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Questions? Contact chris@pvamag.com.

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Photo courtesy of
Visit Panama City Beach/Cory Lee

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Visit us online at
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If you like wheelchair sports and recreation,
you'll love our sister publication — **SPORTS 'N SPOKES!**
Preview online at sportsnspokes.com

PVA needs your voice to help expand its grassroots efforts. If a campaign is of personal significance to you, PVA would love to hear your story.

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MARCH
Editor's
DESK

March is a month that's usually associated with the start of many things, such as spring and the baseball season. However, when it comes to Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA), this month marks the end of an era.

PVA Publications Operations Manager Sherri Shea is calling it a career after an astonishing 46-plus years on the job. The longest serving employee in PVA history, Sherri started working with the PVA department that produces *PN* and *SPORTS 'N SPOKES* magazines in October 1978. Think about that for a minute or two. Almost five decades of service to one place is a rarity these days. Her time with PVA has lasted longer than a lot of things.

As you might imagine, being here that long means there's not much, if anything, Sherri hasn't had a hand in doing, including design input, editing and even writing some articles. Her title might cover doing the stuff that helps an office function, such as taking care of the computers, ordering supplies and paying bills, but her presence here far exceeds that. Sherri's wealth of PVA knowledge is as invaluable as it is immeasurable. There isn't enough space and aren't enough words to express our thanks for her service, help and camaraderie, but we wanted to at least try.

We wish Sherri all the best in her well-earned retirement and hope she gets to enjoy traveling, plenty of relaxing, fun times with family and friends, or just not doing anything. Thank you, Sherri!



Andy Nemann, Managing Editor

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DIGITAL HIGHLIGHTS

THOMAS TO TESTIFY

Visit the website for video and more from this month's testimony by Paralyzed Veterans of America National President Robert L. Thomas Jr., before a joint session of the House and Senate Veterans' Affairs committees.

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ROBERT L. THOMAS JR.
NATIONAL PRESIDENT

PVA from the TOP

Luck Or Destiny?

Do you believe in luck? If an individual hits the lottery or if a basketball player makes a last-second, game-winning shot, are those people lucky? Or is destiny playing a part?

This month all across the world, people will be celebrating St. Patrick's Day. There will be cities all colored in green, parades and music festivals. Individuals of Irish descent will be celebrating their heritage and wearing apparel decorated with shamrocks or saying things like, "Kiss me, I'm Irish." Some might say this is when they feel the luckiest, but you don't have to be Irish to enjoy this festive day.

While most use this holiday to wear green and drink Guinness beer, some may not know the origin of St. Patrick's Day. Looking back at history, the Feast of Saint Patrick, or simply St. Patrick's Day, is a religious and cultural holiday held on March 17. It commemorates the death of Saint Patrick, the foremost patron saint of Ireland.

Although Patrick was born to a wealthy family in Roman Britain, it's said that during the fifth century, he was kidnapped and taken as a slave to Ireland, where he found his spiritual calling. Following his escape from his captors, Patrick made his way home and went on to become a priest. He eventually returned to Ireland, where he spread his Christian faith. In his teachings, Patrick used the traditions and symbols of the Celtic people, including a shamrock to explain the Holy Trinity.

It affected their lives, and that drove them to advocate for themselves and their fellow brothers and sisters.

So, let me know, is this luck or just our divine destiny? ■

St. Patrick's Day has been celebrated for more than 1,000 years, however, a lot of the traditions that we're accustomed to now were not part of the original celebrations. In actuality, drinking beer was banned.

Many other folktales have carried over from earlier times. For example, believing that if you caught a leprechaun, you would inherit his pot of gold; if you wore green that it would make you invisible to leprechauns; or if



© GETTY IMAGES/MATEI PHOTO

you kissed the Blarney Stone, you would have the gifts of good luck and eloquence.

By now, many of you are probably saying, "What does this have to do with Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA)?" Or, "Thank you for the history lesson, but I already know the meaning behind St. Patrick's Day."

This holiday symbolizes luck to me and reminds me of how fortunate we are to have PVA forefathers with the vision to create an organization that would help veterans navigate their new world after a spinal cord injury or disease.

It affected their lives, and that drove them to advocate for themselves and their fellow brothers and sisters. They set the path and made life easier for all those facing these challenges.

So, let me know, is this luck or just our divine destiny? ■



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An Advocate Is Paramount

I recently went to the emergency room (ER) located in the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) hospital where I've been receiving care for more than three decades.

This was the third time in just a year that kidney stones had triggered a serious infection, and as I lay on a gurney, I wondered how much more my 60-year-old body could take. But it wasn't just my physicality that was under duress, so was my mental state.

While my body did battle with MRSA and sepsis, my mental game was engaged in a full-court press. Sure, the docs were calling most of the shots, but I needed to be vigilant in my advocacy. After all, my most dependable advocate was picking up the kids at school, and I was headed to the operating room.

During the pre-op huddle, the team discussed the basic stuff like my vital signs and which kidney was causing the problems. And, like previous pre-op huddles, there was a focus on some of the nuances relating to my tetraplegia, such as my predisposition for autonomic dysreflexia in addition to my allergies relating to specific antibiotics such as vancomycin.

My understanding was that we covered all the important stuff and we were ready to proceed. But once we were in the operating room, clinicians were still addressing some important issues, such as how much anesthesia and which antibiotics were to be used.

Calculation of a patient's body mass index (BMI) is a significant factor when determining the appropriate dosage of anesthesia. However, someone in the ER recorded my height as 6 inches rather than 6 feet, so when my BMI was calculated to be 3,906 rather than 26, the nurse and I shared a nervous laugh while she corrected the mistake.

When someone in the operating room asked about which antibiotic was to be used, someone responded, "vancomycin." I quickly said, "No, I already told you that I go into autonomic dysreflexia when given vancomycin!" I don't recall much of the conversation that followed, but I woke up on daptomycin.

I was then transferred to the direct observation unit, where I was expecting another round of educating clinicians on all things relating to spinal cord injury (SCI). However, I got lucky this time; it turns out the nurse assigned to me had worked in the SCI center just a few years ago, so the learning curve was pretty flat.

Truth be told, I hate to see a nurse leave the SCI center, but it's comforting to know they continue their good work in other departments in the hospital where patients with SCI receive care. Furthermore, it's VA policy for nurses assigned to the SCI center to visit patients who are admitted elsewhere in the hospital.

However, it was only after I was admitted to the SCI center that the need for vigilance became less of a concern and I could begin to relax. After all, this center was built as a place for people like me to come home to, and that's exactly how I felt.

While it's comforting to be surrounded by clinicians who specialize in caring for veterans with SCI, there's still a need to ask questions and direct your care when appropriate.

For example, one of my roommates had been having a difficult time. He was probably overwhelmed with all the stuff that was happening, but when his wife arrived, she scolded him for not knowing everything that was going on with his case. She said in a very stern tone, "Why don't you ask questions?! Now, I have to track down your doctors in the halls and ask them what's going on. They must think I'm a crazy bitch!" That's when my wife looked at me, raised her right eyebrow like Mr. Spock and whispered, "Now you know how I feel."

I'm very fortunate to be married to someone who takes better care of me than I do. Gone are the days when a fever was a mere

When it comes to my care, she never accepts the status quo, always thinks in terms of "we" and has never been afraid to fight my battles.



inconvenience. Nowadays, my wife wastes no time in driving me to the hospital when something doesn't feel right.

Even when I'm admitted as an inpatient, my wife will go home at night and spend hours on the computer diligently researching my ailment du jour. This time, she "diagnosed" my kidney infection before I even went to the emergency room, and just a few months ago, after reviewing the results of my recent blood test, she told my doctor that my prescription of pregabalin was causing a noticeable decrease in my red blood cells. Obviously, I stopped taking the medication, and my red blood cell count is back to normal.

Over the 20 years we've been married, I've been hospitalized several times. When it comes to my care, she never accepts the status quo, always thinks in terms of "we" and has never

been afraid to fight my battles. For a while, I thought I might be caught up in a chronic case of Munchausen syndrome by proxy, but it turns out my wife is simply a very caring, empathetic and diligent person who will stop at nothing to protect me over and over again.

Living with a SCI can get really complicated and when the stuff hits the fan, having an advocate is paramount.

As always, please share your thoughts at al@pvamag.com. ■

Correction

In the February issue of *PN*, the article *All You Need Is Love* misidentified the type of cancer Steph Roach had. She had Hodgkin lymphoma stage 3B, not breast cancer. We apologize for the error.

Dole Act Passes

Calling it a “critical step forward,” Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) says it’s “grateful” for the passage of the Senator Elizabeth Dole 21st Century Veterans Healthcare and Benefits Improvement Act.

Passed by Congress just before last Christmas and signed into law by then-U.S. President Joe Biden on Jan. 2, the act is a comprehensive bipartisan package of bills that expands services for veterans, their families and caregivers, as well as their survivors, across health care, education, benefits and more.

“Paralyzed Veterans of America is grateful to Congress for passing the Senator Elizabeth Dole 21st Century Veterans Healthcare and Benefits Improvement Act, a critical step forward in supporting the families and caregivers of our nation’s veterans, especially those with catastrophic injuries and diseases, like MS [multiple sclerosis] and ALS [amyotrophic lateral sclerosis],” says PVA National Presi-

KEITH MELLNICK



Former Sen. Elizabeth Dole was honored with Paralyzed Veterans of America’s Gordon H. Mansfield Congressional Leadership Award in 2024.

dent Robert L. Thomas Jr., in a press release issued after the act was passed by Congress. “This bipartisan effort reflects a shared commitment to honoring the sacrifices of those who have served by ensuring they and their caregivers receive the vital supports they desperately need.”

For more information on the act, visit congress.gov/bill/118th-congress/senate-bill/141.

Barriers PSA

A new public service announcement (PSA) from Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) is highlighting how inaccessibility can affect anyone at any time.

Barriers Still Exist – For Everyone is PVA’s latest

PSA and emphasizes the impact of inaccessibility through the experiences

how simple tasks such as shopping, boarding a hotel shuttle, attending school

COURTESY OF PARALYZED VETERANS OF AMERICA



A new Paralyzed Veterans of America public service announcement highlights inaccessibility.

of five everyday Americans. Launched Dec. 11, 2024, the PSA is available for television and comes in lengths of 15, 30 and 60 seconds. The spots look at

and catching a bus can become daunting or entirely un navigable when barriers are present.

PVA’s intention is to show the general public how

everyone loses when inaccessibility is present, but joining PVA's fight to help veterans and others with disabilities helps everyone win.

To watch or download the PSAs, visit psadirect.com/client/pva/?vid=3035.

Veteran Travel

Saying it's "relieved,"

Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) is applauding the passage of the Veterans Expedited TSA (Transportation Security Administration) Screening Safe Travel Act.

Passed by Congress late last December and signed into law by then-U.S. President Joe Biden on Jan. 4, the act provides eligible service-connected veterans with disabilities with free access to the TSA PreCheck program, which helps makes it quicker and easier to pass through security at U.S. airports.

"No veteran should ever have to endure invasive pat downs while navigating airport security simply because he or she uses a mobility device," says PVA



Chief Policy Officer Heather Ansley in a press release issued after the act was passed by Congress. "Paralyzed Veterans of America is relieved Congress

addressed this longstanding issue and is taking steps to better restore and protect the dignity of catastrophically disabled veterans. PVA will continue to fight for the safety, respect and independence our nation's disabled veterans earned and deserve."

Eligible veterans must still go through the TSA's normal procedures and background checks to enroll in the program.

For information, visit tsa.gov/precheck. 

An advertisement for Aqua Creek Products. At the top, there is a logo of a mountain range with a blue wave below it, and the text 'Aqua Creek Products'. Below the logo, the main headline reads 'ELEVATED AQUATIC ACCESS' in large, bold, white letters. Underneath the headline, it says 'Any color, any application.' in a smaller, white font. The background is a dark, starry space with vibrant pink and blue nebulae. In the foreground, several pieces of aquatic access equipment, including chairs and platforms with mechanical arms, are displayed on a black circular base. The base has a white outline of the state of Montana with a blue star, and the text 'MADE IN MONTANA' in white. At the bottom of the advertisement, there is a row of social media icons for Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn, YouTube, Twitter, and Pinterest, along with the website 'aquacreek.com', the phone number '888-687-3552', and the email 'sales@aquacreek.com'.

Gearing Up To Advocate in 2025

Every year, Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) members and chapter leaders travel to Washington, D.C., to take on Congress and advocate for PVA's most important policy priorities.

Before 2024, PVA's Advocacy/Legislation Seminar coincided with the annual joint session of the House and Senate Veterans' Affairs committees, during which the PVA national president testifies about the issues of most importance for the health and benefit of veterans with spinal cord injury and disease.

Starting last year, PVA decided to increase its presence on Capitol Hill throughout the year by holding the Advocacy/Legislation Seminar in June.

During their time in Washington, D.C., PVA advocates will have the opportunity to speak with their senators and representatives, and through their personal stories share why PVA's policy priorities are important to them and their fellow PVA members.

Although the Advocacy/Legislation Seminar is in June, PVA needs your advocacy to start now.

PVA Priorities

During his testimony before the joint session of the House and Senate Veterans' Affairs committees in early March, PVA National President Robert L. Thomas Jr., will lay out PVA's 2025 policy priority agenda.

One of PVA's top priorities this year is opposing any efforts to weaken specialty care services, such as the spinal cord injuries and disease (SCI/D) system of care, provided by the Department of Veterans Affairs.

The time-honored tradition of the joint hearings provides veterans service organizations an opportunity to tell the members of these important



Paralyzed Veterans of America National President Robert L. Thomas Jr., testifies.

COURTESY OF PARALYZED VETERANS OF AMERICA

committees about the key priorities for their organizations' members. This is a critical opportunity for Thomas to educate Congress members about PVA's policy issues.

PVA's Advocacy/Legislation Seminar is when advocates will visit their Congress members to ensure that action is taking place on PVA's priorities and once again communicate their importance in person in Washington, D.C.

At its core, grassroots advocacy empowers individuals to create tangible policy change through their life experiences. Congress has a responsibility to listen to those they represent. Bills have been created based on a singular constituent having a meeting with a representative on an issue he or she wished to resolve.

The voice of the people is a powerful tool — one that as a collective PVA uses to push issues across the finish line.

Webinars

PVA understands just how important advocates' experiences are and cre-

ated a series of advocacy webinars to assist in preparation for the upcoming Advocacy/Legislation Seminar.

For anyone new to the advocacy space, or even for those who wish to refresh their knowledge, there are five webinars with additional resources to educate advocates on the history of Congress, the makeup of committees, information on stakeholders and guidance from past staffers and advocates.

The webinars can be found at pva.org/research-resources/disability-rights-advocacy/webinars, and they are, in order:

- Fundamentals of Government
- The Legislative Process
- Stakeholders of Advocacy
- Understanding the Issues
- Becoming a Change Agent
- Connecting the Dots

In addition to these videos, a copy of each PowerPoint presentation and additional resources are available.

While the national president's annual testimony and the Advocacy/

Legislation Seminar are two ways PVA voices its members' needs, there are other options, as well.

A Grassroots Effort

If you haven't heard of it before, PVAction Force is a national grassroots advocacy network.

It's free and open to all Americans to take part in writing to Congress members about important issues using a simple computer mouse click. This tool isn't reserved for PVA members alone.

Anyone interested in the issues PVA supports can act. In fact, the more people taking action on issues, the more Congress will listen. PVA intends to use every tool at its dis-

posal to raise awareness of the issues important to PVA members.

Sign up on PVAction Force (votervoice.net/PVA/home), and make sure you're getting updates on newly launched PVA campaigns, blog posts keeping advocates up-to-date on news and information and a quarterly newsletter highlighting some of the noteworthy news from the PVA Government Relations Department.

PVA needs your voice to help expand its grassroots efforts. If a campaign is of personal significance to you, PVA would love to hear your story.

The organization also has lots of resources on pva.org that provide information about PVA's policy priorities. The policy priorities page includes

an overview of PVA's priorities, papers that explain the legislation the organization supports, links to congressional testimonies, webinar recordings and other resources on a variety of topics. This page is regularly updated as new legislation is introduced and new opportunities to advocate arise.

Life experiences are what drive policy into becoming law, and PVA needs your voice to make an impact. Reach out to me at lisae@pva.org, and help spread the word on issues Congress needs to pay attention to this year.

Lisa Elijah is PVA's grassroots advocacy manager in Washington, D.C. ■

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Explore MusicUnity

If you happen to be in the Carlsbad, Calif., area between now and April 30, plan to visit the latest spotlight exhibition at the Museum of Making Music.

MusicUnity: Connecting Communities Through Music explores the transformative power of music in bridging communities and empowering individuals through innovation, healing and lifelong learning.

Supported by a grant from the Kenneth T. Norris and Eileen L. Norris Foundation, MusicUnity highlights how the world of music making, together with the industry of music and sound products, continues to innovate and enrich lives. Through three distinct themes, the exhibition showcases inspiring stories, innovative technologies and community-driven programs that exemplify music's unifying power.

Visitors will encounter adaptive instruments designed with inclusivity in mind, hear stories of veterans finding solace in music and explore how lifelong learning in music fosters a deeper sense of purpose and joy.

The exhibition also highlights the essential role the industry of music and sound products plays in enabling these transformative experiences.

MusicUnity: Connecting Communities Through

PHOTOS THIS PAGE COURTESY OF MUSEUM OF MAKING MUSIC



Adaptive instruments create new opportunities for individuals of diverse abilities to share in the joy and benefits of music-making. Designed with inclusivity in mind — from custom prosthetics to intuitive digital interfaces — these innovations empower musicians to express themselves fully. By bridging the gap between technology and creativity, adaptive instruments celebrate the unique contributions of each musician, fostering a more diverse and vibrant musical community for all.

Music opened at the Museum of Making Music Dec. 15, 2024, and runs through April 30. The museum is at 5790 Armada Drive, Carlsbad, Calif., 92008.

For information about the exhibition, tickets and museum hours, visit museumofmakingmusic.org or call 760-438-5996.

In addition, the Paralyzed Veterans of America Cal-Diego Chapter is hosting a special event at the museum in early April. Look for coverage in a future issue of *PN*.



Music has long supported the military, from the GI piano built for deployment in war zones to the Rhodes miniature Xylette piano designed for hospitalized soldiers during World War II. Today, music continues to serve both active duty members and veterans, helping those with physical and emotional scars to heal and reconnect.

COVID-19 & MS Symptoms

For people with multiple sclerosis (MS), having a novel coronavirus (COVID-19) infection is not associated with worsening multiple sclerosis (MS) symptoms or disability, according to a study published in the Dec. 23, 2024,

with MS, that they do not need to worry about long-term worsening of their MS symptoms after a COVID-19 infection.”

The study involved 2,132 adults with MS with an average age of 65. They were followed over 18 months.

Participants completed a questionnaire, reporting whether they ever had

Participants reported their level of disability based on how their condition affects daily activities such as walking or standing.

After adjusting for factors such as age, race and gender, researchers found that for both those with COVID-19 infection and those without, MS symptom severity increased nominally by 0.02 points per month, both before and after a COVID-19 infection. They found no difference in MS symptom severity between those with COVID-19 infection and those without.

For disability, researchers found similar results.

“Our study indicates that COVID-19 infection was not associated with immediate changes in symptom severity or disability, nor did it change the MS symptoms or disability trajectory for more than a year and a half after the infection,” says Salter. “While our study looked primarily at older people and results may not be the same for younger people, these findings help us better understand how this type of infection can affect people with MS.”

A study limitation was that tests for COVID-19 infection can produce incorrect results, so not everyone who had COVID-19 may have tested positive. Also, people may have had COVID-19 and did not know it.

The study was supported by the National MS Society.

To read the original release, visit aan.com/pressroom/home/pressrelease/5222.

Neural Stem Cell Study

A phase I clinical trial led by researchers at University of California (UC) San Diego School of Medicine has demonstrated the long-term safety and feasibility of neural stem cell transplantation for treating chronic spinal cord injuries (SCI).

The study, which followed four patients with chronic SCI for five years, found that two patients showed durable evidence of neurological improvement after treatment with neural stem cell implantation, including increased motor and sensory scores and improved electromyography (EMG) activity. Some patients also showed improvement in pain scores.

Neural stem cell transplantation is an emerging treatment for various neurological disorders and injuries that works by implanting human-derived stem cells into damaged or diseased areas of the nervous system. Because these neural stem cells are derived from human cells, this treatment approach has the potential to regenerate damaged tissue while integrating seamlessly into the existing nervous system.

© GETTY IMAGES/KOTO_FEIA



online issue of *Neurology*, the medical journal of the American Academy of Neurology (AAN).

“Infections may be associated with more disability among people with MS,” says study author Amber Salter, PhD, of UT Southwestern Medical Center in Dallas and a member of AAN. “However, our study found that for COVID-19 infections specifically, this was not true. This is good news for people

a COVID-19 infection that was confirmed by a test.

A total of 796 people reported having a COVID-19 infection, and 1,336 people reported never having COVID-19.

Participants also reported the severity of their MS symptoms at least six times during the study. They were asked about walking, hand function, bodily pain, fatigue and memory and thinking. They were scored based on symptom severity.



The study found that all four patients tolerated the treatment well, and while the current study was only designed to assess safety and tolerability, the results suggest that neural stem cell transplantation may have therapeutic potential for treating chronic SCI. Following these promising results, the researchers now hope to initiate a phase II clinical trial to assess the treatment’s efficacy.

The study, published in the Dec. 17, 2024, edition of *Cell Reports Medicine*, was led by Joseph Ciacci, MD, a professor in the Department of Neurological Surgery at UC San Diego School of Medicine and neurosurgeon at UC San Diego Health, and Joel Martin, MD, who

was a neurological surgery resident physician at UC San Diego at the time the study was completed and is now a neurosurgeon at Orlando Health in Florida.

The research was supported by the California Institute of Regenerative Medicine UC San Diego Alpha Stem Cell Clinic and the Sanford Stem Cell Clinical Center within the Sanford Stem Cell Institute.

Contributor: Miles Martin/UC San Diego Health Sciences

Pressure Ulcers After Acute SCI

Research led by The Ohio State University Wexner Medical Center and

College of Medicine, along with scientists at the Charité – Universitätsmedizin Berlin in Germany, has provided the first evidence that hospital-acquired pressure ulcers are a potent risk factor for poor neurological recovery among patients with acute spinal cord injury (SCI).

“It’s old surgical wisdom that patients who have infections will often develop wound healing problems after surgery,” says Jan M. Schwab, MD, PhD, co-corresponding author of the study, in a December Ohio State University Wexner Medical Center release.

“While typical infections in spinal cord injury patients evolve in the lung or the bladder, the skin also can be affected. Pressure ulcers often develop in patients with spinal cord injury starting during the early hospitalization, affecting roughly half of the patients. While underrecognized as an immunologically active infection site, these wounds also contain bacteria that can spread through the body via the blood stream.”

Study findings were published online in the journal *JAMA Network Open*.

This study included 1,282 individuals with SCI, of which 594 (45.7%) developed pressure ulcers during initial hospitalization at 20 locations across the country.

“Our study found that patients with pressure ulcers regained significantly less motor function through one

year after injury. In addition, their recovery of ‘independence in activities of daily living’ was significantly restricted compared to other patients,” says Schwab, who is one of the leaders of Ohio State’s Belford Center for Spinal Cord Injury.

Pressure ulcers send inflammatory signals throughout the body, which may also interfere with healing processes directly at the injury site, thereby blocking neurological recovery, says Schwab.

“Our results point to the need to refer acute SCI patients to neurologi-



Jan M. Schwab, MD, PhD

COURTESY OF THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY WEXNER MEDICAL CENTER

cal rehabilitation centers such as Ohio State Dodd Rehabilitation Hospital, with specialized protocols and standards to effectively prevent pressure ulcers,” Schwab says.

During this multi-center study, patients were enrolled from 1996 to 2006

and followed-up until 2016. Patients came from the 20 centers of the prospective SCI Model Systems Database in Birmingham, Ala.

Earlier studies by Schwab's team have shown that SCI patients are immune compromised. As a result, they are more likely to develop infections, such as pneumonia, which delays and blunts their neurological recovery, as well.

"We wondered whether just the presence of another inflammatory lesion in the body such as a pressure ulcer — in addition to the spinal cord injury lesion itself — is already sufficient to distract wound healing," says Schwab.

The new study focused on pressure ulcers that were acquired during the early care phase after SCI, spanning surgical or first rehabilitative SCI care.

The primary study endpoint focused on the change in the American Spinal Injury Association motor score at one year after SCI. Secondary endpoints included the recovery of Functional Independence Measure motor items at one year after SCI and mortality up to 10 years.

"Patients who develop pressure ulcers face worse long-term disability and increased risk of death," says co-corresponding author Marcel Kopp, MD, a clinical scientist with Department of Experimental Neurology at Charité in Berlin.

"We believe that preventing pressure ulcers from developing can help protect these patients and lead to improved medical care."

VA Expands GI Bill Benefits

Following an April 2024

Supreme Court decision, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has updated the process for awarding GI Bill benefits. This change means many veterans who served multiple periods of military service (for example, veterans who reenlisted) will be eligible for up to an additional 12 months of education benefits.

Under the previous policy, eligible veterans who served at least two periods of service were limited to a maximum total of 36 months of GI Bill benefits, between the Montgomery GI Bill and the Post-9/11 GI Bill. Under the updated policy, eligible veterans can now qualify for up to 48 months of total GI Bill benefits.

This policy change also means many veterans who were previously limited to 36 months will now be eligible for additional education benefits. Specifically, veterans who served at least two qualifying periods of service — one that qualified them for the Montgomery GI Bill and a second that qualified them for the Post-9/11 GI Bill — may be eligible to receive

up to 12 months of additional GI Bill benefits (bringing them to a total of 48 months). This could impact as many as 1.04 million veterans and beneficiaries.

Of the 1.04 million veterans who may potentially be eligible for an additional 12 months of benefits, the VA will automatically adjudicate the claims for approximately 660,000 without any further action required on their part. For all remaining

multiple periods of service who chose the Post-9/11 GI Bill over the Montgomery GI Bill, the VA will reinstate the time the veteran had remaining at the time of his or her election, plus 90 days. For example, if a veteran chose to use the Post-9/11 GI Bill at a time when he or she had five years left to use the Montgomery GI Bill, the veteran would be given five years plus 90 days to use any additional Montgomery GI

BENEFITS.VA.GOV/GIBILL/RUDISILL.ASP

The screenshot shows the VA website's 'Education and Training' page. At the top, there's a navigation bar with the VA logo, 'U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs', and search/contact options. Below that, a main heading reads 'Education and Training'. A prominent banner titled 'Rudisill Decision Update' features a background image of the Supreme Court building. Below the banner, there's a section titled 'Impact of Rudisill Supreme Court Decision on Veterans' Education Benefits'. The text explains that veterans with at least two periods of service can now receive up to 48 months of total GI Bill benefits. A table compares 'BEFORE' and 'NOW' conditions for MGIB and PGIB eligibility. At the bottom, there's a 'SUBSCRIBE TO VA'S MONTHLY BENEFITS NEWSLETTER' form with fields for email and address.

veterans, the VA will reach out to directly to encourage them to file a claim.

As a part of this policy, the VA is also extending the expiration dates for using GI Bill benefits for eligible veterans. For each veteran with

Bill benefits. To receive an expiration date extension, applications must be submitted by Oct. 1, 2030.

To learn more about this change, including how to apply, visit benefits.va.gov/gibill/rudisill.asp. ■

in depth

MADISON BOWERS

PVA PUBLICATIONS FILE PHOTO

Service Dog Training Standards

The West Virginia University (WVU) Hearts of Gold program will play a key role in setting new industry standards for service dog training and support with the help of a more than \$590,000 award from the Wounded Warrior Service Dog Grant Program.

For nearly 20 years, the WVU Hearts of Gold program, a partnership between the WVU Davis College of Agriculture and Natural Resources and The Human-Animal Bond (humananimalbond.org), has given back to veterans who have sacrificed so much — transforming their lives by pairing them with specially trained service dogs.

With the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) working to expand access to service dogs as a therapeutic resource for veterans with disabilities, this research will be fundamental in setting guidelines for service dog training and support.

Giving Back

The award is part of a broader initiative that has secured nearly \$3 million in funding for the Hearts of Gold program since 2018, resulting in an expansion of staff, classes and the number of service dogs placed with veterans.

The program's mission is to provide WVU students with the rare opportunity to learn about, research and train service dogs specifically for veterans with mobility and psychiatric disabilities.

"The Wounded Warrior Service Dog Grant Program found significant variations in how different entities train dogs," says Matt Wilson, profes-



Paralyzed Veterans of America members like James Tipton, left, utilize trained service dogs to help with a variety of tasks.

sor of animal sciences and member of the Hearts of Gold staff. "Over the next few years, we will evaluate a list of more than 130 best practices for service dog training. Annually, all the entities involved will gather to share their findings and set industry-wide standards."

These standards, Wilson says, could ultimately pave the way for the VA to cover the cost of training and placing service dogs

for veterans nationwide.

"That's what's really exciting," he says. "We are a part of a group that will put in a mechanism whereby veterans can access service dogs as a therapy for their disability."



PVA PUBLICATIONS FILE PHOTO

Training standards could expand access to service dogs for veterans with disabilities.





A grant will help develop industry standards for service dog training.

Over the course of two years, Hearts of Gold dogs are trained by students, inmates at Federal Correctional Institution Morgantown in West Virginia, faculty and doctoral students with the WVU School of Medicine occupational therapy program and Hearts of Gold staff to assist with tasks personalized to their matched veterans.

“Hearts of Gold was established to give students in the Division of Animal and Nutritional Sciences program experience working with dogs, but also to expose students to what it is like to work with people with disabilities,” Wilson says. “The program is rooted in ‘unleashing the power of service.’ It is all about giving back to those who have taken the initiative to serve our country in the U.S. armed forces and, as a result of that, they have a need we can help to address.”

Lasting Benefits

For students like Thomas Sico, a senior animal and nutritional sciences major from New Jersey, the program has been a transformative experience.

“When I came to school, my original thought was to go to veterinary school. Now, after taking this lab, my future goal is to train dogs for a K-9 unit. This class totally altered my college experience,” Sico says. “This class helps you to find a love for helping people with dogs.”

The Hearts of Gold program primarily serves veterans within a 100-mile radius of Morgantown, providing these service dogs — typically valued at upward of \$25,000 — at no cost. Through hands-on coursework, students can make a difference in the lives of veterans while gaining real-world, practical experience for their futures.

“It definitely makes me feel like I am doing something good,” Sico says.

“I have veterans in my family, and I can appreciate efforts being made to help them.”

Wilson says it’s a project with lasting benefits for the veterans and the students.

“Students get into it because they see the dog, but the effects on them seeing how the program serves a vital community in our state is really important,” Wilson says. “Hopefully, it gives them a broader perspective on what they can do to have an impact on other people’s lives.”

Madison Bowers is a communications specialist in the Division for Land-Grant Engagement at West Virginia University. ■

What’s your favorite place for an accessible vacation?

TRAVEL

PN is planning an upcoming article about top accessible travel destinations, and we’d like your help. Briefly tell us about what places you like to visit and what makes them accessible. We may use that information in our upcoming article. Send your picks to Managing Editor Andy Nemann at andy@pvamaq.com.

Breaking The Travel Silo



TravelAbility is getting people out of their bubbles and thinking more about tourism accessibility.

ILLUSTRATION BY KERRY RANDOLPH © GETTY IMAGES/EYEEM MOBILE GMBH

by *Andy Nemann*

When it comes to travel, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) figuratively and literally opened a lot of doors for people with disabilities. However, 35 years later, many challenges remain, and a unique grassroots organization is working to help clear those hurdles.

Founded in 2019, TravelAbility is dedicated to educating the travel industry on how to provide accessible experiences that allow

people with disabilities to enjoy traveling just as much as everyone else. One of the biggest ways the organization does that is through its annual Emerging Markets Summit that brings together travel industry leaders, disability advocates, tourism associations and others to discuss and learn about accessible travel.

Last Nov. 13–15, more than 200 people, including representatives from Marriott hotels, Visit Tampa Bay, Google, AARP and



Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA), gathered at the Argonaut Hotel on San Francisco's famed Fisherman's Wharf for the fifth annual summit. TravelAbility

founder Jake Steinman believes bringing together so many different groups helps people break out of their individual "silos" to better understand and focus on the needs of travelers with disabilities.

"We're bringing people together, that's really what it is," Steinman says. "Everybody's in their own bubble, but they come here and everybody gets what everybody is doing and why they're doing it, and they're doing it for change."



COURTESY OF TRAVELABILITY

TravelAbility works to educate the travel industry about accessibility.



It's Not A Checklist

The summit helps people and groups break out of their “bubbles” and “silos” through more than 40 presentations and panel discussions and networking, as well as an expo featuring products and services.

ANDY NEWMANN

ACCESSIBLE STATEROOM FLEET SUMMARY

CLASS	SHIP	SUITE	BALCONY	OCEANVIEW	INTERIOR	TOTAL
ICON	ALL	4	35	4	7	50
OASIS	ALL	3	33	2	8	46
QUANTUM	ALL	2	12	8	12	34
FREEDOM	ALL	2	8	7	16	33
VOYAGER	ALL	2	8	7	10	27
RADIANCE	JEWEL, SERENADE	2	6	6	5	19
	RADIANCE, BRILLIANCE	2	6	2	5	15
VISION	ENCHANTMENT	2	4	7	6	19
	GRANDEUR, Rhapsody, VISION	2	4	4	4	14
		6	2	4	2	14

ANDY NEWMANN



Royal Caribbean's Ron Pettit provides an update on the cruise line's efforts to make their ships more accessible for people with disabilities.

Businesses such as Royal Caribbean cruise lines and Kampgrounds Of America (KOA) presented what they're doing to make their destinations more accessible. Travel association representatives from Oregon, Michigan, British Columbia and elsewhere discussed their approaches to accessibility. Attendees also heard from disability advocates about how to

make travel more accessible to different groups, including those who are blind, have autism or have spinal cord injury and disease (SCI/D).

TravelAbility ambassador and owner of Incredible Memories Travel Kristy Durso believes improving travel for those with disabilities is a bigger issue than most people realize since “everyone has a connection to disability.” An Army veteran and full-time wheelchair user with two autoimmune diseases, Durso says it's more than just following the ADA. It's about customer service and being a profitable business.

“I think the biggest thing is retraining everybody to stop thinking about accessibility as a checklist,” she says. “Instead, everyone needs to think about it as a conversation and meeting customers' needs.”

Understanding and meeting those needs was a key focus of a presentation from PVA senior advocacy attorney Danica Gonzalves, Esq. She joined Jesse Campbell, director of destination development and communications for Visit Fort Wayne (Ind.), to host a session titled Beyond The Finish Line: The Impact of Hosting an Adaptable Sports Event. The session tapped into PVA's experience with sporting events such as the National Veterans Wheelchair Games, which it co-hosts with the Department of Veterans Affairs, and Fort Wayne's knowledge in hosting adaptive sports events at Turnstone Center for Children and Adults with Disabilities, a fitness and aquatic center for children and adults with disabilities.

During Gonzalves' portion of the session, which drew a large number of state and city travel associations, she used a bit of juxtaposition to explain how the needs of travelers with disabilities should be considered. Detailing the tasks and hurdles needed for her as an able-bodied person to get to the summit, she then asked the attendees to think about how someone with a disability would do those same things. Gonzalves also believes people are “siloe” and not looking at “the entire picture of a travel experience.”

“The people that are here obviously want to do more. They're here to learn how to do more,” says Gonzalves, who also spoke at a



Matt Harrington, far right, and Ron Kuzon, right, of The Schoolhouse Hotel speak with TravelAbility founder Jake Steinman, center, and TravelAbility ambassador Kristy Durso, far left, about their expansion plans for their all-accessible hotel in White Sulphur Springs, W.V.

PHOTOS THIS PAGE BY ANDY NEMANN

session on what constitutes accommodations for hotels, attractions, restaurants and meetings. “Being here representing PVA, I can help these travel boards, help these entities do that goal of what more they can do to expand into accessibility.”

Sharing The Information

For the more than a dozen tourism authorities from across the country and Canada at the summit, it wasn’t only a chance to learn about the needs of travelers with disabilities. It also was a chance for some of them to talk about what their respective communities are already doing to make travel more accessible.

Known as “Olympic City USA,” Colorado Springs, Colo., is home to the United States Olympic and Paralympic Committee, which has helped to spur a “healthy and positive” sense of competition among area businesses and attractions to incorporate universal design, according to Visit Colorado Springs Communications Manager Sheridan Powell. Attending her second summit, Powell says the community is being motivated to do more and

learn from each other, which allowed her to come to the summit and pass that information on to others in her presentation, An Olympic Opportunity For Accessible Travel.

More than 200 people from the travel industry and disability organizations gathered for the TravelAbility Emerging Markets Summit last November.





“It’s not a secret sauce or a secret recipe,” she says. “You want to share that information widely so that all boats can rise.”

Additionally, representatives from The Schoolhouse Hotel, a fully accessible hotel in White Sulphur Springs, W.V., were among those from the many hotels and other businesses who attended the summit to gain more understanding about the needs of travelers with disabilities, while also passing on their unique experiences and knowledge.

The focus of the feature article *Class Act* in the February 2022 issue of *PN*, The Schoolhouse Hotel was a 110-year-old school before being turned into a boutique hotel, with each of its 30 rooms being custom-designed for people with disabilities. New owner Ron Kuzon has interesting plans for expansion, including adding 86 more rooms, creating an accessible distillery and allowing the property to become a center where assistive technology



ANDY EMANN

Wheelchairtravel.org founder John Morris, left, speaks with TravelAbility founder Jake Steinman on his experiences traveling to the 2024 Summer Olympic Games in Paris.

TravelAbility’s Emerging Markets Summit is designed to help those in the travel industry better understand the needs of travelers with different disabilities.

COURTESY OF TRAVELABILITY



could be tested. Acting chief operating officer Matt Harrington says the summit helped him understand that accessibility is a perspective, and “everyone has their own disability,” so there’s always more work to do.

“Our website used to say ‘100 percent accessible,’ but there’s no such thing,” Harrington says. “It’s a continuous improvement project, where you’re always looking at what you’re doing and how you can do it better. Accessibility is a living, growing thing, especially with new technology.”

The Breadcrumb Process

Helping people in the travel industry see that accessibility needs to be thought of in many ways and that it’s continually evolving is one of the summit’s main goals.

Steinman believes that besides the presentations, the biggest way the summit accomplishes that goal is through its networking. He says someone in charge of accessibility at a hotel chain may be “in a silo that nobody else touches,” but the summit helps break the person out of that mindset by meeting others in similar roles with similar experiences, while also meeting people with disabilities whom they may not have previously encountered.



Paralyzed Veterans of America senior advocacy attorney Danica Gonzalves, Esq., speaks about hosting accessible sports events.

“This creates empathy, and that changes the way people think about accessibility,” Steinman says. “When you change the way people think, you change the way they act, and that’s really the breadcrumb process that takes place here.”

All that effort to improve travel accessibility doesn’t end with the summit either. Steinman and his group have created the *Accessibility Playbook* to help tourism authorities, hotels and others develop and implement practical strategies to better welcome and accommodate people with disabilities. The more-than 65-page book covers a wide range of topics, including Digital Accessibility, The Visitor Experience and more. Steinman says there are more than 700 places around the world that have the playbook, which is also being used at the Rosen College of Hospitality Management in Orlando, Fla.



“We don’t just stay home. We’re not just the lowest income bracket,” Durso says. “We have hopes, dreams, likes and dislikes. We’re all the things that any other group is. And when you start looking at it in that way, eventually you begin to understand that you really can do this. This business really can be more accessible.”

For more information, visit travelability.net. ■

TravelAbility’s *Accessibility Playbook* is designed to help the travel industry create accessibility strategies and programs.



Playful

PANAMA
City Beach

From beaches and boardwalks to shopping and fine dining, there's plenty of accessible fun in Florida's panhandle.

by Barbara
& Jim Twardowski

While sitting on a pier

originally built in 1936, we sipped cocktails and watched the sunlight dance on the emerald-colored waters of the Gulf of Mexico.

No reservations are taken at Pineapple Willy's in Panama City Beach, Fla., in the Sunshine State's panhandle along the Gulf of Mexico. It's a casual restaurant where patrons eat at picnic tables, and a roll of paper towels is conveniently stationed beside the salt and pepper shakers. Peeling fresh-boiled shrimp is messy work and definitely worth the effort.

Pineapple Willy's is one of several restaurants listed in the accessibility section of

the Visit Panama City Beach guide, a helpful resource for visitors who have disabilities. The online guide is one component of the "Fun. For. All." initiative to ensure Panama City Beach is welcoming to people of all abilities.

In 2024, Panama City Beach received a Destination Verified Seal from Wheel the World, an inclusive online booking platform. Their teams visit partner destinations to evaluate accessibility features at local restaurants, attractions and hotels.

We drove to Panama City Beach in our wheelchair-accessible van, and Barbara used her power wheelchair to explore this popular



ILLUSTRATION BY KERRY RANDOLPH © GETTY IMAGES/ROBHAINER BARBALISS



JIM TWARDOWSKI



COURTESY OF VISIT PANAMA CITY BEACH

Florida getaway. Here are a few wheelchair-accessible attractions and restaurants to consider when planning your next vacation.

Beaches

Located in the northwest panhandle of Florida, Panama City Beach has 27 miles of beautiful beaches.

During the summer, the population of this coastal community swells from 18,000 to over

100,000. To avoid the crowds, we visited in the fall and stayed at a beachfront hotel to be sure we had multiple opportunities to admire the views. Beach access points 22, 24, 25, 27, 40, 41, 47, 56, 60, 66, 70, 73, 76A and 76B are “accessible to all,” according to the free Visit Panama City Beach visitors guide.

Access point 22 (Edward F. Hickey Jr. Park) was recently converted to meet Americans with Disabilities Act standards. This access

Pineapple Willy’s, left, and the M.B. Miller County Pier, above, in Panama City Beach, Fla., offer beautiful views of sunsets over the Gulf of Mexico.



point features disabled parking spots, an accessible ramp and 100-foot beach mat.

M.B. Miller County Pier

The wheelchair-accessible M.B. Miller County Pier stretches 1,500 feet over the clear green waters of the Gulf of Mexico.

You might spot a school of Spanish mackerel swimming by. A daily fishing license costs \$6, and you can rent a fishing rod on site. Spectators can stroll the pier for \$3.

A short walk or roll from the pier, a Mobi-Mat makes rolling a wheelchair or walker over the sand doable. To venture beyond the mat,



JIM TWARDOWSKI

Barbara Twardowski admires the view from the M.B. Miller County Pier.

rent a beach wheelchair from Beach Powered Mobility (beachpoweredmobility.com).

Conservation Park

We spent a tranquil morning rolling on a wheelchair-accessible raised boardwalk beneath the cypress domes at Panama City Beach Conservation Park. Educational signage describes the birds and plants you might see along the mile-plus long boardwalk.

JIM TWARDOWSKI



Barbara Twardowski explores Panama City Beach Conservation Park.

Encompassing over 2,900 acres, Conservation Park was created in cooperation with the City of Panama City Beach and the Florida Department of Environmental Protection for hikers, cyclists and nature lovers. The park has more than 24 miles of trails to explore. On the southeast corner of the park, you'll find parking, public restrooms and a drinking water station.

St. Andrews State Park

On a peninsula 3 miles east of Panama City Beach, St. Andrews State Park (floridastateparks.org/parks-and-trails/st-andrews-state-park) encompasses 1,200 acres and has more than 1.5 miles of beach on the Gulf of Mexico and Grand Lagoon. Admission is \$8 per vehicle for two to eight passengers. Improvements are



TWO PHOTOS BY JIM TWARDOWSKI

St. Andrews State Park, left, encompasses 1,200 acres and includes a pier, inset.

being made to the park, and some areas are closed. Check the website for updates.

Even from inside our van, we could easily see the magnificently preserved dunes. Those closest to the shore are covered with sea oats. Dunes situated more inland have rosemary, scrub oaks and sand pine.

Disabled parking spaces are located within the park. Raised boardwalks are wheelchair-accessible, and Mobi-Mats provide a path over the sand. Ask about the availability of beach wheelchairs at the ranger station. A wheelchair-accessible fishing pier provides an opportunity for people-watching and wildlife sightings.

A concession stand offers snacks, souvenirs and, most importantly, drinking water. Plan to spend several hours or even a day at the park, especially if you are a birder; the area is frequented by migrating birds and butterflies.

Shopping

With more than 120 stores, Pier Park (simon.com/mall/pier-park) is the place to shop.

The outdoor retail complex is wheelchair accessible and has nearly two dozen eateries. For those who aren't afraid of heights, purchase tickets to SkyWheel (skywheelpcb.com). The ride, located in the parking lot, stands nearly 20 stories high and is wheelchair-accessible. Hop inside an enclosed gondola, and you'll be rewarded with a wonderful beach view. The maximum weight per gondola is 1,300 pounds.

The recently opened 38,000-square-foot Duplin Winery (duplinwinery.com) conducts wine tastings from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday through Saturday. Guests sample 10 wines,

learn a bit about their history, can enjoy crackers and cheese dip and complete the session with a full glass for \$20. The winery is also a shopping destination. Customers will find a large assortment of gift items from wine stoppers and birdhouses to clothing and home decor. Time your visit to coincide with the live music performed on the patio daily.



Panama City Beach, Fla., was honored by Wheel the World in 2024 for its many accessible amenities.



TWO PHOTOS COURTESY OF VISIT PANAMA CITY BEACH



The Pour restaurant is a cozy spot for breakfast or lunch.

Dining

Panama City Beach offers a variety of wheelchair-friendly dining options.

Some establishments close or alter their operating hours during the offseason. Always call ahead to confirm they're open.

A cozy spot for breakfast or lunch is The Pour (thepourpcb.com). The nonprofit restaurant pours its resources into helping the community. The eclectic decor with a swing, velvet couches and intimate seating is an ideal place for an afternoon pick-me-up mocha or cheesecake brownie. The accessible entrance is in the back.

Thomas Donuts (thomasdonutandsnackshop.com), which has been in business more than 50 years, is across the street from the beach. A paved parking lot and ramp to patio dining is located on the side of the property. Patrons line up at an outside window to place their orders. The glazed doughnuts and smoked sausage kolaches are delicious.

Parlor Doughnuts (parlordoughnuts.com/shops/panama-city-beach-fl) serves the traditional treats with a twist. Their flaky, layered doughnuts come in a variety of sweet-tooth-loving choices such as French toast, strawberry shortcake and peanut butter cup.



Something about the fresh salt air requires a robust breakfast. Andy's Flour Power Café & Bakery (www.andysflourpower.com) serves breakfast all day Monday through Friday and brunch on the weekends. The extensive menu includes biscuits and gravy, three-egg omelets, French toast, a Belgian waffle, a vegetable frittata and more. The coffee is ground fresh. The lunch menu includes several salads, sandwiches and a daily soup.

Motorcycle enthusiasts will enjoy the bikes on display and rummaging through the gift shop while waiting for a table for lunch or dinner at The Wicked Wheel (thewickedwheel.com), which specializes in Southern dishes. Of course, we had to order their award-winning fried chicken, which is brined, hand-battered and deep-fried. There's a hefty list of lip-smacking accessories (side orders) ranging from collards and cheese grits to fried okra and honey skillet corn.

The beachfront Runaway Island (runawayislandpcb.com) provides up-close water views in a casual setting. We sat on the covered outdoor deck; most of the tables were bar height, which was not a problem for Barbara's elevating wheelchair. They serve lunch and dinner and frequently have live music. We happened to visit in the early afternoon and discovered their 12 for \$12 menu (available from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday-Friday). The blackened redfish served on Yukon Gold mashed potatoes was a tasty bargain. Jim ordered the fried shrimp and fish off the regular menu.

The Grand Marlin (pcb.thegrandmarlin.com) menu changes daily according to which fish is caught fresh. Try the New Orleans-style barbecue shrimp or a crab cake. For the ultimate Southern seafood meal, order the shrimp and grits. The meal is served by a professional staff in a tranquil atmosphere. Reservations are highly recommended.

Where To Stay

The SpringHill Suites by Marriott Panama City Beach Beachfront lobby is located on the hotel's fourth floor. The floor-to-ceiling windows provide jaw-dropping views of turquoise waters and sugar white sand. Beside the front desk is an open patio where guests can feel the breeze and smell the salt air while lounging.



Crab cakes are featured at The Grand Marlin.



Fried seafood is on the menu at Runaway Island.



SpringHill Suites by Marriott Panama City Beach Beachfront features, clockwise from top left, accessible rooms, a zero-entry pool, a fitness center and dining/bar area on the lobby level.

PHOTOS THIS PAGE BY JIM TWARDOWSKI



Our accessible king suite included a sleeper sofa, a television, a desk, a microwave, a mini fridge and a coffee/tea server. Open space under the bed would accommodate a Hoyer lift. We were delighted to have a balcony that was large enough for a motorized wheelchair. From our 10th floor perch, we could see the beach, the hotel's lazy river and the M.B. Miller County Pier. The spacious bathroom had a roll-in shower and a wall-mounted bench.

The 24-hour fitness center's equipment is arranged to take in views of palm trees and the sparkling Gulf of Mexico. The resort-style outdoor swimming pool with a lazy river can be accessed either by using the zero-entry or the

pool lift. Order a beverage and people-watch at the covered bar and grill that sits beside the pool. Several cabanas with large televisions are located at the far end of the pool.

Additional hotel features include:

- Self-parking in the onsite garage includes disabled spaces and an elevator. Cost is \$20 per day. Electric car charging is available for a fee.
- A complimentary hot breakfast buffet is served daily in the lobby.
- A small market on the lobby level sells snacks.
- The hotel provides stairs and a ramped entry to the beach.
- The Compass Lounge on the lobby level is a lively hangout for drinks.
- The M.B. Miller County Pier is less than half a mile from the hotel.

For assistance and information to plan your trip, contact Visit Panama City Beach (visitpanamacitybeach.com). ■



A Pleasant Stay

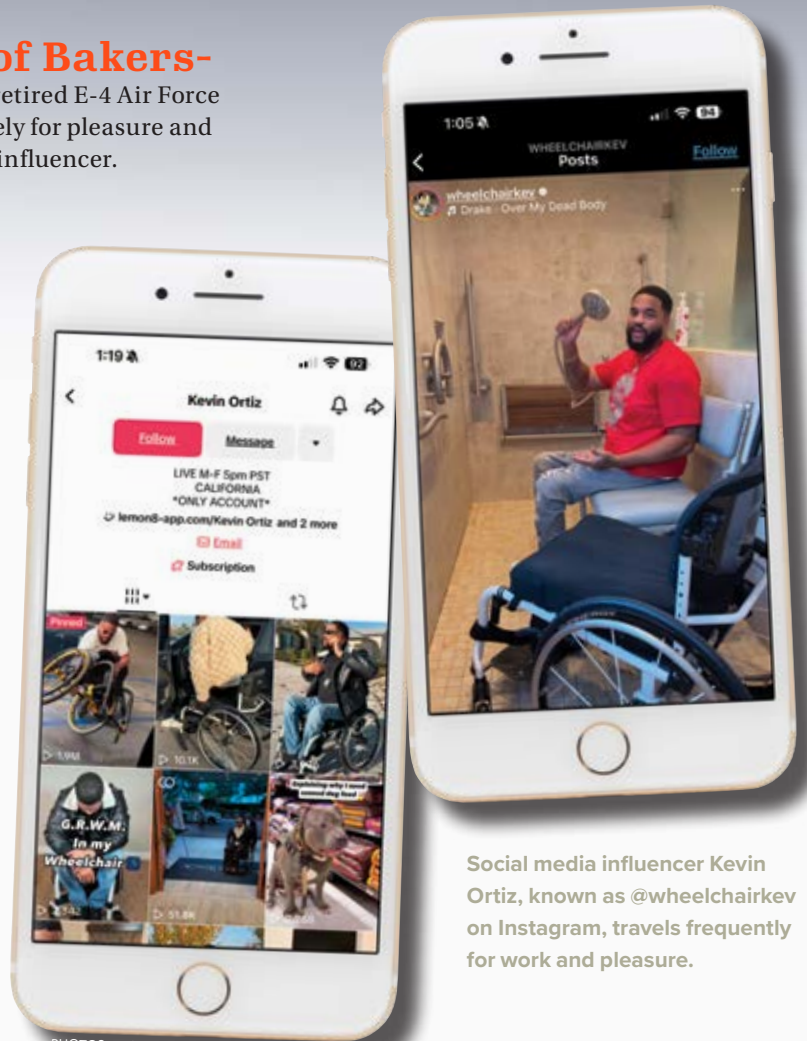
Booking an accessible hotel room can be fraught with difficulties, but preparation and communication can mitigate some common issues.

Kevin Ortiz of Bakers-field, Calif., a paralyzed retired E-4 Air Force veteran, travels extensively for pleasure and his job as a social media influencer.

by Geri Koepfel

Having a level T10-11 complete spinal cord injury (SCI) makes it essential for him to have a wheelchair-accessible hotel room with a roll-in shower. Ortiz, a Paralyzed Veterans of America California Chapter member, is savvy about booking rooms that meet his needs. But even as seasoned as he is, he runs into snags.

For instance, Ortiz arrived slightly early for a 3 p.m. check-in when traveling to Richmond, Va., for his grandfather's funeral. He waited in the car and went into the hotel at 3:08 p.m. to find out the



Social media influencer Kevin Ortiz, known as @wheelchairkev on Instagram, travels frequently for work and pleasure.



desk clerk didn't have the accessible room he'd booked.

"She said they literally just gave away my room to someone in a wedding party," he recalls.

Other wheelchair users have similar tales of mixups, rooms that fall through or rooms that aren't accessible for their specific needs. Like many, Ortiz has had to wash up in sinks more than once.

"How often do I have a hiccup when it comes to the room?" he asks. "Probably 35, maybe 40 percent of the time."

Being an influencer with over 350,000 followers on Instagram (@wheelchairkev), Ortiz has gotten reimbursements and drawn attention to the plight of wheelchair users by posting videos on TikTok, Instagram, Facebook and YouTube.

Even casual social media users can post reviews to try to get refunds, but it's better to avoid disruptions in the first place. It doesn't matter whether you're going on a weekend road trip or a two-week cruise — it's frustrating if you can't do basics like get into bed or take a shower.

Online booking services and travel agencies tailored to travelers with disabilities can

help people avoid unpleasant surprises. Still, those who prefer to plan their own trips can prepare using tips from experts.

Make A Personal Connection

The main way to a smoother stay is to research the room in advance and book well ahead of time, if possible.

Barbara Twardowski of Mandeville, La., who regularly contributes to *PN* with her husband, Jim, says not to assume you'll get what you need if a room is labeled online as Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) compliant.

"You've got to read the fine print," she says.

Not all ADA rooms are alike throughout a chain or within the same building. Some rooms are geared for hearing accessibility only, Twardowski says.

Kristy Lacroix, a certified accessible travel specialist and owner of Wheelchair Escapes (wheelchairescapes.com), says she calls or



Kristy Lacroix

COURTESY OF WHEELCHAIRSCAPES.COM



WHEELCHAIRESCAPES.COM

Wheelchair Escapes helps travelers with disabilities plan accessible trips.

Stress the importance of having not just an accessible room but one that works for you, Lacroix says. Also, ask for housekeeping rather than speaking with the front desk clerks. Speak with staff who can give you precise details — for example, bed height, door width, shower bench, etc. — and answer specific questions.

“If you’re really nice, they will sometimes take pictures and send them to you,” Lacroix says. “They will take time to measure the bed height or the space under the bed. That space under the bed is very important, and many hotels are going to platform beds, and many people traveling with a [Hoyer] lift will not be able to go there.”

Also, experts suggest following up with the hotel two to three weeks and about two

emails the hotel directly — not the 800 number that goes to a call center — and makes a personal connection. She traveled for 29 years with her husband, Jerry, a disabled veteran who died in 2023.

COURTESY OF WHEEL THE WORLD



PVA PUBLICATIONS FILE PHOTO



COURTESY OF WHEEL THE WORLD

Prior to booking an accessible hotel room, ask hotel staff to measure the bed height and space under the bed if a Hoyer lift is needed. Staff will sometimes take pictures and send them to you.

days in advance to confirm you'll get the room you booked.

Be Aware Of Bathroom Setups

In addition to bed heights, travel experts say showers present many challenges. Check the bathroom carefully when you enter the room.

Twardowski says she needs a roll-in shower, but they're hard to find. ADA regulations require only one roll-in shower in hotels with 100 or fewer rooms.

Even if the shower is accessible in theory, it may not be in practice.

"Maybe 50 percent of the time or more, there's no bench at all," Twardowski says.

If that happens, she calls house-keeping to find out if they have a portable chair, but many times, it's flimsy and dangerous.

Joy Burns of Atlanta, who uses a manual wheelchair when traveling, suggests asking for a pool or patio chair if there's no usable shower bench because they're larger and heavier.

"I've known several people who have broken a leg because they transferred to a bench at a hotel that was not safe," says Burns, the community and alliances coordinator for Wheel the

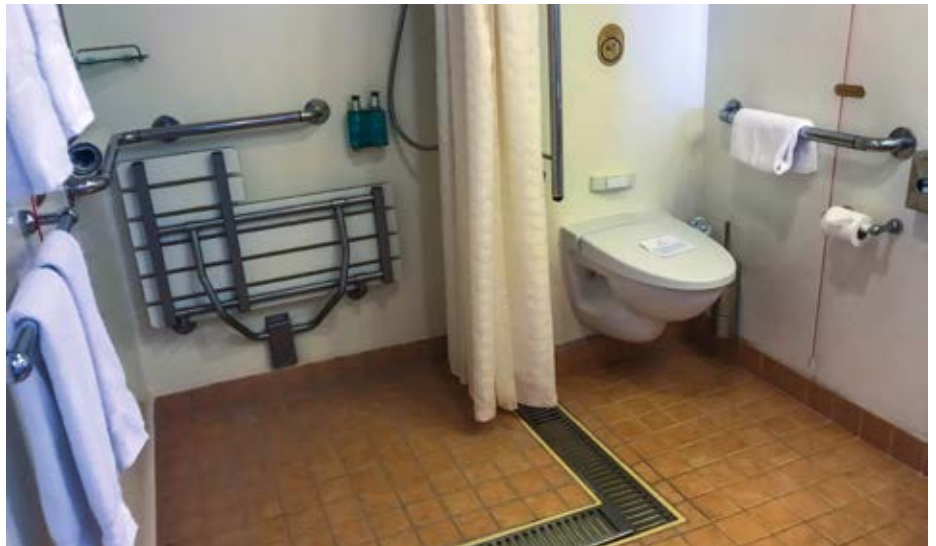
World (wheeltheworld.com), a San Francisco-based online travel company for travelers with disabilities and their families.

She adds that rooms with roll-in showers and a bench don't always work.

Sometimes, the bench is nowhere near the showerhead, Burns notes, and the controls aren't within reach. Or, there isn't enough turning radius in the shower.

Another issue: "The mirror over the sink is too high, so you can't see yourself to shave," she says. "You only see your forehead. It's insane the

Accessible bathrooms in hotel rooms come with a variety of setups, and some may not work for your specific disability.



COURTESY OF KRISTY LACROIX



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BRITTANY MARTIN



BRITTANY MARTIN

amount of hotels this happens in ... what works for one person will not work for another person, and that's one of the big problems regarding what an accessible hotel room should look like."

Lacroix says grab bars that are too high are another problem.

"If the grab bars are above your shoulder, what leverage are you going to get on that to lift up and scoot over?" she says. "You're not, because it's too high."

Some people travel with slider or transfer boards, a lightweight seat raiser, and/or portable shower chairs that they carry in a boogie

board bag, among other items. Online forums recommend a range of products.

Show, Don't Tell

Whether it's a big chain or a boutique hotel, domestic or international property, or a cruise line, experts say snafus can and do occur even if you carefully research and book the room you need.

When that happens, Lacroix says, ask for a manager and building engineer to come and see the room so you can show them the problem rather than trying to explain on the phone.

Burns also suggests working with the building engineer to find a solution.

"I can't tell you how many times we've had engineering come in and take the box springs off or take the frame off the bed," she says.

If nothing else works, experts advise asking for a rollaway bed.

COURTESY OF CHRIS BEUSCHLEIN



COURTESY OF PRINCESS CRUISES



Experts say, in general, newer cruise ships tend to be more accessible.



An accessible cabin on board Silversea Cruises' Silver Shadow includes a parlor.

Lacroix says sometimes the room has too much furniture to allow wheelchair access, so she's stacked it up so her husband could get through. She's also had the bathroom door removed, a sadly common problem that other experts also mentioned.

"The door to get from the room to the bathroom wasn't even big enough for a wheelchair to get through," Lacroix says. "How can you call that an accessible room?"

One strategy to avoid being stuck in an unusable room is to book at a newer and/or larger property, Twardowski says. Newer buildings and cruise ships tend to be more accessible, and the more rooms a property has, the more ADA rooms are required.

She adds that all-suite hotels are another option because the rooms are bigger, easier to navigate and often have a sleeper sofa.

More Tips

Here are a few more tips to ensure you get an accessible room that meets your needs, plus what to do if you don't.

- Call or email the hotel directly and ask housekeeping for details about an ADA room.
- Ask how many ADA rooms are available specifically for wheelchair users; consider booking at larger hotels so there are spare rooms in case of a mix-up.

- Follow up directly with the hotel two to three weeks and a couple of days before the stay to ensure you get the room you booked.
- Inspect the room upon arrival so you can remedy any issues or get a different room as soon as possible.
- When going on a cruise, check online to see if the cruise line has an access department. Sometimes, you can find the ship and cabin number online and see pictures of it.
- The general rule is the newer the building or ship, the better the accessibility will be.
- Use social media. Even if you're not an influencer, posting a negative review can trigger a call or email from a manager willing to issue a refund or at least prompt the hotel to improve.
- If a room worked well, post a positive review so others have the information and the hotel knows what it did right.

Finally, according to Burns, don't let the potential for setbacks deter you from traveling — the adventure is worth it.

"Be flexible," she says. "Things may not go according to plan, but the risk is worth the reward." ■

around the HOUSE

Your Great Outdoors

Spring is just around the corner, and you may have cabin fever after being cooped up by inclement weather. Even short interactions with nature can contribute to overall well-being.

Thoughtful planning now will help you enjoy your outdoor spaces sooner and more fully, whether you have an urban balcony or an acre of land.

Paying attention to accessibility details, even when determining how to display and care for newly potted plants, will ensure a pleasurable and safe environment.



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Careful planning for outdoor spaces can enhance enjoyment of your home.

Extend Indoor Living

Extending an indoor living space outside, with a minimal change in floor height, can make your home feel larger.

Doors must be wide enough to maneuver through with minimal to zero thresholds. The outdoor extension may be a porch, patio, balcony or deck with minimal change in floor height from the inside.

Porches & Balconies

A porch is covered by a roof, offering weather protection at exterior doors, which is important when the interior and exterior floor levels are the same.

A deep porch adjacent to your kitchen can become an outdoor dining room. Screening the porch allows for natural ventilation and listening

to nature while keeping insects out. Locate framing elements so seated views are unobstructed.

Adding a balcony gains a small outdoor living space and a greater connection with nature than a window, yet maintains the home's footprint. Full-length doors allow more daylight inside than a window. Design



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Accessible outdoor entertaining space extends the usable size of your home and can provide enjoyment year-round.



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A deep porch adjacent to your kitchen can become an outdoor dining room.



An accessible wrap-around deck allows multiple vantage points of the outdoors. Views while seated are not blocked by the handrail.

handrails for safety and to preserve views from a seated position. Even a balcony can allow a bit of gardening.

Potted plants can add visual interest or contribute to your culinary pursuits. Place pots at stable, reachable heights. Self-watering pots, water wicks and water-storing crystals added to the soil will slow down watering frequency when no garden hose is available.

Decks & Patios

Decks and patios are roofless porches, with decks allowing for ramped transitions to grade level.

Edges must be detailed with handrails, curbs or benches, depending on the height above grade. Deck materials are typically durable, weather-resistant pressure-treated lumber or a composite material. Narrow gap placement between boards allows water to drain,

but is still tight enough to maintain a smooth floor surface.

Patios are usually composed of hard, slip-resistant materials such as brick, stone or concrete. Patios should be gently sloped to foster water runoff. Joints must be narrow and shallow to ensure your chair wheels won't catch.

Pathways

Once you're at ground level, accessible pathways become the circulation spine linking various outdoor activity areas.

Paths should be made of firm, stable and slip-resistant materials. Pathways should be wide enough for your wheelchair, with even wider occasional turn-around spaces. Slopes must be manageable, and in order to traverse smoothly, transitions between different materials should be treated like a door threshold, with minimal change in height.

Water Elements

Water elements can be placed near a seating area or as a point of interest along a path and range from fountains to waterfalls and koi ponds.



Potted plants elevated to a reachable height allow balcony gardening.



Pathways are the circulation spine between outdoor activity areas and must be wide enough for a wheelchair and composed of firm, stable and slip-resistant materials. Perennials planted along the path provide seasonal color and interest.

The sound of flowing water is often used to mask unpleasant noises and creates a sense of tranquility. These elements provide a valuable habitat for birds, bees and other wildlife and can have a cooling affect nearby.

Design considerations include an accessible water source and pump

access and a waterproof power source within reach.

Outdoor Entertaining

How do you envision using your yard?

Do you like to sit with your morning coffee and hear nothing but bird chatter? Or is your home the



Fire pits are popular gathering spaces that can help people relax. Plan maneuvering space, accessible controls, stable flooring and evening lighting for safety.

go-to place for large family cookouts? Maybe you need a garden bed to grow fresh lettuce and herbs. By purposely creating accessible ways to enjoy the outdoors, daily life is enriched both for you and your guests.

Cooking is popular outdoor entertainment, with grills, smokers, pizza ovens and fire pits.

Allow plenty of maneuvering space around these hot zones, factoring in gathering space for guests. Choose products that have an easy-to-open, hinged lid. The lid may still require an assistive device to protect you from burns. Cooking surfaces and gas controls should be within reach. Plan counter space directly adjacent for easy transfer of hot food. Outdoor sinks should have knee space underneath to allow a forward approach.

Additionally, fire pits and fireplaces warm not just the temperature but also the ambiance. Plan ample maneuvering space, as people love to



The soothing sound of flowing water promotes relaxation and calmness.



Position outdoor cooking appliances within your reach range. The outdoor sink would be improved by adding knee space below.

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gather around a fire. Design the fire pit height to be within your reach and to eliminate uncomfortable bending. A projected hearth may limit your reach.

Is your fuel gas or wood? Gas requires less preparation and cleanup, but propane storage or an in-ground gas line must be considered, along with accessible controls. Wood will require accessible storage and ash removal.

Gardening

Gardening can improve both physical and mental health.

Plant cultivation covers a wide spectrum, from colorful, potted annuals, hydroponic growing kits and raised borders filled with eye-catching perennials to full-fledged, traditional vegetable gardens.

The key for an accessible gardener is to bring the soil within reach. Pots and plant boxes can be window- and wall-mounted or raised on pedestals, and hanging baskets should be hung within reach range.

For a more ample harvest, a larger planting area can still be within reach by constructing table-top-style raised planting beds that allow knee space



The outdoor environment can please all the senses by including fragrances from plants such as lavender.

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Side-approach raised beds allow for deeper soil. Beds should have firm and stable circulation paths that are wide enough to maneuver around. Size bed dimensions based on your reach ability.



Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) has published *Accessible Home Design: Architectural Solutions for the Wheelchair User* as a detailed resource for homeowners, architects and builders. It's available for purchase by calling 800-424-8200, ext. 7645, or emailing pvaarchitecture@pva.org.

The cost is \$9.99 for PVA members or \$14.99 for non-members. You can also purchase the book for \$14.99 on Amazon: amazon.com/s?me=A1K1VT0E51SAX3&marketplaceID=ATVPDKIKX0DER or by using the QR code.



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A table-top style plant box allows a full front-approach and is built at a height designed to your wheelchair specifications.

underneath. Keep in mind the need for an accessible water source and tool storage.

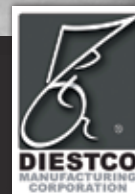
Further Considerations

- Consider illumination levels for safety and evening enjoyment.
- Design ways to mitigate extreme climate conditions to benefit those who have difficulty regulating body temperature.
- Consult an architect with accessible design expertise to determine the best use of space to accomplish your outdoor activity goals.

For more information on this or any architecture issue concerning accessibility, call 202-416-7645 or email pvaarchitecture@pva.org.

Rachel Y. Krishnan, AIA, is project manager of architecture services with the PVA Architecture Program. ■

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Appeal Options

When a claim for Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) benefits is filed, there are primarily four possible results: the claim/contention can be denied; granted; confirmed and continued at the same rate/percentage; or proposed to be reduced/severed.

Regardless of the outcome, claimants are entitled to appeal any decision they're not satisfied with. These "appeal rights" are explained and provided on VA Form 20-0998, "Your Right to Seek Review of Our Decision."

There are three appeal review options. Here is a brief look at each option and which is the best "lane" to choose for a favorable decision.

Three Options

The Veterans Appeals Improvement and Modernization Act of 2017 became law Aug. 23, 2017 (Public Law 115-55). It's also known as the Appeals Modernization Act (AMA).

Within the AMA, claimants are provided three options for review:

- 1) Higher-Level Review
- 2) Supplemental Claim
- 3) Appeal to the Board of Veterans' Appeals (BVA)

Each lane has its own pros and cons, but they also have specific requirements. Understanding them will help the claimant choose the best option and provide the best chance of a favorable decision.

Higher-Level Review

The Higher-Level Review is often referred to as a "de novo review," meaning "from the beginning" or "new look." Here, the VA will review the entire claim and all of the evidence used to decide the rating decision.

The key factor is that no new evidence can be submitted to support or argue the claim. During the review, the VA can potentially find a difference of opinion, or Clear and Unmistakable Error or identify a duty to assist error.

The claimant or his or her Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) national service officer (NSO) can also request an informal hearing conference to discuss the argument with the decision review officer.

If an error is found, the VA will then return the claim to the regional office for correction or request additional evidence. For a Higher-Level Review, VA Form 20-0996 must be submitted within one year of notification of the rating decision.

Furthermore, an individual cannot file a request for Higher-Level Review of a Higher-Level Review.

Supplemental Claim

For the Supplemental Claim, "new and relevant" evidence must be obtained and included with the claim.

New evidence is information that the VA hasn't considered in making any prior decision, and relevant evidence is any information that proves or disproves something applicable to the claim.

New and relevant evidence can be one of many things, such as a new diagnosis, treatment, medical report/records, doctor/medical opinion, buddy or lay statement or newly added presumptive conditions. As long as the evidence satisfies "new and relevant," the claimant will be able to file a Supplemental Claim. This is the preferred appeal in most cases.

Unlike a Higher-Level Review, a Supplemental Claim can be filed at any time to argue a denied condition, but it does impact the effective date. If you file a Supplemental Claim within a



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year of the rating decision, the original effective date (date of claim) should generally be upheld.

An individual may also file a Supplemental Claim for previously denied claims outside of one year, but the effective date will generally be the date the VA received the Supplemental Claim. To file a Supplemental Claim, VA Form 20-0995 should be submitted with the required new and relevant evidence.

Board Of Veterans' Appeals

Lastly, the claimant may appeal to the BVA.

In most cases, this would be suggested as a last option to argue the claim, mostly because it takes the longest amount of time for a decision. With an appeal to BVA, you have three options:

- 1) Direct Review
- 2) Evidence Submission
- 3) Hearing with a BVA law judge

These options should be discussed with your NSO to determine the best one.

The option chosen will generally determine how long the appeal will take to be decided. Like a Higher-Level Review, the claimant must submit the appeal within one year of the notification of rating decision, and the appeal must be submitted on VA Form 10182.

Which One Is Best?

With three appeal options, is one better than the others? The simple answer is yes, but each claim and veteran varies in so many ways.

To determine which appeal option is best, it's highly recommended that a veteran discuss

appeals with an NSO and allow the NSO to submit all paperwork.

Filing the "wrong" appeal, or rather not utilizing the best choice, can not only directly impact the NSO's ability to advocate, but many times, it affects the timeliness and likelihood of receiving a favorable decision.

The NSO will prepare and include what's referred to as a Submittal with every claim. This is a detailed letter/argument clarifying the claim's intent, pointing out favorable evidence and applying these facts to VA laws and regulations.

Your NSO also may suggest utilizing the informal hearing conference. A general rule of thumb is to avoid appealing to BVA, as these can

be very lengthy, but in certain cases they are necessary.

It's prudent to discuss the VA's decision and each appeal option with an NSO prior to submitting anything to the VA. For help with an appeal or any benefits questions, contact your local PVA NSO from the roster on page 52.

Information for this article was gathered from public sources such as va.gov and Title 38 of the *Code of Federal Regulations* (benefits.va.gov/warms/topic-title38.asp).

An Army veteran, Charlie Tocci has worked with PVA for more than 10 years and is a senior benefits advocate in Syracuse, N.Y. ■



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NVWG Registration

It's time to register for this year's National Veterans Wheelchair Games (NVWG).

Registration is now open for the Games, which run from July 17–22 in Minneapolis and are co-presented by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and Paralyzed Veterans of America.

Registration began in February and runs until April 5. Those interested can register at the NVWG website, wheelchairgames.org/athletes/registration.

The NVWG, which started in 1981, is open to all U.S. veterans with spinal cord injuries, amputations, multiple sclerosis or other central neurological conditions who require

a wheelchair for athletic competition. More than 20 sports will be offered.

S'NS Junior Athlete

Know of a junior wheelchair athlete you think should be recognized?

Nominations are open for the *SPORTS 'N SPOKES* (S'NS) Junior Athlete of the Year award, which will be handed out in September. S'NS is the sister publication of *PN*.

Established in 1986, the Junior Athlete of the Year award recognizes outstanding wheelchair athletes ages 21 and under who demonstrate excellence across multiple dimensions. Award recipients combine excep-



CHRISTOPHER DIVIRGILIO

Luke Bowman from Michigan was the 2024 *SPORTS 'N SPOKES* Junior Athlete of the Year award winner.

The award celebrates young athletes who demonstrate dedication to athletic excellence, display outstanding character and sportsmanship and make positive contributions to their communities.

Nominations opened in mid-February and close on June 15. Athletes must be age 21 or younger prior to June 15 of the calendar year.

Luke Bowman from Michigan was the 2024 Junior Athlete of the Year award recipient.

To nominate a junior athlete, visit sportsnspokes.com/nomination-form.

tional athletic achievement with exemplary sportsmanship and meaningful community impact.

PVA Bowling

David Nelson Jr., Chris Murphy, Rich Goebel and

KERRY RANDOLPH



Registration for the 2025 National Veterans Wheelchair Games in Minneapolis is open and runs through April 5.

John St. Andria each won individual titles, while Shawn Beam and Eddy Hutchens teamed up for a doubles championship at the eighth annual Paralyzed Veterans of America Mid-Atlantic Invitational Bowling Tournament in September 2024 in Short Pump, Va.

Nelson won the Scratch Division over George Holscher, and Brooks Martin and had the division's highest-scoring game. Murphy took the A Division over William Ingersoll and St. Andria and had that division's highest-scoring game,

while Goebel won the B Division over Debra Freed and Mark Hartney. Gary Poole recorded the B Division's highest-scoring game.

St. Andria took the Up & Down Tournament over Brad Hughes and Goebel.

Holscher (Scratch Division), Ingersoll (A Division) and Goebel (B Division) each recorded their division's highest set.

Beam and Hutchens won the doubles title over Jimmy May and Mike Marcheskie and Rich Goebel and Frank Goebel. ■



Bowlers competed at the eighth annual Paralyzed Veterans of America Mid-Atlantic Invitational Bowling Tournament in September 2024 in Short Pump, Va.

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*For full indications for use, visit: www.eksobionics.com/indications-for-use/

February 2025

Bayou Gulf States Boccia Tournament	February 1-2, 2025	Gulfport, MS
Central Florida Air Gun Tournament	February 8-9, 2025	Orlando, FL
PVA Wheelchair Rugby Invitational	February 14-16, 2025	Louisville, KY
Florida Gulf Coast Bowling Tournament	February 19-21, 2025	Tampa, FL
USA Boccia Regional Tournament - hosted by PVA	February 28-March 3, 2025	Dade City, FL

March 2025

Intro to Paracycling Camp - Stop 1	March 6-7, 2025	Phoenix, AZ
Tampa Pickleball Clinic	March 7, 2025	Tampa, FL
USA Boccia Regional Tournament - hosted by PVA	March 7-9, 2025	San Antonio, TX
Mid-Atlantic Billiards Tournament	March 14-16, 2025	Midlothian, VA
PVA Wheelchair Basketball Camp & Invitational	March 19-23, 2025	Colorado Springs, CO
Wisconsin Air Gun Tournament	March 21-22, 2025	Racine, WI
Bayou Brawl Bass Tournament	March 28-30, 2025	Westwego, LA
Wheelchair Football Camp	March 28-30, 2025	Tampa, FL

April 2025

Citrus Slam Bass Fishing Tournament	April 4-6, 2025	Kissimmee, FL
USA Boccia Regional Tournament - hosted by PVA	TBD	San Diego, CA
Pocahontas Off-Road Spring Camp & Off-Road Classic	April 9-13, 2025	Chesterfield, VA
Mid-America Billiards Tournament	April 10-12, 2025	Oklahoma City, OK
Bluegrass Bash Bass Tournament	April 11-13, 2025	Kuttawa, KY

SCHEDULE 2025

April 2025 | Continued

National Air Gun Camp	April 14-18, 2025	Centreville, VA
Salt Lake City Pickleball Clinic	April 24-25, 2025	Salt Lake City, UT
Texas Bowling Tournament	April 30-May 2, 2025	San Antonio, TX

May 2025

Puerto Rico Boccia Tournament (Year-end event)	May 2-4, 2025	San Juan, PR
Land of Lincoln Bass Tournament	May 2-4, 2025	Whittington, IL
Intro to Paracycling Camp - Stop 2	May 8-9, 2025	Salt Lake City, UT
Texas Trapshoot Tournament	May 9-11, 2025	San Antonio, TX
Intro to Paracycling Camp - Stop 3	May 21-22, 2025	Milwaukee, WI
Vaughan Trapshoot Tournament	May 23-25, 2025	Elburn, IL
Texas Air Gun Tournament	May 31-June 1, 2025	San Antonio, TX

June 2025

Wheelchair Basketball Camp	June 6-8, 2025	Arlington, TX
Capital Clash Bass Tournament (Year-end event)	June 13-15, 2025	La Plata, MD
Colonial Pickleball Tournament	June 14-15, 2025	Perry Point, MD
Iowa Trapshoot Tournament (Year-end event)	June 20-22, 2025	Cedar Rapids, IA
Grand Teton Outdoor Experience	June 23-27, 2025	Jackson Hole, WY
PVA Bowling National Championship - Great Plains	June 27-29, 2025	Omaha, NE

July 2025

National Veterans Wheelchair Games	July 17-22, 2025	Minneapolis, MN
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pva service office roster

For assistance, please refer to the directory below to identify the PVA Service Office nearest you. Also, you may contact the PVA Veterans Benefits Department located at our headquarters in Washington, D.C., at 866-734-0857.

ALABAMA

VARO, Montgomery
334-213-3433

ARIZONA

VARO, Phoenix
602-627-3311

ARKANSAS

VARO, North Little Rock
501-370-3757

CALIFORNIA (Hawaii, Manila)

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

VARO, Los Angeles
310-235-7796

VAMC, Mather
916-843-2602

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

VARO, Rancho Cordova
916-364-6791

VAMC, San Diego
858-552-7519

VARO, San Diego
619-400-5320

Veterans Career Program

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

COLORADO (Wyoming)

VARO, Denver
303-914-5590

DELAWARE

VARO, Wilmington
302-993-7252

DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

PVA National Office
202-872-1300

FLORIDA

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

VAMC, Miami
305-575-7180

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

VARO, St. Petersburg
727-319-7470

VAMC, Tampa
813-978-5841

GEORGIA

VARO, Atlanta
404-929-5333

VAMC, Augusta
706-823-2219

Veterans Career Program

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

ILLINOIS

VARO, Chicago
312-980-4278

VAMC, Hines
708-202-5623

INDIANA

VARO, Indianapolis
317-916-3626

IOWA

VARO, Des Moines
515-323-7544

KANSAS

VAMROC, Wichita
316-688-6875

KENTUCKY

VARO, Louisville
502-566-4430 / 4431

LOUISIANA

VARO, New Orleans
504-619-4380

MAINE (Vermont, New Hampshire)

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

MARYLAND

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

MASSACHUSETTS (Connecticut, Rhode Island)

VARO, Boston
617-303-1395

VAMC, Brockton
774-826-2219

Veterans Career Program

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

MICHIGAN

VARO, Detroit
313-471-3996

MINNESOTA

VAMC, Minneapolis
612-629-7022

VARO, St. Paul
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Veterans Career Program

Minneapolis
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MISSISSIPPI (Louisiana)

VARO, Jackson
601-364-7188

MISSOURI

VAMC, Kansas City
816-922-2882

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VARO, St. Louis
314-253-4480

NEBRASKA

VARO, Lincoln
402-420-4017

NEVADA (Utah)

VARO, Las Vegas
702-791-9000, ext. 14458

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775-321-4789

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VARO, San Juan
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VARO, Columbia
803-647-2432

SOUTH DAKOTA (North Dakota)

VAMROC, Sioux Falls
605-333-6801

TENNESSEE

VAMC, Memphis
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VARO, Nashville
615-695-6383

TEXAS

VAMC, Dallas
214-857-0105

VAMC, Houston
713-794-7993

VARO, Houston
713-383-2727

VAMC, San Antonio
210-617-5300, ext. 16819

VARO, Waco
254-299-9944

Veterans Career Program

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202-714-4777
(covering CO, KS, NM, MO, OK, TX, UT)

VIRGINIA

VAMC, Hampton
757-722-9961, ext. 2943

VAMC, Richmond
804-675-5316

VARO, Roanoke
540-597-1707

Veterans Career Program

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202-769-7387
(covering DC, IN, KY, MD, OH, TN, VA, WV)

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VARO, Seattle
206-220-6149

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Sherri Shea



ALL PHOTOS PVA PUBLICATIONS FILE PHOTOS

Happy Retirement!

PVA Publications Operations Manager Sherri Shea retires this month after 46-plus years with Paralyzed Veterans of America. Take a look back at some photos of her at work and at play as we wish her well on her next chapter.

VOLUNTEERS NEEDED for a Research Study for People with Spinal Cord Injury (SCI)

This study will test a health promotion program for people aging with SCI.

You may be eligible if you:

- ✚ Have had a traumatic spinal cord injury (SCI)
- ✚ Are at least 45 years of age **OR** have had your injury for at least 15 years
- ✚ Have access to a smartphone, tablet or computer with internet connection
- ✚ Are able to communicate in an online group in English
- ✚ Live in the U.S.

The 8-week *Living Longer and Stronger with SCI* program (LLS for short) is a group health promotion program offered online in Zoom.



Eligible participants will be randomized (like flipping a coin) to either the LLS program or a control group.

All participants will complete online questionnaires on three occasions. Participants will receive a small payment for their time.

CONTACT US to find out if you are eligible!

by phone: **713-797-7767**

by email: TIRR.LLSstudy@uth.tmc.edu

OR

Scan the QR code to provide your contact information



The study is funded by the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research (NIDILRR). The study is conducted by TIRR-Memorial Hermann's Spinal Cord Injury and Disability Research Center in Houston, Texas in collaboration with investigators affiliated with the University of Texas Houston Health Science Center, and the University of Montana.



IRB NUMBER: HSC-MH-23-0383
IRB APPROVAL DATE: 02/27/2024



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