**Blinded Veterans Helping Blinded Veterans and Their Families:**

**Historical Achievements of the Blinded Veterans Association**

**January 8, 2016**

The Blinded Veterans Association (BVA) is the only national Veterans Service Organization (VSO) chartered by the United States Congress and exclusively dedicated to assisting America’s blinded veterans and their families. The organization is celebrating 72 years of service.

A meeting of 100 war-blinded soldiers from World War II resulted in the founding of BVA on March 28, 1945. The BVA Congressional charter of August 1958 designates the organization as the official advocate and representative for all blinded veterans before the Executive and Legislative branches of government. Throughout more than 72 years, BVA has successfully carried out this important mission. In the process, the organization has recorded numerous significant accomplishments on behalf of America’s blinded veterans and their families. The Association’s most notable achievements to date have been:

* Assuring that the Veterans Administration of the 1940s, now known as the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), to assume the primary responsibility for the care and rehabilitation of America’s blinded veterans and servicemembers requiring blind or low vision services.
* Collaborating and, when necessary, serving as an adversary with VA to assure high-quality, comprehensive medical and rehabilitation services and benefits for blinded veterans. The mutually beneficial relationship between the agency and the association has continued for 72 years with members often appointed to various VA committees, and advisory councils.
* Advocating for the first VA Blind Rehabilitation Center (BRC), inaugurated in Hines, Illinois, on July 4, 1948. As the numbers of war-blinded has increased with new conflicts, the number of BRCs has also increased. They now number 13 blind centers. Computer Access Training Sections (CATS) are available at each BRC.
* Successfully persuading the U.S. Congress to expand the eligibility for blind rehabilitation services to veterans whose blindness was not a result of their military service. Literally thousands of blinded veterans have thereby received rehabilitation assistance.
* Advocating for the successful creation and growth of the VA Visual Impairment Team (VIST) Coordinator and Blind Rehabilitation Outpatient Specialist (BROS) positions and the VA “Full Continuum of Rehabilitation Care” 2007 initiative that brought 45 more outpatient or inpatient service programs to veterans with either low vision or blindness.
* Bringing about the establishment of a Blind Rehabilitative Outpatient Specialists (BROS) and expanding full time positions from 24 positions in 2005 to 91 full time, and one BROS at every VA Polytrauma Center.
* Successfully advocating for an increase in VA Blind Rehabilitation Service (BRS) funding from $94 million in Fiscal Year 2007 to $152 million in 2015.
* Working successfully with other Veterans Service Organizations to assure the passage of Section 1624 of the National Defense Authorization Act of 2008. The legislated mandated the creation and implementation of a joint VA-Department of Defense Vision Center of Excellence and Defense Eye Injury Vision Registry toward improving the “Seamless Transition” of the combat eye wounded.
* Successfully introduced and the enactment of legislation in May 2010 that eliminated all medical care co-payments for catastrophically disabled blinded veterans who are nonservice-connected. The law has resulted in improved access to rehabilitation services for many additional low income blinded veterans who now have no co-payments for health care or medications.
* Collaboration with professional medical organizations seeking additional congressional funding for defense-related translational battlefield Vision Research Program funding at $ 4 million in 2008 to annually $10 million per year since FY 2012.
* BVA, along with other Veterans Service Organizations, support this commitment for our warfighters. During annual congressional meetings BVA stands with the Association for Research in Vision and Ophthalmology (ARVO), the American Academy of Ophthalmology (AAO), the American Optometric Association (AOA), and with the National Alliance for Eye and Vision Research (NAEVR) in requesting Department of Defense Vision Research Program funding as a priority.
* Assuring that new landmark provisions to make monthly payments to full-time caregivers of war disabled blinded veterans were included in the Caregiver and Veterans Omnibus Health Services Act of 2010 (Public Law 111-163), and continued advocacy for including other generations of disabled veterans in this program.
* Influencing the reclassification of the Blind Rehabilitation Specialist positions (Orientation and Mobility Professionals and Rehabilitation Teachers) that included scholarships for students preparing for a VA career in rehabilitation, higher salaries, improved recruitment, and greater retention.
* Helping to change the VA rating system for blindness so that blind and visually impaired veterans could be considered more severely disabled if they have already experienced a hearing loss.
* Successfully advocating for equitable “Paired Organ” compensation to veterans who are service-connected for damage in one eye and subsequently lose their vision in the other eye.
* Assuming a leading role in securing Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC) benefits for surviving spouses and dependent children of 100 percent service-connected disabled veterans.
* Influencing the establishment of the Special Housing Grant and the initiation of the Home Improvement and Structural Alteration (HISA) grant that assists blinded veterans in making structural modifications to their living arrangements to accommodate living independently with their disability and increases in annual SHA grants for the cost of living.
* On September 29, 2016 the FY 2017 Continuing Resolution federal agency funding included a section resulting from BVA advocacy during three sessions of Congress to give the Department of Veterans Affairs the statutory authority under Title 38, U.S.C. Section 111 to provide VA travel benefits to all catastrophically disabled, nonservice-connected blind and visually impaired veterans seeking rehabilitation services at VA facilities. The legislation applies similarly to amputees and individuals with spinal cord injuries for travel to specialized rehabilitation centers.
* Visiting with returning war blinded Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom service members and their families at initially at both the Walter Reed Army Medical enter 2005, the Bethesda Naval National Medical Center, and the new combined Walter Reed National Military Medical Center-Bethesda. In the process of such visits, Seamless Transition issues among servicemembers, National Guard, and Reserves, allowing BVA to assist them and their caregivers access rehabilitation services and VA benefits.
* Establishing Operation Peer Support (OPS) in 2006. The initiative seeks to connect the newly war blinded and their families with those who have gone through similar adjustments in the past, demonstrating that life after blindness is a reality. The program includes attending annual a BVA national convention in which OPS participants focus on rehabilitation, education, employment, technology, sports/recreation, and more recently expanded events throughout the year that have generated numerous BVA news stories, raised public awareness of BVA OPS programs, and national and international recognition from government agencies, associations, and vision researchers.
* Project Gemini, initiated in May 2011 and named for the transatlantic cable that connects the United States and the United Kingdom, is a joint initiative between the nonprofit organizations Blinded Veterans Association (BVA), Blind Veterans UK, and St Dunstan’s of South Africa. The initiative seeks to heighten public awareness within the three countries of the issues facing recently war blinded veterans with vision loss, resulting in improvements in services and benefits by raising awareness about vision rehabilitation services, vision trauma research, and the management of eye injuries.

**While the above is not a complete list of all the various accomplishments of BVA, they highlight the impact the Association has had, and is currently having today, on the lives of thousands of blinded or low vision veterans. Access to VA health care and benefits to veterans, their dependents, and caregivers is improving.**