let adversity have the final word.

A new commander

The election of John Donovan represents both continuity and a renewed focus on DAV's future.

A longtime DAV leader and service-connected disabled Navy veteran, Donovan has held leadership roles at the chapter, department and national levels, earning the respect of members across the organization.

As national commander, Donovan emphasized that DAV's greatest strength is its members—the volunteers who mentor new leaders, recruit future generations, advocate in their communities and ensure no veteran faces life's challenges alone.

"Membership grows through the work each of you does every single day," Donovan said. "It grows when a volunteer driver arrives before sunrise to get a veteran to a medical appointment. It grows when a service officer stays late because one more family needs help filing a claim. It grows when chapter members build wheelchair ramps, volunteer at food pantries, work community events or simply check on a veteran who hasn't been seen in a while."

His election begins a new year focused on strengthening chapters, developing future leaders and ensuring DAV remains the nation's preeminent organization for disabled veterans.

In addition to Donovan's election, delegates elected other DAV national officers: Senior Vice Commander James Procunier, 1st Junior Vice Commander Glenn Hohman, 2nd Junior Vice Commander Brenda Reed, 3rd Junior Vice Commander Adam Greathouse, 4th Junior Vice Commander Denice Williams, Judge Advocate Michael Dobmeier and Chaplain Debra Varner Dancer.

The DAV Auxiliary elected Kathleen Wenthe as its new national commander, succeeding Melissa Pierce.



Left: *2026 Disabled American Veteran of the Year Sam Juan turned years of trauma, addiction and personal hardship into service to her fellow veterans by openly sharing her story of recovery and healing through psychedelic advocacy and artwork.* ***Right:*** *Auxiliary Member of the Year Patty Corpus.*



Left to right: *Auxiliary National Adjutant Bunny Clos, Auxiliary National Commander Kathleen Wenthe, DAV National Commander John Donovan, and DAV National Adjutant Barry Jesinoski before the Introduction to National Officers Dinner at the 2026 DAV and Auxiliary National Convention.*

Celebrating fellowship and service

While the convention's business sessions remained its central purpose, members also found time to celebrate the friendships, camaraderie and shared purpose that have long defined DAV.

An annual highlight, Fun Night allowed attendees to enjoy a special performance by Grammy-nominated husband-and-wife duo Michael Trotter Jr., who's an Army veteran, and Tonya Trotter of The War and Treaty.

Known for their powerful blend of soul, country, gospel and rock, the acclaimed performers energized the audience with a memorable evening that celebrated resilience, hope and the enduring bonds shared by the veteran community.

The convention also brought a unique mix of entertainment and entrepreneurship to the main stage through the DAV Patriots Pitch contest. Six veteran entrepreneurs competed for $10,000, showcasing their businesses and pitching their ideas to the convention audience, who voted to select the winner. Dr. Jeremy Dublon, founder of NextStepCare, took the top prize in a contest that highlighted the creativity, ambition and entrepreneurial spirit of the veteran community.

Together, Patriots Pitch and Fun Night added moments of energy and celebration to a convention filled with meaningful work, giving members opportunities to connect, have fun and celebrate the broader veteran community.

Like so many convention traditions, these shared experiences reminded attendees that the relationships built through DAV often last a lifetime.

Looking ahead

As members departed Orlando, they returned home carrying more than reports and newly adopted resolutions.

They returned with renewed purpose.

The challenges facing veterans continue to evolve—from ensuring timely access to healthcare and benefits to strengthening caregiver support, expanding employment opportunities and protecting the promises made to those who served.

Meeting those challenges will require the same determination that has defined DAV since its founding.

Under Donovan's leadership, the organization enters its next year committed to building stronger chapters, developing new leaders and expanding its ability to serve veterans in every community.

The work ahead will depend not only on national leadership but on the thousands of members who volunteer in hospitals, assist veterans with benefits claims, advocate before lawmakers, mentor fellow veterans and strengthen DAV in their hometowns every day.



Above top: *Grammy-nominated husband-and-wife duo Michael Trotter Jr., an Army veteran, and Tonya Trotter of The War and Treaty put on a special performance during Fun Night.* ***Above:*** *Convention attendees enjoy the music and camaraderie of Fun Night.*

That spirit of local service has always been the foundation of DAV's national success.

The 2026 DAV and Auxiliary National Convention demonstrated once again that while leadership changes from year to year, the mission remains constant.

From the opening gavel to the election of new officers and from committee deliberations to celebrations of service, members reaffirmed a shared commitment to ensuring America's veterans receive the care, respect and opportunities they have earned.

As one national commander concluded his year of service and another accepted the responsibility of leading the organization forward, the convention reflected both DAV's proud history and its enduring future.

The watch has changed.

The mission continues.



2026 NATIONAL CONVENTION AWARDS

SERVICE AWARDS

VA NATIONAL CEMETERY ADMINISTRATION EMPLOYEE
Reynaldo Rodriguez, California

VA VETERANS BENEFITS ADMINISTRATION EMPLOYEE
Sharon Smith, Texas

VA VETERANS HEALTH ADMINISTRATION EMPLOYEE
Lori Chase, New Hampshire

VOLUNTARY SERVICES AWARDS

VOLUNTEER OF THE YEAR
Warren and Rosemary Heinsohn, Illinois

AUXILIARY VOLUNTEER OF THE YEAR
Jennie Riemer, Wisconsin

LOCAL VETERANS ASSISTANCE PROGRAM
Division 1: **Department of Florida**, 499,346 hours
Division 2: **Department of South Carolina**, 615,284 hours
Division 3: **Department of Wisconsin**, 99,127 hours
Division 4: **Department of Iowa**, 59,157 hours
Division 5: **Department of South Dakota**, 52,078 hours

MEMBERSHIP RECRUITMENT AWARDS

JUDGE ROBERT S. MARX AWARD
Department of North Dakota

GENERAL JONATHAN M. WAINWRIGHT AWARD
Department of Wyoming

TOP MEMBERSHIP RECRUITER AWARDS
Division 1: **Department of Massachusetts**
Division 2: **Department of Missouri**
Division 3: **Department of Indiana**
Division 4: **Department of Connecticut**
Division 5: **Department of New Hampshire**

TOP MEMBER RECRUITER OF THE YEAR
Drew Wheatley, Missouri, recruited 521 new members

TOP NSO RECRUITER OF THE YEAR
John Rodriguez, Illinois, recruited 273 new members

MEMBERSHIP RECRUITERS HALL OF FAME
Scott Burdick, Arizona

EMPLOYMENT AWARDS

PATRIOT EMPLOYER OF THE YEAR (LARGE)
Sonepar, South Carolina

PATRIOT EMPLOYER OF THE YEAR (MIDSIZE)
ENSCO Inc., Virginia

PATRIOT EMPLOYER OF THE YEAR (SMALL)
Cambridge International Systems, Virginia

2027 DAV and Auxiliary National Convention
Indianapolis | July 17–20

flickr | To view or download photos from the 2026 national convention, visit **flickr.com/theDAV.**



From the NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE DIRECTOR
JON RETZER

Keep faith with veterans

Every veteran knows the cost of service and the promise that comes with it. If we're changed in service, our nation will be there for us when we come home.

Policies like PAYGO (pay as you go), CUTGO (cut as you go), sequestration and budget caps were created to control government spending. In reality, Congress can ignore these rules when it chooses, even as federal deficits and the national debt continue to rise. Yet some politicians hide behind them when it comes to improving veterans benefits and services.

When lawmakers try to expand or strengthen veterans benefits, PAYGO requires them to offset the cost by cutting other programs or raising revenue. That means even widely supported proposals can stall, not because they're controversial but because of how they're paid for.

For veterans, that creates a fundamental problem.

Our benefits aren't optional. They were already paid for through service and sacrifice. Yet these rules treat them like any other government program, forcing veterans to effectively pay for improvements to their own care.

These budget constraints have real-world consequences. They can delay expansions in benefits and access to care, prevent improvements to Department of Veterans Affairs programs, and impose funding limits that don't match veterans' needs. Even when Congress wants to act, these rules can slow or stop progress.

The Major Richard Star Act and the Love Lives On Act are perfect examples. These bipartisan bills, which would achieve key DAV policy goals by eliminating the offset between military retirement pay and VA disability compensation and by strengthening survivors benefits, respectively, are being held up under the guise of PAYGO.

DAV is working to ensure veterans aren't held back by budget rules that ignore the true cost of war. We're calling on Congress to exempt all veterans programs, benefits and services from PAYGO requirements. We also believe veterans programs should be protected from sequestration and across-the-board cuts and that funding for veterans benefits and VA healthcare should be exempt from arbitrary budget caps so it can reflect real-world demand.

The cost of war doesn't end when service members come home. It continues in the care and benefits veterans have earned.

That cost is a national responsibility. It shouldn't be shifted back onto those who have already borne the cost of service.

Removing PAYGO and budget caps for veterans isn't about avoiding fiscal responsibility. It's about keeping faith with those who served.

DAV will continue fighting to ensure that promise is kept for you, your family and every generation of veterans to come. ■



‘They took my memory’

DAV-backed OATH Act would secure justice for veterans of covert Cold War-era human experiments

By Elizabeth DePompei

Dave Dufrane dined at the Denny’s off I-95 in Edgewood, Maryland, countless times. He enjoyed those breakfasts, but he could never fully relax. At the top of his mind was the military post a mile down the road that had plagued him with nightmares for over six decades: Edgewood Arsenal, the site where the Army conducted human experiments on its own soldiers.

In 2005, after his usual breakfast, Dufrane decided to do something he hadn’t done before. He drove to the arsenal and parked his car outside its back gate. He stared into the distance at the shacks that remained.

“And I had some bad stuff going through my head,” he said. “That’s a scary, scary place.”

Dufrane was one of an estimated 7,000 Army personnel who passed through Edgewood Arsenal between about 1950 and 1975 and were forced to sign secrecy oaths because of the covert human drug experiments that took place—experiments that forever changed their lives and left many of them with lasting physical and mental scars.

Because they couldn’t speak of their time at Edgewood, these veterans had no way of proving to the Department of Veterans Affairs that their ailments were connected to this part of their service, often preventing them from being able to access the benefits they earned and needed.

Even when Edgewood veterans were partially released from their secrecy oaths in 2006, they faced another insult. The effective date of their disability claims could only go back to the date they filed the claim, even though Edgewood veterans weren’t formally allowed to file for claims related to the experiments until after 2006.

As it stands, Edgewood veterans must individually plead their cases for service connection and fair effective dates. Now, a DAV-backed bill aims to secure justice for veterans like Dufrane by allowing them to receive retroactive benefits that have been blocked by secrecy oaths.

> "I was never down off one chemical long enough to straighten out until they laced me with something else."
>
> —*Dave Dufrane*



Army veteran Dave Dufrane has a dining room table full of personal and historic records documenting his service at the former Edgewood Arsenal and the human drug experiments that took place there. Dufrane spent decades being dismissed by those who didn't believe his story of covert operations.

Another dimension

Frank Rochelle grew up in rural North Carolina. He was "just a country kid, never been nowhere" when he was drafted in 1968 at 20 years old.

While at Fort Lee in Virginia, Rochelle saw a bulletin for a volunteer program to help test Army equipment. Participants would be on duty only four days a week, with no kitchen or guard duty.

"I'd just finished basic at Bragg, where I was crawling under concertina wire," Rochelle said. "So I volunteered to go."

But when Rochelle arrived at Edgewood, the mission quickly changed. Instead of equipment, they'd be testing chemical warfare agents. Despite the bait-and-switch, Rochelle trusted the people in charge.

"They said, 'We're not going to harm you.' Well, I believed them," Rochelle said. "I was just a young country boy, and I was raised up [to think] anybody in uniform, you respected."

The substances used at Edgewood included psychoactive drugs like LSD and PCP but also things like mustard gas, incapacitating agents and what Rochelle called "pharmaceutical rejects." The program's goal, he'd later learn, was to develop nonlethal agents that could literally make battlefield enemies lay down their weapons—either out of delirium or incapacitation. The program was born of Cold War-era fears and a race to develop the best in chemical warfare. Around the same time, the CIA was conducting mind-control drug experiments in operations like Project MKUltra.

In one experiment at Edgewood, Rochelle said, a drug he only knew by code name CAR-302,668 was administered to him as an aerosol through a breathing apparatus. He hallucinated for 2½ days.

"I was in a whole other dimension," he said.

At one point, while in the bathroom, Rochelle believed the freckles on his arms were bugs crawling under his skin. He used a razor blade from a shaving kit to try to cut them out.

After that, Rochelle completed one more test and spent the rest of his two-month assignment hanging around the barracks.

Dufrane, who was at Edgewood in 1965, three years before Rochelle, had a particularly extreme experience. While most soldiers underwent two or three tests or received placebos, Dufrane was experimented on eight times with various drugs.

"I was never down off one chemical long enough to straighten out until they laced me with something else," Dufrane said.

One of those chemicals was BZ, a drug with no recreational equivalent that has been described as a "nightmare" able to cause psychosis.

Dufrane said he was put inside a padded room on four different occasions, in one case for four days straight. One test caused temporary blindness for eight hours. Another drug was administered via a wind tunnel to several soldiers and a goat. Another one occurred in a dark, wooded area where soldiers were sprayed with a substance that left them glowing purple under a black light.

Like Rochelle, Dufrane trusted his superiors. He had dreamed of being a soldier since he was a kid. Even if he had been aware enough to object, he wouldn't risk what, for him, was supposed to be the beginning of a meaningful career.

'Doing our duty'

After Edgewood, Rochelle served seven months in Vietnam and finished his service in 1970. He worked

in maintenance at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, all the while struggling with memory loss, insomnia, breathing issues and other symptoms.

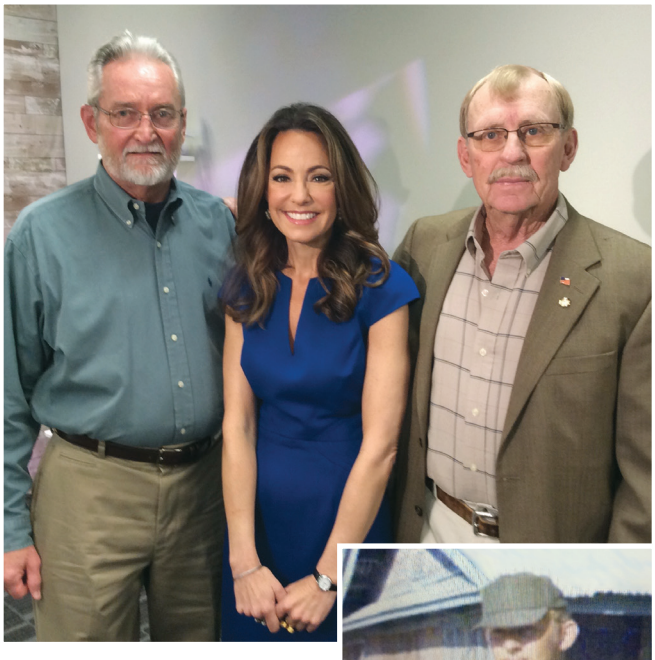
In 1971, after waking up nearly blind in one eye, he went to a Veterans Administration clinic. His doctor couldn't explain the vision loss, and when Rochelle brought up the Edgewood experiments, nobody believed him. His first claim for benefits was denied.

In 1987, before he was formally relieved of his secrecy oath but more than a decade after bombshell Senate hearings exposed the Edgewood experiments, Rochelle again filed claims and was finally granted service connection for conditions related to Edgewood. He filed again over the years for additional conditions.

Dufrane was deployed to Thailand after Edgewood and immediately started experiencing nightmares, headaches, memory loss and neuropathy. Later, while at Fort Rucker, Alabama, Dufrane was approved for Christmas leave but forgot to sign out. He was demoted.

"They took my memory and then wanted me to remember everything," he said.

In 1967, decades short of the career he had once dreamed of, Dufrane left the Army.





Army veteran Frank Rochelle (above right and right)—who went on to serve seven months in Vietnam—is still fighting for an earlier effective date for his disability claims related to his time at Edgewood Arsenal.

For roughly 30 years, he didn't tell a soul about Edgewood. When he finally went to the VA, desperate for help, nobody believed him. It wasn't until he got his hands on some of his records and in front of someone willing to listen that he was able to get help through the VA. In the late '90s, he filed his first claims and was granted service connection for disabilities related to Edgewood.

Since Rochelle's and Dufrane's time at Edgewood, the Army's human experiments have been well publicized, first through the 1975 Senate hearings and media coverage and later when veterans' secrecy oaths were relieved and they could finally talk about what happened without fear of punishment. Then a 2023 decision in Taylor v. McDonough seemed promising. The court found that Edgewood veteran Bruce Taylor was entitled to disability benefits "retroactive to the date he would have obtained them if the government had not blocked his application with a secrecy agreement," according to the American Civil Liberties Union.

Yet both Rochelle and Dufrane are still fighting for earlier effective dates for their Edgewood-related disability claims, appealing to the Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims. Like Taylor, they said, they couldn't file for claims in a timely manner due to the secrecy oath and covert nature of the program. Their appeals cases are pending.

But in May 2025, they received a glimmer of hope that offers a different route to justice for themselves and other Edgewood veterans. Sen. Richard Blumenthal, ranking member of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, introduced S. 1665, the Obligations to Aberdeen's Trusted Heroes (OATH) Act (The old Edgewood Arsenal site is now part of Aberdeen Proving Ground.) The bill would ensure that veterans who signed secrecy oaths receive benefits effective from the date they were discharged from service. It would also require the VA to identify all veterans who participated in the Edgewood experiments or other secrecy oath programs and to notify them of their earned VA benefits.

"For too long, secrecy oath veterans—especially those from programs like Edgewood Arsenal—were left outside the system built to support them," said DAV National Legislative Director Jon Retzer. "The OATH Act corrects that failure by mandating outreach, establishing clear definitions and guaranteeing fair effective dates. It is a long-overdue step toward accountability and equity."

Once they get what they earned, Dufrane wants his rank back. Despite the horrors of Edgewood, he and Rochelle take pride in their service.

"Nobody really realized why we were there," Rochelle said. "We just knew we were doing our duty." ■

PART 2

250 YEARS of the American veteran

THE MODERN COVENANT

Advocacy transformed a bureaucratic nightmare into a sacred, legally protected right for every American veteran

By Jonathan Kaupanger

As the U.S. entered World War I, Congress realized the 19th-century veteran pension model was financially unsustainable. In response, it passed the War Risk Insurance Act, shifting to a modern model of purchased policies and vocational rehabilitation.

However, this shift created a bureaucratic nightmare. By 1920, returning Doughboys with mustard gas-scarred lungs were trapped between three uncoordinated agencies: the Bureau of War Risk Insurance held the money, the Public Health Service had the doctors, and the Federal Board for Vocational Education managed the training. This bureaucratic fragmentation could lead a veteran to suffocate in a hospital bed with zero income while agencies argued over paperwork.

Into this chaos stepped Judge Robert S. Marx, a severely wounded World War I Army veteran who saw that scattered administration was costing lives. On Christmas Day 1919, Marx organized a gathering of disabled veterans, and on Sept. 25, 1920, Disabled American Veterans of the World War, DAV's original name, was established.

In June 1921, DAV held its first national convention, and the mandate was clear: consolidation. Marx essentially put the government on trial for negligence, documenting cases of veterans who had died waiting for paperwork to move offices.

This advocacy led to the Sweet Act, which merged the competing agencies into a single Veterans Bureau, decentralized power, and established presumptive periods for tuberculosis and what was then called shell shock. Known as "DAV's Baby," the Sweet Act was the organization's first, but not last, major victory.

The Bonus Army and the 'Tombstone Bonus'

Economic gratitude proved fickle. To bridge the gap between low wartime military pay and high domestic wages, Congress passed the World War Adjusted Compensation Act. Instead of cash, veterans received Adjusted Service Certificates that wouldn't mature until 1945. President Calvin Coolidge vetoed the bill, famously stating, "Patriotism which is bought and paid for is not patriotism," though Congress overrode him.

By 1932, the Great Depression left veterans with these certificates as their only collateral, but they

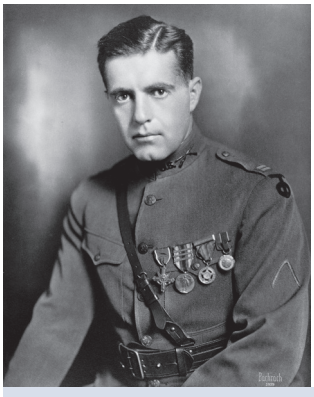




PHOTO COURTESY OF THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Left: *Decorated World War I officer and Cincinnati Judge Robert S. Marx founded DAV in 1920 to advocate for policies and support systems that ensure a better quality of life for all veterans.* ***Right:*** *World War I veterans and Bonus Army demonstrators crowd the steps of the U.S. Capitol in the summer of 1932.*

wouldn't be able to cash them in for over a decade. In response, an unemployed former Army sergeant named Walter W. Waters organized a march from Portland, Oregon, to Washington, D.C. The ranks of protesters swelled as 43,000 veterans and families joined in, crossing the nation before setting up camp near the Capitol. The Bonus Army, as it would be called, maintained strict military order in its cardboard shantytowns to prove they weren't bums, according to Roger Daniels in his book, "The Bonus March: An Episode of the Great Depression."

While the camps occupied the mudflats, DAV acted as the respectable arm of the protest.

"By the summer of 1932, DAV was uniquely positioned to act," said DAV National Adjutant Barry Jesinoski. "We had just been granted our federal charter by Congress, officially recognizing us as the voice for disabled veterans. For our members, that bonus wasn't a windfall or a luxury—it was a life raft."

DAV handed Congress a critique of legislation that told veterans to wait 13 more years for immediate relief. "We called it the 'Tombstone Bonus,' because it was scheduled for 1945, a date many of our members wouldn't live to see," Jesinoski said.

The standoff between Waters' Bonus Army and the federal government ended in violence that July. Army Gen. Douglas MacArthur ignored presidential orders, crossed the river and treated the eviction of starving veterans like a military conquest, burning Bonus City to the ground. Army Maj. George S. Patton led a cavalry charge with drawn sabers while Army Maj. Dwight D. Eisenhower mapped the advance as soldiers used vomiting agents near families.

Watching the smoke rise, then-presidential candidate Franklin D. Roosevelt reportedly remarked, "This elects me."

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



Flames engulf "Bonus City," the sprawling Anacostia Flats shantytown, on the night of July 28, 1932. Following orders to clear the capital, federal troops forcibly evicted World War I veterans and set fire to their makeshift homes, bringing a violent end to the monthslong Bonus Army demonstration in Washington, D.C.

Yet, after his election, FDR's Economy Act of 1933 slashed veterans benefits by 25% overnight, placing the idea of government solvency above the moral debt owed to those who bled.

DAV launched a massive nationwide telegram campaign, flooding Congress with stories of severely disabled veterans whose compensation was slashed. On March 28, 1934, Congress defied the president and overrode FDR's veto to restore the cut benefits, proving the veteran lobby was a permanent political force. By 1936, another sophisticated DAV outreach blitz forced the early payout of the World War I bonuses, injecting $1.5 billion into the mid-Depression economy.

World War II and the Era of the Shrinking Promise

As the nation got closer to World War II, the government abandoned its pay-later approach for a security-from-day-one contract, highlighted by the National Service Life Insurance Act of 1940. These hard-learned lessons culminated in the first GI Bill, replacing "Baby Bonds" with transformative investments in education and housing.

In 1943, DAV championed the Disabled Veterans Rehabilitation Act. Then-National Commander Laurence Melton understood that while a pension facilitates survival, rehabilitation facilitates life. By 1947, veterans accounted for 49% of all college admissions, and 16 million veterans traded foxholes for the suburbs. However, these prosperity gains were unevenly distributed, as systemic barriers often denied Black and other minority veterans access to these classrooms and neighborhoods.

The Cold War ushered in the era of the shrinking promise. From 1950 to 1979, the government debated whether peacetime or Cold War service merited superpower investment. The Veterans' Readjustment Assistance Act of 1952 downgraded benefits, forcing Korean War veterans to manage flat monthly stipends for tuition and rent rather than paying schools directly.

DAV became a barrier between the veteran and a congressional pair of scissors. Then-Legislative Director Cicero Hogan called out the irony by arguing, "It is an astonishing irony that the government will freely appropriate billions of dollars to build a better tank yet turn right around and try to save pennies on the care and rehabilitation of the flesh-and-blood soldier who was broken driving it."

When President Gerald Ford vetoed the Vietnam Era Veterans' Readjustment Assistance Act of 1974—weeks after pardoning Richard Nixon and offering clemency to draft evaders—DAV led a fierce backlash with a stinging narrative: mercy for the deserter, but a veto for the veteran. Congress delivered a swift, surgical override.



PHOTO COURTESY OF DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE

President Franklin D. Roosevelt enacts the Servicemen's Readjustment Act, commonly known as the GI Bill, on June 22, 1944.

By the late 1970s, the unpopular Veterans' Educational Assistance Program replaced the original GI Bill. To rescue cratering military recruitment, Rep. G.V. "Sonny" Montgomery and Army Gen. Max Thurman fought for three years to establish and finalize the permanent Montgomery GI Bill by 1987.

The late 1980s transformed veterans rights from gratuities into legal entitlements. The Department of Veterans Affairs Act of 1988 elevated the VA to a Cabinet-level department. At the same time, the Veterans' Judicial Review Act of 1988 dismantled a century-old system where the VA acted as its own investigator, judge and jury, creating the U.S. Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims and allowing professional legal representation.

Subsequent landmark legislation in 1984, 1991 and 1998 shifted the burden of proof away from the individual by establishing the first presumptives for radiation, Agent Orange and Gulf War Syndrome.

The New Century of Advocacy

Since 9/11, public perception has shifted from viewing veterans through a broken lens to recognizing them as civic assets. Modern advocacy has focused on long-overlooked corners of the community:

- **The Isakson-Roe Omnibus (2020):** Expanded education benefits and established the VA Advisory Committee on Tribal and Indian Affairs; later added pandemic-era protections.
- **The Deborah Sampson Act (2021):** Made historic investments in women veterans by expanding healthcare, including ensuring dedicated women's health providers at every VA medical center and retrofitting community-based outpatient clinics for privacy and dignity.
- **The PACT Act (2022):** Significantly expanded recognition of toxic exposures, including burn pits, establishing presumptive service connection for numerous cancers and respiratory illnesses.
- **The Elizabeth Dole Act (2025):** Increased the cap on home-based care from 65% to 100% of nursing home costs, enabling more veterans to age with dignity in their own homes.

"Beyond policy drafting, we mobilized our DAV CAN (Commander's Action Network) to provide the political pressure needed to get these bills across the finish line," said National Legislative Director Jon Retzer. During the final push for the Dole Act in late 2024, DAV members sent thousands of messages to Congress that made a critical difference.

Despite these historic wins, critical pieces of legislation like the Major Richard Star Act, the Housing Unhoused Disabled Veterans Act, Veteran ACCESS Act, Student Veteran Benefit Restoration Act, and VA Vocational Readiness and Employment Reforms all remain stalled amid ongoing procedural budget debates in Congress.

President Calvin Coolidge is often credited with warning, "The nation which forgets its defenders will be itself forgotten." Veterans benefits are more than just line items in a budget; they're a declaration of a society's memory. ■

Take Action To join DAV CAN and ensure your voice is heard on Capitol Hill, visit **davcan.org**.





Top: *Veterans joined DAV in a powerful rally on Capitol Hill as part of Operation: Keep the Promise. Event supporters urged Congress to pass advance appropriations for all veterans benefits, programs and services.* ***Bottom:*** *DAV representatives on Capitol Hill after presenting key legislative priorities to lawmakers and staff at the 2025 DAV Mid-Winter Conference.*

MORE THAN A DISTRACTION

How recreation therapy moved one veteran from 'just survive' to a future full of possibility

By Brian Buckwalter

When he was in the Army, Justin Hall sometimes tripped and fell.

He brushed it off as clumsiness.

Then his left leg started going numb and his back began hurting. Doctors, including a neurologist, attributed the symptoms to an old rib injury.

He left the Army in 2010 without any further explanation.

He developed insomnia and leg spasms. He had no response on a nerve conduction study. Still, no diagnosis.

Hall lived with these symptoms for years, pushing through the pain.

In 2019, he went on a surfing trip to Hawaii, which was "the most fun thing in the world," he said. Six months later, he had a major autoimmune response.

Hall's body shut down.

He fell into a two-week coma, and when he woke up at the Medical University of South Carolina (MUSC) in Charleston, he was completely paralyzed.

"I had to blink to communicate," Hall said.

Another neurologist looked over his records and made the diagnosis that had eluded other doctors for years: autoimmune glial fibrillary acidic protein (GFAP) astrocytopathy—a condition where the immune system mistakenly attacks support cells in the brain and spinal cord. The condition was rare enough that it hadn't been formally described until 2016.

While in Charleston, Hall said he didn't think much about the diagnosis or the possibility of being paralyzed for the rest of his life. Instead, he remembers replaying in his mind the scene from Quentin Tarantino's film "Kill Bill" where Uma Thurman's character, the Bride, repeats, "Wiggle your big toe," willing herself free of her own paralysis.



Recreation therapist Suzanne Kenrick observes Justin Hall navigating the wheelchair obstacle course at the Charlie Norwood VA Medical Center in Augusta, Georgia.



Hall hits his second shot on the 16th hole during the 2024 National Disabled Veterans Golf Clinic in Riverside, Iowa.

"I used to think that life was over, that there were no possibilities, and now it's like they're endless. Life is full of possibilities where I thought there were none."

—Justin Hall

'Survive right now'

Hall made some progress during his month-and-a-half stay at MUSC, regaining the ability to make small movements—turning his neck slightly, squeezing his hand. Then he learned he was being moved to the Department of Veterans Affairs hospital in Augusta, Georgia.

"I was really scared to come to the VA, because I didn't have good luck with the VA system," Hall said. "I cried when they told me they were transferring me.

"And then I got here, and it was, like, the best therapy ever."

Two days after admission to the Charlie Norwood VA Medical Center's intensive care unit, Hall was moved to the spinal cord injury unit. Work started in the gym, where therapists moved his limbs. Then he asked to use the therapy pool.

"And that's when I could barely move my arms, so I had to prove that I wouldn't drown," Hall said.

Weeks after arriving, he went with other spinal cord injury inpatients to an overnight camp experience at Georgia's Fort Yargo State Park—his first exposure to adaptive sports such as zip lining and archery. He saw them as just distractions from his condition.

"I wasn't even thinking about the possibilities of life when I was at that camp," Hall said. "I was very much in a 'just survive right now' mode. Being told I had this disease, I thought it was a death sentence. I didn't think I would live past five years."



Hall was first introduced to adaptive sports in May 2019 at a camp at Georgia's Fort Yargo State Park, shortly after arriving to the Charlie Norwood VA Medical Center in Augusta.

Giving life

But recreation would become far more than a distraction for Hall—a revelation he credits to his recreational therapist, Suzanne Kenrick.

"I was a very depressed person," Hall said. "I feel like Suzanne saw that and was like, 'Hey, have you thought about just getting out there and being active?'"

Kenrick, who's been with Augusta's spinal cord injury unit since 2002, said rec therapy takes activities a person enjoys and uses them to facilitate function.

"I tell my veterans this many, many times: There's life beyond your spinal cord injury," Kenrick said. "Our goal is to give back [a veteran's] purpose and help them find what that is."

Rec therapy often gets attention because of adaptive sports clinics like the annual winter sports and golf clinics that DAV co-presents with the VA. Kenrick said veterans who participate in those events only represent about 1% to 2% of all veterans she sees.

Rec therapy encompasses much more, Kenrick said, finding what brings a person joy—whether it's sports, gardening, painting or something else.

"We're able to take one person at a time and just get down to 'What is it that makes you tick?'" she said.

For Hall, it's sports—especially pickleball—thanks to Kenrick's invitation to the gym where she hosts weekly games for veterans using wheelchairs.

Beyond the hospital walls

"The first time I showed up to pickleball, I was so nervous because I didn't know anybody there except for Suzanne," Hall said, "and everybody there had been in sport chairs for a decade or more."

By the end of that day, he was spinning the ball and winning shots.

"This is my very first time doing this, and I'm giving somebody a little bit of an issue," he recalled thinking. "I can't move in this chair, but maybe one day I could."

He kept playing and improving, and instead of seeing it as a distraction, he saw potential.

Those weekly matches are also where he met Dr. Lisa Maddox—someone he considers a mentor.

(Continued on Page 24)

Maddox, an Army veteran, former VA physiatrist and above-the-knee amputee, was a nationally ranked wheelchair tennis player and is deadly on the pickleball court. She offers a perspective both as a patient and as a doctor who worked closely with rec therapists.

Maddox recalled one patient under her care—a Black woman veteran—who just wanted to get her hair done after being in a hospital bed for a while.

"Black women's hair is a lot different than Black men's hair and other races, because our hair isn't straight and it's challenging," Maddox said.

Maddox worked with her team to have part of the veteran's rec therapy include getting her hair done.

"She was just so thankful," she said. "And that really showed me the absolute worth and power of rec therapy."

Where physical therapy and occupational therapy help with strength and daily tasks, rec therapy brings it all together to help a veteran navigate the world after an injury—getting a haircut, opening doors, shopping for groceries and dining out.

"We would take our chairs and just go out in public," Hall said. "Simple stuff, but it's not so simple anymore."

"They're not approaching the world on two feet, necessarily, anymore," Kenrick said. "They don't live within the four walls of the hospital here, so it's important to make that jump into the community. To me, that's the greatest impact we have."

Kenrick said that to facilitate rec therapy, the VA will fund adaptations to equipment but not the item itself. For example, the VA won't buy a kayak, but it will buy outriggers. Sports chairs, like those used to play pickleball or basketball, are considered VA-fundable adaptations, which Kenrick said can be preventive medicine.

"Being an active participant in your life and feeling like you have purpose makes you want to stay well," she said. "That $5,000 chair may seem expensive up front, but every day that a veteran stays out of the hospital and stays more well, then the burden of care on the medical system is less and less."

By paying for adaptations, the VA is the healthcare outlier—most civilian insurance companies will use a "medical necessity" standard to deny those requests.

'Endless possibilities'

Advocates for rec therapy, including DAV, continue to remind lawmakers of its beneficial role in veterans' lives, backing bills that would expand veterans' access. In February, several people testified before the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs about how adaptive sports and recreation therapy have been critical in their care journeys.

"The conclusion that a lot of folks made was 'well, we just need more rec therapists,'" said Kenrick, who watched the hearing. "And I was like, 'Yes, hallelujah!' because there are way more veterans than there are of us."

DAV National Legislative Director Jon Retzer's statement for the record for that hearing noted that recreational pursuits are a key component of physical rehabilitation, mental health recovery and social reintegration.

"They are clinically recognized tools that improve mobility, reduce isolation and restore confidence," he wrote.

Rec therapy, Hall said, helped renew his outlook on life.

"I used to think that life was over, that there were no possibilities, and now it's like they're endless," Hall said. "Life is full of possibilities where I thought there were none."

He got married last year and wants to start a family. He wants to compete. He also wants to be a mentor—like others were to him—to veterans coming through the spinal cord injury unit in Augusta.

Wheeling his chair into the unit's pool room one recent morning, he saw a veteran who was newer to the unit and in the early stages of his recovery. With a smile on his face, Hall started a conversation.

"How's it going?" ■



Former VA physiatrist and Army veteran Lisa Maddox regularly participates in a pickleball gathering Kenrick hosts every Tuesday afternoon as part of her recreation therapy program.



From the AUXILIARY NATIONAL COMMANDER
KATHLEEN WENTHE

Carrying our mission home

As the warmth of summer softens into fall, I'm looking back on our recent convention with profound gratitude—and looking forward with a renewed sense of purpose. The energy and inspiration we gathered there were truly incredible. But like any good harvest, that inspiration can't sit in a storage bin. It must be carried home, planted deep within our local communities, and tended with steady hands and willing hearts. We're the stewards of a legacy that demands our active dedication.

As your new Auxiliary national commander, my goal is to ensure we keep our mission growing strong. To do that, I want to introduce a simple framework to guide our steps in the coming year: DAV Auxiliary CARES. This acronym stands for five core pillars that define who we are and how we serve, acting as our road map for the crucial work ahead:

- **Communicate:** Communication is the bedrock that keeps our members united. A simple phone call, a quarterly newsletter or a casual conversation over coffee can be the exact touchpoint a member needs to feel valued and connected.
- **Advocate:** Advocating for veterans and their families is central to our identity. When we speak up to lawmakers and champion DAV legislative priorities, we ensure the promises made to our heroes are kept. We are their voice, a powerful force that reminds our nation's leaders of the obligation we owe to those who served.
- **Recruit:** Our survival and continued growth depend on bringing new, active voices into the fold. We don't need a high-pressure sales pitch—just a warm, personal invitation to show someone there's always room at our table.
- **Educate:** To serve well, we must know our craft. Educating ourselves about our programs equips us to offer accurate guidance and meaningful resources when a veteran family needs it most. Knowledge transforms our good intentions into impactful, life-changing actions.
- **Support:** This is the beating heart of the Auxiliary. Whether it's volunteering at a Department of Veterans Affairs facility, checking in on a weary caregiver or sending a note of encouragement, a small gesture can make a lasting difference.

True leadership—and what some may call country charm—isn't about being fancy. It's about being genuine. It's about showing up with an authentic smile; remembering a name; and serving with a mixture of warmth, grit and a whole lot of heart.

Let's make DAV Auxiliary CARES the way we live out our calling every single day. Together, we'll carry our mission home. Thank you for your trust, your dedication and your unwavering service. Let's get to work. ■

Caregiving rooted in LOVE



Only 2 when her mother was injured in Iraq, Sanaa Lucas continues to demonstrate the remarkable resilience of child caregivers

By Jennifer Kovalich

Even before she was old enough to understand the role, Sanaa Lucas has been a caregiver. She was 2 when her mother, Latoya Lucas, was severely injured in a rocket-propelled grenade attack in Iraq while serving with the Army's 52nd Engineering Battalion in support of the 101st Airborne Division.

Latoya sustained significant burns on her left side and lost the use of her left hand and left foot. She also experienced a traumatic brain injury, developed post-traumatic stress disorder and anxiety, and has a colostomy bag. Latoya spent five months at what is now Walter Reed National Military Medical Center with her daughter and her husband, Mike, a Marine veteran, by her side. As a toddler, Sanaa helped her mother by doing tasks such as bringing her a napkin from a bedside table or holding a cup of ice water to Latoya's mouth so she could take a drink.

"It meant the world to me," Latoya said of waking up from surgery at Walter Reed and having her husband and daughter with her. Mike and Sanaa lived in a hotel on the hospital grounds during Latoya's hospitalization. "They would come over every day," she said. "She was just always being that strong pick-me-up helper."

Attending her mother's medical appointments became second nature to Sanaa.

"From an early age, all she knew was doctor appointments and hospital visits and things like that, and that's not something normal for kids her age to really experience on a day-to-day basis, and especially for how long she had to do that," Latoya said.

Sanaa vividly remembers attending Latoya's medical visits but has vague memories of being on the hospital ward and seeing other wounded service members, some who were disfigured, who had lost their limbs and whose head wounds were wrapped in bandages. Though difficult for a child to comprehend, the experience instilled empathy and compassion in the little girl, particularly when she later saw wounded veterans in public.

"I had an understanding," Sanaa said.

As a high schooler, Sanaa began to encourage her mother, who lives with daily pain, to explore nonpharmaceutical approaches to her wellness, including holistic acupuncture.

She continues to advocate for Latoya's health and recently introduced her to the meditative healing practice of breathwork and sound baths, where participants lie on the floor while the harmonious tones of quartz singing bowls wash over the body, instilling a feeling of calm.

The pair, who share an obviously close bond, recently traveled to Albany, New York, for a session with a Reiki master. The experience was transformative for Latoya, who expressed it also appealed to her because of its physical accessibility for anyone.

"It was fabulous and fantastic," Latoya said. "I felt so good afterward, and that's something I really want to incorporate into my healing journey and my recovery, which is always ongoing."

Sanaa, 25, resides near her parents; works in government relations in the Washington, D.C., area; and plays viola with the Washington Metropolitan Philharmonic. Her love of music began with violin lessons when she was 9 and has become a way to ground herself, particularly in highly tense situations. A deeply introspective person, Sanaa has had her life molded by being a caregiver for more than two decades.

"I think it shaped me tremendously," Sanaa said. "I think just always being mindful of this thing that is bigger than me, like my mom's sacrifice and how much she's contributed to our family, just kind of keeping that at the forefront."

Throughout the United States, there are an estimated 2.3 million child caregivers, according to a 2022 White House study. They provide critical support to their loved ones while balancing the rigors of growing up.

"Child and young adult caregivers play an enormous role in the health and welfare of our nation's veterans," said DAV National Caregiver Support Program Director Ron Minter. "The responsibilities they carry and the care they provide are remarkable and reflect a maturity beyond their years."

Though Sanaa's home life differed from her classmates, her school life and friendships were "pretty normal." Music helped, and her constancy in assisting her father in caring for Latoya permeated through her friendships and relationships. Her caregiving role has also motivated Sanaa to give back to other military children. A DAV Auxiliary member, she's also involved with a military scholarship program and spoke on a panel in the spring to provide career and professional advice. Sanaa and Latoya share gratitude and mutual appreciation for each other. Sanaa is also grateful that she was able to process and understand her mother's situation, even from a young age. For others in similar caregiving situations, she encourages being patient, staying positive and sticking together.

"Love is really at the root of it all," she said. ■

Learn More Online

Learn more at **davcaregivers.org**.



Top to bottom, left to right: *Sanaa Lucas began violin lessons at age 9, as her parents thought music would be a good outlet for her. Latoya Lucas holds her daughter, Sanaa, before deploying to Iraq in 2003 with the 52nd Engineering Battalion. Sanaa and Latoya have a strong bond, and Latoya is grateful for all that her daughter has done for her. Mike, Latoya and Sanaa Lucas are a tightknit family. Mike is Latoya's primary caregiver, and growing up, Sanaa emulated her father, always eager to help her mother and do whatever she could for her.*

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Front row, from left: *Brenda Reed, Denice Williams, Debra Varner Dancer*
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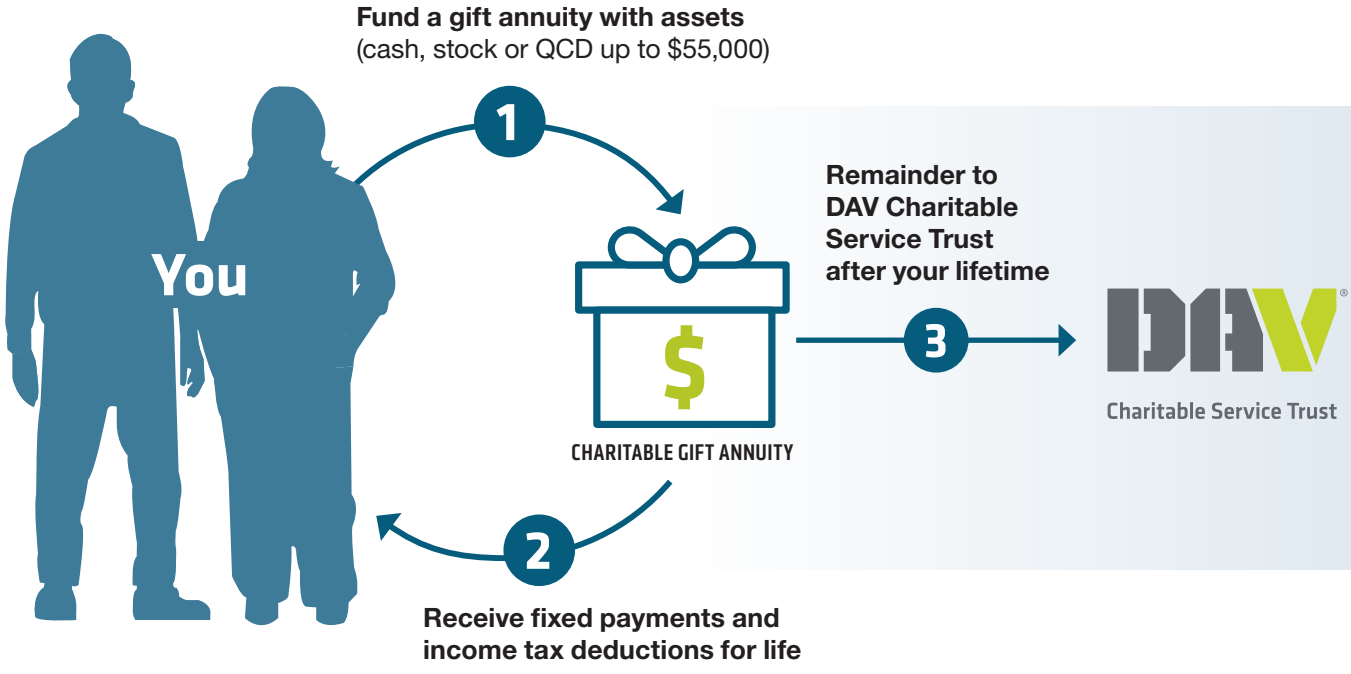
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VA expedites prosthetic limb delivery


PHOTO BY ALPHA KAMARA/COMMAND COMMUNICATIONS

■ The Department of Veterans Affairs has overhauled the procurement process that previously caused amputees and wounded veterans to wait months for critical prosthetic adjustments and replacements.

Under previous guidelines, every prosthetic order—regardless of size or cost—was subject to a formal review by a contracting officer. This bottleneck routinely added weeks of unnecessary delays for veterans trying to recover and regain their mobility.

The VA's new policy exempts an estimated 95% of all prosthetic limb orders from these lengthy administrative reviews. Moving forward, only the most expensive, highly specialized devices will require traditional contracting oversight. Additionally, local VA purchasing agents can source prostheses directly from local suppliers without entering protracted negotiations, provided the equipment matches fixed Medicare pricing.

While the administrative shift is an overdue victory for veterans, the real impact is in the numbers. Early data indicates the new process has already cut average wait times by 10 days, according to the VA. Once fully implemented across all VA facilities, the department projects average delivery wait times will drop by more than 40%—from 94 to 54 days.

More than 45,000 veterans rely on the VA for major limb loss care every year. Streamlining this process allows clinicians to focus on patient rehabilitation rather than administrative delays, helping get essential care to veterans when they actually need it.

Federal review gives VA hospital quality high marks

■ Department of Veterans Affairs medical centers outpaced the private sector in quality, safety and performance, according to the annual Overall Hospital Quality Star Rating report released by the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) in May.

The independent federal review found that 78% of rated VA hospitals achieved four or five stars. This is the highest percentage of top-tier ratings for the agency since CMS began integrating VA facilities into its national scoring metrics in 2023. Additionally, VA medical facilities account for nearly 15% of all five-star-rated hospitals nationwide for 2026.


PHOTO BY DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

The data marks the fourth consecutive year that VA facilities have, on average, outperformed non-VA private sector hospitals in the annual assessment. For the second straight year, no VA hospital received a one-star rating.

The high marks come during a period of significant growth and strain on the system. So far in 2026, the VA has enrolled more than 140,000 new veterans and opened 35 new clinical facilities to manage the influx. To help accommodate working veterans, the system also added more than 2.5 million appointments outside standard business hours.

While veterans frequently face administrative roadblocks and wait times while accessing the system, the CMS data indicates that the clinical care delivered inside VA facilities remains highly competitive with, and often superior to, private sector alternatives.



From the NATIONAL CHAPLAIN

DEBRA VARNER DANCER

Stronger together starts with you

It was wonderful being around so many of you at our national convention. I hope it invigorated you and returned you to your communities renewed and resolved to do important work.

But remember, as we go our separate ways, we're still one.

Because together, we accomplish more. Together, we advance. Together, we are stronger.

As members of DAV, our collective efforts become greater than the sum of our individual contributions. Each member has a distinct role, and every person is essential to the whole. When we each take the time to grow ourselves and serve others, we faithfully fulfill the responsibilities before us to care for our fellow veterans.

As we face new challenges and experiences in life, growth becomes increasingly personal. Everyone develops differently and is shaped by distinct temperaments and ways of learning. It's important to understand how you grow most effectively so you can realize the best version of yourself.

Whatever your learning style, the result should be more than the knowledge you gained; it should be using what you learned to help others. The goal is service to our country, fellow veterans, their families, neighbors and friends.

Don't allow your gifts and talents to be buried treasures. Use them and nurture them. If you desire to grow in the area that has been given or assigned to you, you need to learn how to serve.

It's written in the book of Ecclesiastes, "Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might." Whatever your faith tradition may be, the wisdom holds.

As an organization united by a common cause, we serve best by living out our mission of empowering veterans to lead high-quality lives. As we carry that mission forward through benefits advocacy, fighting for ill and injured veterans' interests on Capitol Hill, and educating the public about the sacrifices and needs of veterans, we should keep in mind the meaning of TEAM: Together Everyone Achieves More.

At nearly 1 million strong, we're a powerful voice for keeping America's promise to its veterans and their families, but we'll only accomplish our goals by working together. The vision is in front of us, the camaraderie is strong, and we remain connected to one another.

If we become disconnected or divided, we risk losing sight of the task before us. Instead, we must combine our individual gifts and talents to grow as one, strengthen the organization and support one another through service.

Until we gather again, may we serve the veterans in our communities remembering that we're still one. ■



ALL HANDS (AND PAWS) ON DECK

DAV state leaders—and a few of their most loyal, four-legged battle buddies—took over DAV National Headquarters in Erlanger, Kentucky, for the annual Commanders and Adjutants Association Orientation. Scheduled following state conventions, this strategic launchpad ensures state leaders are fully equipped to handle the logistical, financial and administrative heavy lifting of the upcoming year.

Under the direct guidance of national leadership, including National Adjutant Barry Jesinoski, attendees dove deep into vital details: organizational health, national bylaws and financial accountability. But it wasn't all rules and regulations. A massive chunk of the mission was dedicated to sharpening service delivery and legislative advocacy. Leaders got the latest intel about veterans programs, ensuring they can effectively manage, nominate and support chapter and department service officers for mandatory annual certifications.

Ultimately, the orientation transforms individual state departments into a unified national front. By pairing seasoned department veterans with newly minted commanders and adjutants, the orientation builds a powerhouse network of peer-to-peer mentorship. When these leaders finally head back to their home communities—binders packed and pups in tow—they leave Erlanger with an operational blueprint to protect, expand and deploy free professional services to veterans nationwide. ■

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Graham

Assistant National Employment Director

Disabled Army veteran Jackie Graham was appointed assistant national employment director at DAV National Headquarters, effective Aug. 4, 2026.

Graham supports DAV's employment program by strengthening relationships with employers, supporting job fairs nationwide, and expanding opportunities to connect veterans and their spouses and caregivers with meaningful careers. She was previously appointed associate national employment director in 2025.

She served for 10 years on active duty and in the Army Reserve, including roles as a medic and drill sergeant.

Before her appointment to DAV's national staff, Graham began her DAV career as a national service officer apprentice in Bay Pines, Florida, in 2015. She later served at the national service office in Montgomery, Alabama, becoming assistant supervisor in 2023 and supervisor in 2025.

Graham is a life member of Chapter 9 in Enterprise, Alabama.



Capizzi

Assistant National Legislative Director

Disabled Marine veteran Shamala Capizzi was appointed assistant national legislative director at DAV Washington Headquarters, effective Aug. 4, 2026.

In this capacity, Capizzi will continue advancing DAV's federal legislative priorities and advocating for policies that improve the lives of ill and injured veterans and their families, caregivers and survivors.

Capizzi enlisted in the Marine Corps in 2000 and served until 2008 as an airfield technician and administrative specialist.

She began her DAV career in 2021 as a transition service officer at Fort Belvoir, Virginia. Later that year, she joined the DAV office in Washington, D.C., as a national service officer. Capizzi was appointed associate national legislative director in January 2026.

She is a life member of DAV Chapter 10 in Fairfax, Virginia, where she and her family reside.



Celebrating Freedom, Service and Community

On July 2, members of Chapter 20 in West Columbia, South Carolina, were honored to be invited to the Columbia Fireflies' Military Appreciation Night. The chapter hosted an informational table where they shared the mission of DAV, distributed promotional materials, answered questions, and welcomed conversations with veterans interested in learning more about the benefits of membership and the support DAV provides.



POW/MIA Ceremony
The DAV Department of South Dakota honored veterans of several eras during a special POW/MIA ceremony. Participating were, from left: Luther Dappen, Korea; Jeremy White, Afghanistan; Doug Star, World War II and Korea; Department Commander Tim Walsh, Persian Gulf War; Al Millette, Kosovo and Iraq; Dan Francis, Iraq; and Past National Commander Gene Murphy, Vietnam.

Share Your News! Send photos of your DAV or Auxiliary news to production@dav.org. Photos should be at least 3 x 5 inches at 300 dpi. Please include a description of the event and names of those pictured, when applicable. In most cases, submissions are published in the order in which they are received but are subject to editing for clarity, style, accuracy, space and propriety.

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WEDNESDAY, NOV. 11

A tradition of thanks continues

Golden Corral honors the military community through annual Military Appreciation Night

For 25 years, Golden Corral has held its Military Appreciation Night to honor those who wore the uniform. This year, the tradition takes place on **Veterans Day, Wednesday, Nov. 11, from 4 p.m. to close**.

During the event, Golden Corral restaurants nationwide will offer a complimentary meal and beverage to active-duty service members, veterans and military retirees as a token of gratitude.

Through Military Appreciation Night, DAV chapters and departments have raised more than $21.5 million to support a wide range of services. In addition, Golden Corral has served more than 6.8 million complimentary meals, welcoming an average of 250,000 veterans each year.

DAV members are encouraged to visit their local Golden Corral to connect with fellow veterans and help celebrate a tradition dedicated to honoring the men and women who have served our country.

Send photos of your chapter or department at a Military Appreciation Night event to **production@dav.org** by Nov. 13, and your photo could be selected for the January/February 2027 edition of *DAV Magazine.*

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