

THE MOUNTAIN STATES CHAPTER NEWSLETTER

ELEVATIONS

HIGH COUNTRY
HIGH STANDARDS

COLORADO
MONTANA
NEW MEXICO
UTAH
WYOMING

NATIONAL
VETERANS

WHEELCHAIR
GAMES





OUR IMPACT

551

ACTIVE MEMBERS

480 men & 71 women,
including 5 new members

1,039

VOLUNTEER HOURS

contributed by members,
caregivers & community supporters

\$14,666

AWARDED IN GRANTS

to 17 members & community
partners, to support quality of
life & education



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Cover: Orlando Perez feels the excitement during a softball game at the National Veterans Wheelchair Games in July.

REMEMBERING THOSE WE LOST

Allen Palmer

Colorado Springs, Colo., June 2025

Modesto Mendez

Thornton, Colo., July 2025

Cayetano S. De Guzman

Thornton, Colo., July 2025

Daniel L. Brown

Colorado Springs, Colo., July 2025



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By branch, by military job, & by era.

✓ HEALING THROUGH HELPING

Help our volunteers to learn the power of Healing through Helping



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FROM OUR BOARD PRESIDENT

A WORD FROM ERIC ALLEN

With summer in full swing, I'm excited to share that the PVA Mountain States Chapter is experiencing a surge of energy and engagement—more than I've seen in my six years with the chapter. Under the leadership of our new executive director, John Henderson, the organization is becoming more efficient, more focused, and more aligned with our mission than ever before.

We've made big strides in recent months. We streamlined our accounting system, brought on a professional grant writer, and—for the first time—introduced a secure online voting system alongside traditional paper ballots. The results were remarkable. Nearly 80 members cast their votes in our most successful election turnout in my memory. Joshua Campbell became our newest board member and we designated Greg Rodgers as our first-ever New Mexico representative. Greg, who lives in Albuquerque, and ED John Henderson, who lives in northern Utah, represent our commitment to expanding and strengthening our chapter throughout the Mountain States region.

In addition to having the right people in place, technology is helping us modernize and connect



Allen fishing in Rainbow Falls, Colorado, with a group from Project Healing Waters.

with members in new ways. With that in mind, if you prefer to receive this newsletter by mail instead of email, let us know—we're happy to accommodate.

Years ago, I was stuck in bed for weeks in constant pain, feeling isolated and sorry for myself. It was a dark time, both physically and emotionally. But when I started hearing the stories of other Veterans—men and women who had faced even greater challenges and found a way forward—it changed my perspective.


Meeting fellow PVA members reminded me that we all have something to give. Sometimes, the best way to heal ourselves is by showing up for others. That shift in mindset—from “What can the PVA do for me?” to “What can I do to help my fellow Veterans?”—made all the difference. I encourage you to take a moment and ask yourself that same question. You might be surprised by the impact you can have.

In the end, peer mentoring sits at the heart of our mission. I'm proud to say we now have seven trained peer mentors, or Co-Pilots, as the VA calls them, supporting our members across the region. Let's keep the momentum going. If you want to participate in the peer mentoring program, or if you have suggestions about outings and activities you'd like us to sponsor, please reach out. Together, we can build something meaningful—one connection at a time.

Keep moving.



Eric Allen



“My own wheelchair was out of commission for four months while I waited on new batteries from the VA.”

If you're in a similar situation, don't hesitate to reach out. There is now a variety of mobility equipment available to members at no cost. Items include manual and power wheelchairs, walkers and crutches, Hoyer lifts, used batteries in good condition, and spare wheelchair parts.

Contact Eric Allen at 720-591-7096.





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ADAPTIVE
BIKES



MESSAGE FROM JOHN HENDERSON

As Executive Director of the Paralyzed Veterans of America Mountain States Chapter, I'm proud to help launch Volume 1 of *Elevations* for the third quarter—our first issue featuring a refreshed look, expanded content and a renewed commitment to sharing stories that connect us.

This new phase of our newsletter reflects the vibrant momentum building across our chapter. Over the past several months, we've been hard at work building programs, improving our systems, and strengthening our engagement with members and partners.

Whether it's a pickleball clinic, a women's gathering, a fishing outing, or the joy of adaptive cycling, our members and board continue to show that grit, determination and hard work truly do move mountains.

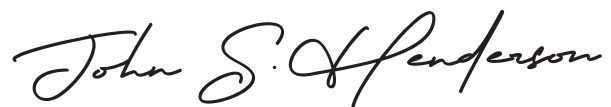
This year, I had the opportunity to represent our chapter alongside our National Director and Multiple Sclerosis (MS) Committee Chair, Izzy Abbass, at the National PVA Annual Convention in Austin. The experience gave me a clear and powerful understanding of how our chapter fits into the national organization's larger mission and strategy. It also strengthened my relationships with the organization's leaders and clarified the responsibilities we hold as a chapter.

Shortly after, I traveled to Washington, D.C., for Advocacy Week and a visit to PVA's national

headquarters. I was inspired to learn firsthand how vital advocacy and legislation are to our mission. With wheels on the ground, we participated in advocacy training, met with legislators and worked to protect the rights and benefits that our members rely on. Advocacy is one of PVA's most essential missions, and we all have a role to play. I encourage every member to find ways to get involved—we need your voice, your experience and your determination to move the needle forward.

Coming off my first National Veterans Wheelchair Games, I'm more inspired than ever. I've been in a wheelchair for 15 years since being hit by a bus while training for an Ironman triathlon, but I have never felt more alive than I did among my peers—sharing triumphs, stories, friendship and strength.

I've also been encouraged by the steady and caring leadership of our Board President Eric Allen and Vice President Izzy Abbass. With their guidance, the Board of Directors has come together in new and meaningful ways, setting a strong course for the year ahead.



MOUNTAINS & MILESTONES WITH TETON ADAPTIVE

EVENT RECAP



BY IZZY ABBASS

In June, my wife and I had the privilege of participating in the inaugural Adaptive Adventure Program, hosted by Paralyzed Veterans of America's Sports and Recreation team. Alongside eight other PVA members, we spent an unforgettable week immersed in the breathtaking beauty of the Teton Mountains—thanks to the fantastic team at Teton Adaptive, who facilitated all the week's activities.

And what a week it was—filled with a wide range of accessible outdoor adventures designed to challenge and inspire. Highlights included mountain biking after a gondola ride up a ski slope, road biking through sweeping mountain landscapes, and the tranquility of kayaking and rafting on pristine waters. We also enjoyed fishing, horseback riding, and another gondola trip to the summit of the Jackson Hole Mountain Resort, offering stunning panoramic views. The week wrapped up on Thursday evening around a campfire with burgers, hot dogs and, of course, s'mores.

This program was more than just a getaway—it was a powerful reminder of what's possible



when accessibility and opportunity come together. We're deeply grateful to Teton Adaptive for making it all possible, and I hope PVA's Sports and Recreation department continues to grow and expand these incredible opportunities for our community.

GET INVOLVED & PARTICIPATE

pva.org/sports-recreation/outdoor-recreation

Sarah Cramer, right, and Izzy Abbass, left, enjoy accessible kayaking and rafting at Palisades Reservoir in Idaho, just west of Grand Teton National Park. The outing was led by Teton Adaptive.

CHAPTER MEMBERS ADVOCATE AT D.C. SEMINAR



The Mountain States Chapter sent four members—the most ever—to PVA's Advocacy and Legislative Seminar in Washington, D.C., held June 10-12.

John Henderson, executive director of the Mountain States Chapter; Renae Byrd McMinn, board member and secretary; Erin Cavit, board member; and Tom Wheaton, PVA national treasurer, joined more than 150 PVA members, chapter leaders and staff from across the U.S. to advocate for the PVA's top legislative priorities. These include preserving the Department of Veterans Affairs' spinal cord injuries and disorders (SCI/D) system of care, increasing disability access within the VA, and improving access to housing and

vehicle modifications. PVA also announced that its petition to oppose dismantling the SCI/D system of care now has nearly 3,500 signatures.

Collectively, participants visited the offices of more than 300 members of Congress. Mountain States Chapter members met with 21 of the region's 28 legislators, including those representing Colorado, Utah, New Mexico and Wyoming. While most meetings were held with legislative staffers (as is customary), this year's delegation met several lawmakers in person, including Reps. Brittany Pettersen, D-Colo.; Jeff Hurd, R-Colo.; Gabe Vasquez, D-N.M.; and Blake Moore, R-Utah.

Before traveling to Washington, D.C., members attended virtual seminars to learn about the policy priorities identified by National PVA. Additional priorities include:

- Increasing Special Monthly Compensation (SMC) rates for veterans with catastrophic injuries and illnesses.
- Increasing Home Improvements and Structural Alterations (HISA) grants to align with present-day home modification costs.
- Improving access to transportation for both ground and air travel.

Top: Erin Cavit, left, and Renae Byrd McMinn, right, meet with Colorado Congressman, Jeff Hurd.



PVA ADAPTIVE CYCLING

UTAH VETERANS RIDE TOGETHER

In May, about 35 Utah-based Veterans attended the second annual PVA Adaptive Cycling Clinic, held in partnership with the Salt Lake City VA Medical Center. On two separate days, participants rode between 10 to 20 kilometers, depending on ability, along paved bike paths north of Salt Lake City and shared lunch together after.

Ogden Valley Adaptive, a local nonprofit, provided support staff and adaptive bicycles for those who didn't bring their own.

While the clinic included instruction on bike handling, it also offered a refresher on bike maintenance—something that “is absolutely key,” said Shannon O’Rawe, a recreational therapist

at the Salt Lake City VA who helped organize the event.

“Everyone needs refreshers, and it’s especially important that people learn how to take care of their bikes,” she said. “It’s a reflection of self-care.”

More than anything, the event was about camaraderie—giving Veterans a chance to swap stories and enjoy a shared outdoor experience. “Vets learn best from other Vets,” O’Rawe said.

“These kinds of events help build community and support.”

Top: Henderson, left, helps a fellow Veteran with hand positioning on a new bike.

MOVE UNITED CONFERENCE

EVENT RECAP



Members of the PVA Mountain States Chapter attended the annual education conference hosted in May by Move United, a national nonprofit dedicated to promoting adaptive sports. This year's theme was "Catalyzing Change Through Sport."

"It was so uplifting," said Renae Byrd McMinn, Mountain States Chapter board member and secretary.

The multi-day conference was held at the National Ability Center in Park City, Utah, and drew nearly 500 attendees from across the country. The Mountain States Chapter was one of about two

dozen exhibitors. Others included Bowhead, a manufacturer of adaptive mountain bikes; Access Trax, which makes portable wheelchair access mats; AccuTerra Adapt by Neotreks, a trail mapping platform for people with mobility restrictions; the Stand Up and Play Foundation, which specializes in adaptive golf; and Valley Adaptive Sports, based in Driggs, Idaho.

Workshops and educational sessions took place throughout the event, covering topics such as grant applications and reporting, navigating tough conversations, and emerging technologies like the Tetra-Sail, developed by researchers at Utah State University, which uses a sip-and-puff interface to allow individuals with tetraplegia to sail.

"It was a valuable networking opportunity," said John Henderson, executive director of the Mountain States Chapter, who also attended the conference. "By creating partnerships, we can do a lot more and reach more people who need help."

One highlight, McMinn said, was the para-fencing clinic led by two Paralympians. As the only left-handed participant, McMinn had the opportunity to use the sword of Shelby Jensen Mitchell, a left-handed Paralympian and national champion.

Top: McMinn, left, learns para-fencing from Paralympian Shelby Jensen Mitchell, right.



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PUSHING LIMITS & BUILDING BONDS WHEELCHAIR GAMES

EVENT RECAP

More than 500 Veterans from across the country came together for the National Veterans Wheelchair Games, held in Minneapolis over six days in July. The Mountain States Chapter—represented by 29 Veterans from Colorado, New Mexico and Utah—collectively participated in 19 sports and brought home 60 medals.

Launched in 1981, the Wheelchair Games have grown into the world's largest annual wheelchair sports event for Veterans with disabilities. The

Games are open to Veterans with spinal cord injuries, amputations, multiple sclerosis or other central neurological conditions who use a wheelchair for athletic competition.

The event celebrated its 44th year, drawing support from 3,000 volunteers. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 90.

Happy Barton looks forward to the Wheelchair Games all year long. This year marked her ninth time competing.

Left: Richard Spears swims the 100-yard breaststroke and wins gold in his division.

“It’s my lifeblood,” she says. “I live for it.”

To get to the Games, Barton drove 1,500 miles from her home in Wells, Nevada with her sister and husband. A Quality of Life grant from the chapter helped cover gas and lodging along the way. “If we hadn’t had that, we wouldn’t be here,” she says.

Barton loves to compete—in power soccer, her team won bronze, and in archery, she took home gold in the compound bow event. But for her, the Games are about more than medals.

“I love all the people,” she says. Being with other Veterans who push forward despite disabilities “encourages me. It’s the opportunity to be my best.”

She’s grateful to the Salt Lake City VA for providing her with a power soccer chair last year. “It’s faster, more agile, and you have better angles on the ball,” she says.

Jose Carter, of Los Lunas, New Mexico, attended the Wheelchair Games for the first time this year. It was also his first time traveling out of state since his injury eight years ago.

“I was a little nervous,” he says.

To prepare, Carter joined weekly group practice sessions led by Annalise Doyle, recreational therapist at the New Mexico VA in Albuquerque.

Below: Happy Barton, right, helps lead her team to a bronze medal at the 2025 National Veterans Wheelchair Games.





WHEELCHAIR GAMES (CONT.)

Erin Cavit, left, and Renae Byrd McMinn, right, were two of 80 women who competed at this year's Wheelchair Games.

The sessions include boccia and wheelchair slalom practice as well as weightlifting to help him get in shape. Over three months, he met with a VA psychologist to learn strategies for managing anxiety.

The preparation paid off. Carter won three gold medals: in bowling (which he had never tried before), boccia and wheelchair slalom. "I'm super happy I went," he says. He also played power soccer for the first time. "My teammates were really encouraging and helpful. It was an awesome experience."

Carter says he plans to stay in touch with a fellow Veteran he met from North Carolina. The man is an amputee and wears only one shoe—like Carter, except on the opposite side. "We talked about exchanging shoes because we are about the same size," he said.

For Carter, who also has a C4-level spinal cord injury, what stood out the most was

connecting with so many other Veterans. "It's that camaraderie—they understand you, and they have similar mindsets."

"I definitely would like to go again."

Cody Smith competed in his second Wheelchair Games this year.

"Everybody's pulling for one another to do their very best," he says. "That's the coolest part about it."

That energy helped Smith dig deep during the adaptive fitness event, when, about halfway through, he felt like he was going to be sick. "I don't know if I would have dug down that deep without all these people cheering," he said. He went on to win gold in his division.

Smith also won gold in wheelchair slalom, one of his favorite events. That finish qualified him for Super G, a longer and harder version of slalom.

When he competed last year, the roar of the crowd distracted him. This year, he prepared differently. In the hours leading up to the event, he listened to music to stay calm, including Stevie Wonder's "Don't You Worry 'Bout a Thing"—a refrain he kept repeating in his head. Smith notched the third-fastest time. Next year, he hopes to be even faster.

While Smith enjoys competing, what he appreciates the most is the spirit of the Games. "People are connecting with each other and growing with each other," he says. "It brings the best out of me."

To Veterans who haven't competed before, Smith offers his advice: "Get over the fear of the unknown and just try it. You won't have any regrets."

The next Wheelchair Games will take place in Detroit from July 9 to 14, 2026.

Cody Smith competes in the wheelchair Super G, as spotters keep their hands close in case he falls.



MAKING A DIFFERENCE QUALITY OF LIFE

Each month, the Mountain States Chapter awards Quality of Life Grants to help members cover the cost of experiences or projects that enhance their daily lives. Grants range from \$500 to \$1,000, depending on membership level, and support activities such as family outings, adaptive recreation and minor home modifications.

To learn more or apply, visit mscpva.org/grants.

Here's a look at how three members recently used their grants.



CRAIG VOGTSBERGER

Vogtsberger used a Quality of Life Grant to help cover the costs of competing in the St. Anthony's Triathlon in St. Petersburg, Florida, where he won his division.

A Colorado Veteran, Vogtsberger turned to triathlon after being severely injured in 2001. "I wasn't living. I was just existing," he says. He remembers seeing an ad for a local triathlon and forcing himself to leave his apartment to watch it. As he saw the racers emerge from the water and transition onto their bikes, he felt a spark. Soon after, he signed up for his first triathlon. The journey back to living wasn't easy. But, Craig says, "Triathlon is how I recovered and how I stay moving." Since 2007, he has competed in over 75 triathlons and qualified for the USA Paratriathlon National Championships 15 times, including this year's race, scheduled for August.



ROBERT KITCHENS

Kitchens used a Quality of Life Grant to travel to the Cayman Islands in June for a scuba diving trip with Denver Adaptive Divers, a Colorado-based nonprofit that specializes in scuba diving for people with disabilities. When Kitchens first heard about the program, he knew he wanted to take part. “I was looking for that thing that I lost—that little spark of life that says, ‘You’re still alive. You should do this!’”

It was also a chance to return to an activity he had done as a teenager with his dad. “I’m [now] 100% blind and a paraplegic,” Kitchens said. “When I’m underwater, I’m free-flowing and in the moment. That’s what I seek when I dive—being in the moment of life. It’s awe-inspiring to me.”

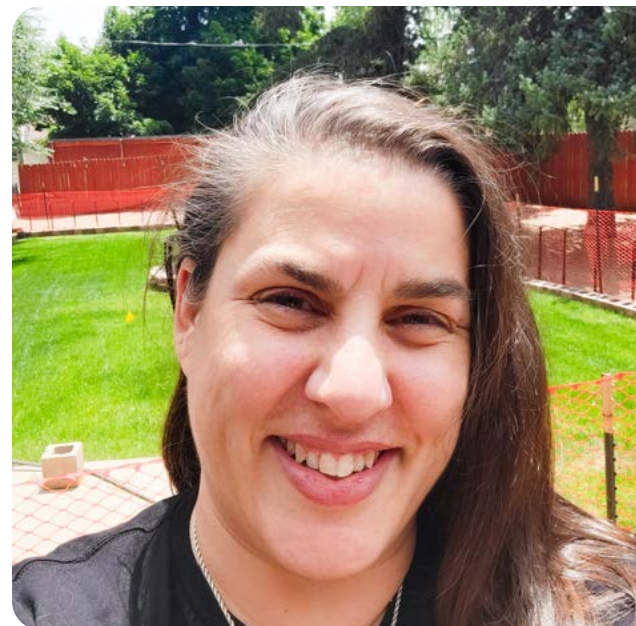
***“Look at obstacles as opportunities.
That’s my outlook on life.”***

Robert Kitchens

SHERRY DWYER

Dwyer, from Colorado Springs, Colo., used a Quality of Life Grant to help pay for the installation of hand railings on the stairway leading to her basement, which she said had been unsafe to access because of the uneven shape of the stairs. Now, using railings to steady herself, she can reach the boiler and water heater.

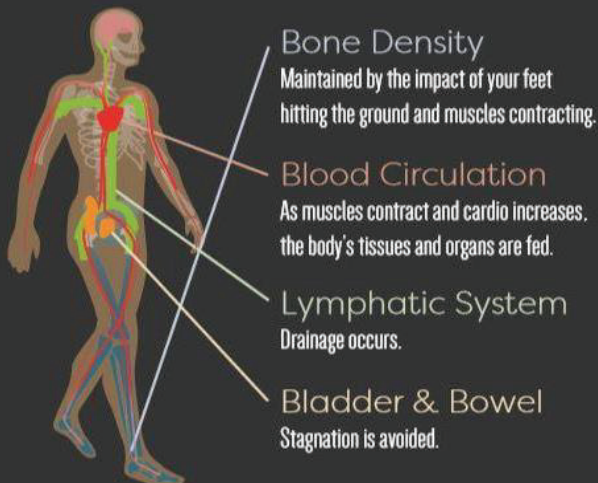
Sherry is happily using the extra space, too. Boxes from her living area have been moved to the basement, helping reduce clutter, which she says, “really helps my mental health.”



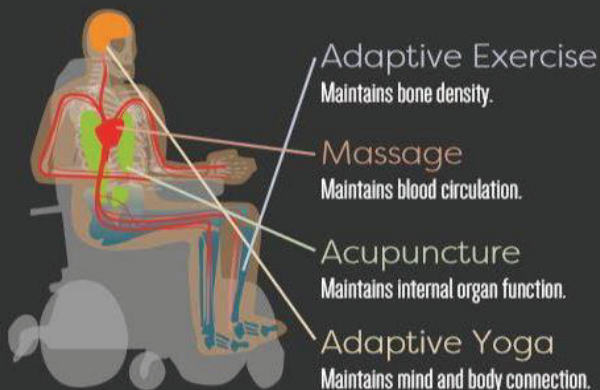
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UPDATES FROM IZZY ABBASS

National Directors are elected by local PVA chapters and serve on PVA's National Board, where they represent and advocate for their chapters' interests.

In May, I attended the National Convention in Austin. It was a bit warm, with temperatures in the high 90s and low 100s, but Tom Wheaton, John Henderson and I made the most of it. As always, it was great to hear what other chapters are doing and get updates from National.

A highlight was nominating our very own Tom Wheaton for National Treasurer. He's been serving in the role for some time and ran unopposed. I also shared updates on our chapter's participation in the Reeve Summit in Denver—or as Eric Allen, president of the board, likes to joke, we held a chapter meeting in Denver and the Reeve team decided to join us.

One of my key actions was introducing a motion to approve the Annual Budget, which was quickly seconded by the Colonial Chapter. I've become somewhat known (or infamous) for ensuring the budget gets finalized, especially since debate can drag on for quite a while. Very few of the many questions raised lead to changes in the budget. I continue to emphasize that the budget is distributed well in advance of the National Convention, giving ample time to ask questions and suggest changes.

A major takeaway from this year's budget was that our monthly chapter grant from national increased from \$150,000 to \$158,000. This is welcome news, as the grant had remained unchanged for several years while operating costs continue to rise. It's a much-needed boost to our Chapter's administration.

Looking ahead to the Fall Board Meeting in Orlando in November, I've submitted two resolutions. The first would open MS (multiple sclerosis) Committee meetings to all Chapter MS Leads. While they wouldn't have voting rights, their updates and insights could be highly valuable.

The second resolution proposes allowing co-chairs for select committees, specifically the MS Committee and the Anita Bloom Women's Committee. Traditionally, these chairs have been National Vice Presidents. However, none of the current VPs have MS, and until 2008, no woman had served as a VP. Allowing co-chairs would ensure that the committees are guided by someone with direct insight into the issue the committee addresses. This will also help us cultivate the next generation of leaders.





LEGISLATIVE UPDATES

2026 ASSEMBLIES

As we all enjoy the dog days of summer, most of our state legislators are doing the same, and not much is happening in any of the five state legislatures that make up the Mountain States Chapter. But get ready for 2026. Below is a list of our region’s upcoming state legislature sessions. By knowing the opening and closing dates, we can prepare to support or oppose legislation at the right time.

STATE	OPENING	CLOSING
Colorado	Jan 20	Early May–TBD
Montana	No session (even-numbered year)	
New Mexico	No Session (even-numbered year)	
Utah	Jan 20	March 6
Wyoming	Feb 9 (Budget)	Late Feb/Early Mar (20 days)

SEEKING CLASS MEMBERS IN LAWSUIT AGAINST CAR RENTAL COMPANY

Last year, Disability Rights Advocates (DRA) filed a class-action lawsuit against Hertz, alleging that the company fails to provide hand controls in most of the vehicles it offers for rent. The lawsuit aims to ensure that Hertz provides equal access to its services, including making hand controls available on a broader range of vehicles and enhancing the accessibility of its reservation system.

If you have ever tried to rent a vehicle with hand controls from Hertz but were unable to get the type

of vehicle you wanted, DRA would like to hear from you. The organization has created a short survey to collect contact information from potential class members. DRA will follow up with everyone who completes the form.

To access the survey or learn more about the case, visit the Disability Rights Advocates website at dralegal.org and search for “Ho v. the Hertz Corporation.”



UPDATES FROM CAPITOL HILL

ASSIST ACT INTRODUCED IN THE SENATE

On May 13, Sen. Tommy Tuberville, R-Ala., introduced the Automotive Support Services to Improve Safe Transportation (ASSIST) Act (S. 1726) in the Senate. The bill builds on legislation passed by Congress in 2023 that aimed to formalize the types of vehicle modifications the VA can provide to disabled Veterans as part of the department's medical benefits package.

HOUSE APPROPRIATORS PASS MILCON-VA FUNDING BILL

The House Appropriations Committee recently approved the fiscal year 2026 Military Construction, Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies Appropriations Act (MilCon-VA) by a vote of 36 to 27. This important funding measure provides \$152.1 billion in discretionary funding for the VA, roughly \$5 billion more than current levels. It also allocates \$300 billion for mandatory programs, bringing total VA funding to \$453 billion.

HOUSE PASSES LEGISLATION SUPPORTING EMPLOYMENT OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

In early June, the House of Representatives passed several pieces of legislation, most of which relate to the Small Business Administration (SBA).

One of these bills, H.R. 1634, known as the ThinkDIFFERENTLY About Disability Employment Act, would establish a memorandum of understanding between the SBA and the National Council on Disability. The agreement aims to support people with disabilities who are interested in becoming entrepreneurs or who want to be self-employed. It would also help small businesses hire individuals with disabilities and improve workplace accessibility.

Top: Abbass is joined by marketers promoting a new drug to treat multiple sclerosis at the annual Consortium of Multiple Sclerosis Centers (CMSC) meeting in Phoenix in May.



COMMUNITY PARTNER SPOTLIGHT

RIVER DEEP FOUNDATION

We're excited to launch a partnership with the River Deep Foundation, a Colorado-based nonprofit dedicated to helping Veterans re-engage in life through adventure and recreation.

We kicked things off in July, when nearly two dozen PVA members and their families joined about 100 participants for River Deep's annual Family Fishing & Fun Day in Fort Collins, Colorado. The event took place on a scenic, accessible 220-acre property and included fishing, archery and a shared lunch.



Bob Adwar, Founder &
Executive Director
of River Deep Foundation

Our collaboration is rooted in a shared mission. Bob Adwar started River Deep Foundation in 2017, drawing on more than a decade of experience with the Denver Chapter of Safari Club International, where he organized hunting and fishing outings for patients at Craig Hospital, a renowned medical center for spinal cord and brain injury rehabilitation.

The goal was to help patients relax in the outdoors and show them what they could still accomplish despite their new limitations.

Today, River Deep Foundation hosts a wide variety of monthly outings and activities not only for Veterans but also for other individuals who have experienced spinal cord or brain injuries, post-traumatic stress disorder or other traumas.

Outings still include pheasant hunting, as well as horseback riding, fly-fishing, fencing, archery and scuba diving. Workshops include blacksmithing, welding, art and more.

One crucial component of healing includes family.

“The mission is to help the healing process.”

“If you’re in crisis, more than likely, your family is in crisis,” Adwar says. That’s why he always encourages family, even children, to participate in their programs as well.

To sign up, contact Jonas Ely, recreational therapist at the Rocky Mountain VA:

- Jonas.Ely@va.gov
- www.riverdeepfoundation.org/outings-program



NEW MEXICO

REGIONAL SPOTLIGHT

Left: Athletes from New Mexico participated in Wheelchair Games in July.

We're shining a spotlight on one of the states in our region to celebrate local wins, highlight Veterans' programs, and keep you connected with what's happening across chapter lines.

LEGISLATIVE WINS FOR VETERANS

Expanded Property Tax Relief

Starting with the 2025 tax year, New Mexico will increase its standard Veteran property tax exemption from \$4,000 to \$10,000, with future increases tied to inflation. Beginning in 2026, disabled Veterans will also qualify for a pro-rated exemption based on their VA disability rating—expanding access to thousands of disabled Veterans who were previously ineligible unless rated at 100%.

Free Lifetime State Park Access

In July, New Mexico began offering free lifetime state park access to all resident Veterans, including day-use and camping passes. This new benefit encourages outdoor recreation, connection and well-being.

RECREATIONAL THERAPY AT THE RAYMOND G. MURPHY VA MEDICAL CENTER IN ALBUQUERQUE

Garden Group

Every Tuesday and Thursday from April through October, Veterans can take part in adaptive gardening using raised beds to grow vegetables and flowers. Harvested produce is later used in healthy cooking classes, where participants also get to try adaptive cooking tools.

Broadway for Veterans

Through its Broadway for Veterans initiative, Popejoy Hall in Albuquerque donated tickets for 25 Veterans to attend *Les Misérables* in February and *TINA: The Tina Turner Musical* in May. Opportunities like this help Veterans engage with the arts and enjoy a night out in the community.

Adaptive Fishing

New this summer, the adaptive fishing program meets on the second and fourth Fridays of each month from April through September. Veterans are invited to try out adaptive fishing gear or simply enjoy the outdoors and connect with fellow Veterans.

AN HONOR: Serving our veterans



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PREPARING FOR CARE AT HOME

BY MARK MALONEY

If you're preparing to leave the hospital and return home, depending on the extent of your injury, you may need one or more caregivers. I am a C3 incomplete quadriplegic and require caregivers because I cannot eat independently or transfer from my bed to my wheelchair.

My caregivers assist with exercises I perform while still in bed, typically before I get up for the day. After they feed me breakfast, I continue my routine using adaptive exercise bikes from my wheelchair and a stand-up machine.

If you'll be relying on caregivers, here are some tips that have helped me and may help you, too.

HOW TO FIND CAREGIVERS

There are a few ways to find caregivers. One option is going through an agency, though this usually means paying the agency rather than the caregivers directly. We chose not to use an agency so we could pay our caregivers more fairly.

The challenge, then, is finding reliable caregivers independently.

Word of mouth and online advertisements through websites like Care.com and Nextdoor.com helped us find some excellent caregivers early on. Those initial caregivers trained others, and that process continues today. Currently, we have five caregivers who work different shifts—mornings, evenings, and afternoons.

In my case, they help with all activities of daily living and drive me to and from appointments, shopping and local parks for recreation.

WHAT QUALITIES ARE IMPORTANT IN A CAREGIVER?

While it's ideal for caregivers to be certified nursing assistants (CNAs), it's not required. What matters most is reliability and competency. A few of our caregivers have been with us for four or five years, and we've been very satisfied with their dedication and performance.

TIPS FOR SCHEDULING MULTIPLE CAREGIVERS

A scheduling app called Homebase has been very helpful. My wife manages the financial aspects, while my daughter uses Homebase to schedule shifts. Sometimes caregivers can't make it as planned, so last-minute adjustments are necessary.

CREATE A CHECKLIST FOR CAREGIVERS

We've found that a checklist is an essential tool in ensuring all aspects of care are completed. The checklist helps caregivers avoid missing important tasks. Over the past five years, we've refined ours. If you'd like a copy, please email info@mscpva.org and we'll gladly send it to you.

A future article will highlight how to maintain good relationships with caregivers.

Mark Maloney, right, talks with Eric Allen, left, during the Reeve Summit in Denver in March. The two discuss ways to expand the peer mentoring program.



Mark Maloney is a volunteer peer mentor—known as a Co-Pilot—at the Denver VA's Spinal Cord Injury & Disorders Center. A retired lieutenant colonel in the U.S. Army, Maloney became a quadriplegic after a cycling accident several years ago. Before his injury, he summited multiple 14ers (including Mt. Whitney) and competed in marathons and triathlons. Today, he remains passionate about staying active and helping others. In 2023, he completed the final kilometer of the BOLDERBoulder running race using a Lite Run Walker and was featured on ABC News. Maloney encourages others to find humor, stay positive and replace negativity with gratitude.

ELEVATIONS

