BVA Happenings – March 6, 2026

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Around BVA

BVA Presents Legislative Priorities to Congress on Capitol Hill

Photo 1 Caption: BVA National Executive Director Lea Rowe, in the company of other VSO representatives, outlines BVA's legislative priorities for the upcoming fiscal year.

Photo 2 Caption: Left to right following Senate/House joint hearing: BVA Executive Director Lea Rowe, Program Director Domonique Lawless (standing), and National President Wade Davis.

Photo 3 Caption: Left to right outside Senate Hearing Room: Testimony attendees Michaun Harrison (Administrative Coordinator), Domonique Lawless, Lea Rowe, Wade Davis, and Duayne Driscoll (National Service Director).



BVA National Executive Director Lea Rowe presented the Association's annual oral testimony this week before a joint session of the House and Senate Committees on Veterans Affairs. The opportunity to testify yearly, recently conducted in panel format, stems from the BVA Congressional charter approved and granted nearly 68 years ago (1958). Lea was joined at the witness table by Student Veterans of America, Jewish War Veterans, Fleet Reserve Association, Minority Veterans of America, National Association of County Veterans Service Officers, and Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America.





Lea addressed VA staffing shortages and pay disparities, final reconciliation of the Veterans Accessibility Advisory Committee Act, expansion of access to and protection of guide dogs, realistic assessments of the needs of blind and low vision veterans received from caregivers, and provision of adequate funding for the Vision Research Program administered by the Congressionally Directed Medical Research Program and focused directly on visual dysfunction associated with service-connected eye injuries.

BVA's printed testimony, a more detailed document, was submitted for the Congressional Record. View Lea's oral testimony and/or read the full written testimony. She is introduced to begin her remarks at 1:50:10 (one hour, 50 minutes, ten seconds) into the video recording.

View Lea Rowe's Oral Testimony

Read BVA's Written Testimony Submitted for the Congressional Record

Africa Mission Accomplished! Baskis, Bedwell, Hale Reach Kilimanjaro Summit

Photo Caption: Steve Baskis, Aaron Hale, and Lonnie Bedwell atop Mount Kilimanjaro.



BVA members Steve Baskis, Lonnie Bedwell, and Aaron Hale all qualify as the universe's cream of the crop when it comes to motivational speaking and high adventure sports such as mountain climbing, skiing, whitewater kayaking, and marathon running. Their brute toughness and stamina were on full display the past three weeks as they achieved their climb of Mount Kilimanjaro, the highest peak on the African continent. They reached the summit on March 2. A

Although the ascent occurred nearly 11 years after it was originally planned, it has now successfully happened and firmly in the history books!

For Steve and Lonnie, they knew in advance what lay in store for them prior to the climb, having already conquered the peak previously. For Aaron, the reason for his decision to experience what for him was the unknown with Steve and Lonnie is something only he could begin to explain—and most assuredly he will do just that in the weeks and months ahead. For now, his followers have a brief message he constructed only the day before yesterday on his LinkedIn page. A portion of what he expressed is this:

> I'm still trying to wrap my head around it...
> We stood on top of Kilimanjaro.
> 215 miles from the coast... and somehow we were standing on the roof of Africa.
> You'd think what would be echoing in my head is the altitude. The miles. The moment I questioned every life decision that led me to hiking uphill voluntarily.
> But it's not. It's gratitude.
> Mountains don't get climbed alone.

Our guides were unreal. Placing our feet when the trail turned to mud… then rock… then snow. When everything narrowed down to one careful step at a time, they were right there.

My teammates? Absolute grinders. There were moments when tanks were empty. Nobody pretended it was easy. We just didn't let each other quit.

The prayers. The messages. The encouragement sent across time zones. You felt that out there.

Every person who donated, shared, believed — you were part of this. Truly. Thank you!

"Be My Eyes" Expands Presence to Assist Railway Travelers

Following a successful pilot program last August, **Be My Eyes** has expanded live visual support to 50 train stations across the United States, including major hubs such as New York City, Washington, DC, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Denver. The expansion means that free, on-demand visual assistance will be available from trained Amtrak agents in those locations, offering a professional, premium service beyond the standard volunteer support available via the **Be My Eyes** mobile app.

The Amtrak profile is located on the **Be My Eyes** Service Directory, which provides links to download the app. A list of the stations that have adopted the service is also available.

Be My Eyes seeks to empower people through human connection, making the universe more accessible for the 340 million people worldwide who are blind or have low vision. By connecting them to sighted volunteers and companies, through AI and video, **Be My Eyes** provides the impetus for the blind and visually impaired to tackle the inaccessible parts of everyday life, whether at home or at work – all for free.

Be My Eyes Service Directory

Train Stations Now Offering My Eyes Visual Support

NJ's Bestwork Industries Boasts Long History of Engaging, Empowering, Employing

Bestwork Industries for the Blind, located in Cherry Hill, New Jersey, is seeking to hire veterans who are blind or visually impaired. Founded in 1981 by Jim Varsaci, a World War II veteran and BVA member who lost his vision in battle,

Bestwork is now the largest employer for people who are blind in the state of New Jersey.

Full-time and part-time employment opportunities are available in the following areas: kitting, packaging, document scanning and imaging, and sewing. Bestwork is a competitive, integrated environment, offering industry wages and opportunities for upward mobility.

To learn more about our employment opportunities and how to apply, contact Shannon Brown at sbrown@bestworkindustries.org or 856-424-2510, extension 213. Come and be part of a great team. More information is available on the organization's website accessible by clicking the button below.

Bestwork Industries

Autonomous Shuttle Transportation Introduced in Latest "Visions of BVA" Episode

"Autonomous Transit and Accessibility: A Conversation with Gregory Crandell of HOLON US Inc." is the subject of the latest episode of BVA's monthly podcast **Visions of BVA**. The program went live on March 1.

In this insightful episode of **Visions of BVA**, host Steve Baskis sits with Gregory Crandell, General Manager of HOLON US Inc., to discuss the future of autonomous shuttle transportation and its potential implications for blind and visually impaired riders.

Gregory shares his background in the automotive industry and explains how HOLON's autonomous vehicle is being developed to support first-mile/last-mile transportation—helping people travel from neighborhoods and smaller roads to larger transit routes and transportation hubs. The conversation explores how the vehicle is being designed with accessibility in mind, including input from focus groups involving blind, wheelchair, and hearing-impaired riders.

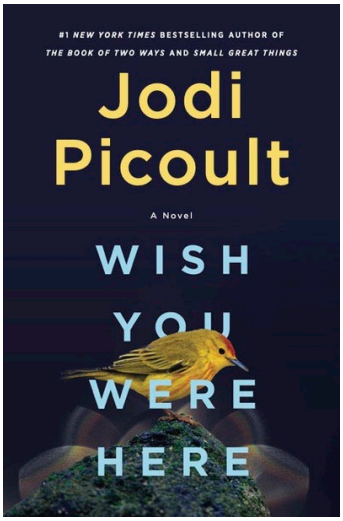
Steve and Gregory also discuss the importance of consistent audio communication, safety redundancy, and how autonomous transit could expand mobility options for veterans and others who rely on public transportation. This episode offers a look at how emerging transportation technology may help improve independence, confidence, and access for the blind and visually impaired community.

Visions of BVA is a deep dive into the inspiring stores of the organization and its members, accounts of resilience, and the achievements of blind and low vision veterans. Each

episode features interviews, discussions on life-changing technology, and a glimpse into the BVA community. The episodes are all available via Apple Podcasts, Spotify, and YouTube.

Listeners and subscribers of **Visions of BVA** are welcome and encouraged to leave their feedback and share their thoughts with Steve Baskis, sbaskis@bva.org, on any aspect of this episode or any others he produces.

Read "Wish You Were Here" and Join Next Book Club Interest Group Session



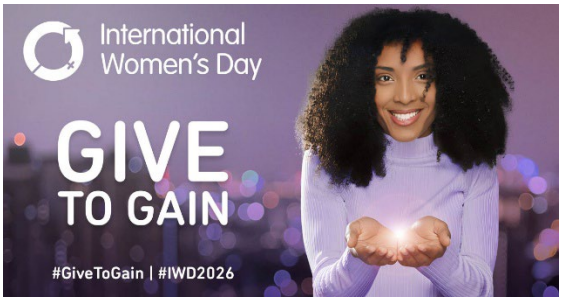
At its last meeting two weeks ago, the BVA Book Club Interest Group selected **Wish You Were Here** by Jodi Picoult to read during the month of March. The narrated version is read by Marin Ireland. The book can be accessed using the National Library Service's Talking Books Braille and Audio Download (BARD) Identifier DB 105742. Reading time is 11 hours and 50 minutes.

Diana finds an engagement ring in her boyfriend Finn's underwear drawer. Will Finn finally propose to her, or will he propose to someone else?

Join the discussion, which will include trivia questions from **Wish You Were Here**, on Wednesday, March 25. Who will leave the session with bragging rights?

All BVA members are invited and encouraged to participate in the Book Club. Although reading the selected book is strongly recommended for maximum participation, it is not an absolute requirement for joining the session.

Recognizing International Women's Day



Continuing a global tradition that highlights and honors women's achievements across every field—science, politics, sports, business, the arts, and the military—International Women's Day, March 8, falls on a Sunday this year. The roots of International Women's Day can be traced back to 1911, when women in more than a hundred countries worldwide began demanding better working conditions, voting rights, and equal pay.

International Women's Day received official recognition from the United Nations in 1975. The theme for 2026 is **Give to Gain**, emphasizing the power of reciprocity and support.

"When people, organizations, and communities give generously, opportunities and support for women increase," the IWD website states. "Giving is not a subtraction, it's intentional multiplication, and when women thrive, we all rise."

Whether through donations, knowledge, resources, infrastructure, visibility, advocacy, education, training, mentoring, or time, contributing to women's advancement helps create a more supportive and interconnected world.

BVA salutes the women veterans who have contributed not only to the uptick in numbers of women BVA members, but who have also assumed leadership roles nationally and within the regional groups during the past 30 years, beginning with Elizabeth "Liz" Carr of the New York Regional Group. Liz served as National Treasurer from 1991-93, National Secretary from 1993-95, National Vice President from 1995-97, and National President from 1997-99. Scores of others have followed in Liz's footsteps.

Looking Ahead to K-9 Veterans Day Next Friday



National K-9 Veterans Day is celebrated next Friday, March 13. On this day, K-9 breeders and handlers honor the service of their furry companions. K-9s serve vital roles in military units and law enforcement. They become embedded in border patrol work, customs, airports, the Coast Guard, the FBI, the police, and even the Secret Service. More important to BVA members, perhaps, especially those who have had assistance of a guide dog, the day also recognizes other service dogs that help people with disabilities and support animals for those with mental health issues.

Service dogs often risk their health and lives to accomplish their missions. It is only appropriate that their efforts are celebrated at least once a year.

Although K-9 Veterans Day has historical roots in the distant past, it was Joseph White, a Vietnam War veteran from Jacksonville, Florida, who founded K-9 Veterans Day as a passion project in the United States. White was a dog handler who saw, firsthand, how valiantly K-9s served in the conflict and was rightly disturbed by the euthanasia (now abolished) of working dogs at the end of their military service.

To help raise awareness and honor the sacrifices of military working dogs, White came up with the idea of a day to annually commemorate them. That was in 1987. March 13 was chosen because it is also the official birthday of the United States Army K9 Corps.

Amazingly, the Greeks and Romans used the earliest military working dogs, favoring the monstrous Cane Corso. The Corso served as a guard dog due to its fearsome appearance. The Persians utilized leaner, sleeker breeds like the Saluki — the ancestor of the Greyhound — for hunting wild game.

Mongolians had canine sentries in their armies. These massive dogs were ancestors of the modern-day Tibetan Mastiff. Legend has it that Genghis Khan led 50,000 of his war hounds to Western Europe, where they devoured the enemy in an unstoppable march.

A wealth of additional information about K-9 Veterans Day – its history and how the day can be observed - is available.

K-9 Veterans Day

Retire Early Saturday Night, Spring Forward Sunday Morning



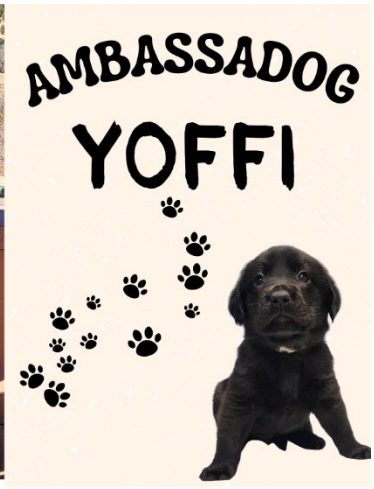
Just four months after Daylight Saving Time ended in early November, the second Sunday in March has arrived. It is already time to spring forward at 2:00am on March 8. Despite recent debate and proposed legislation over ending Daylight Saving Time permanently—or moving to the opposite extreme of retaining it permanently, residents of every state in the country except Arizona and Hawaii will set their clocks ahead one hour.

While not conclusive, health studies have pointed to physical and mental health risks as the body's natural day-to-night rhythms are disrupted. A few national chains, including Grubhub, Burger King, Clean Juice, Denny's, and Hat Creek Burger Company are helping customers spring forward with special discounts and freebies, some on Sunday only but others throughout next week.

Ambassadog Scoop Series Courtesy of Waymo

Introducing March Ambassadog Yoffi





I hail from Colorado, am known by the name Yoffi, and guide BVA member Dan—also referred to by me as my dad. I have bowlfuls of information to share throughout the month of March so I thought I would first provide a few tidbits about myself. I am an adorable black Labrador Retriever, and my name in Hebrew is Beauty. They were obviously very smart when they named me! I enjoy tug toys, hiking, kayaking, and running in the snow. I even assist Dad when he is emptying the garbage pail.

My favorite mission by far is my recent appointment as a BVA Ambassadog. I am honored to join this elite pack of navigation heroes. I'll return on Friday of each week in March to bring you something new!

Ways to Give

Renewing BVA Visionary Monthly Giving Challenge

BVA is built on the motto "Blinded Veterans Helping Blinded Veterans" through an engaged membership. Many of our programs demonstrate the power of camaraderie and peer-inspired support. Those who have benefited from our services often inquire about ways to give back and pay it forward to support their peer blinded veterans.

While it is certainly not mandatory for our members to contribute financially, becoming a BVA Visionary (monthly giver) demonstrates a unified membership. Our monthly giving challenge is to acquire a hundred new monthly givers by June 30. If you have the means to do so, consider joining the BVA monthly giving challenge to support our mission. No amount is too small! To learn more, please visit BVA.org to set up your monthly gift, or email mbuonodagrossa@bva.org.

Monthly Giving Challenge

Donate

VA Insider

"SQUARES" Web Application Provides Needed Veteran Eligibility Info

The Veteran Status Query and Response Exchange System (SQUARES) is a VA web application that provides VA employees and external organizations such as homeless service community partners, law enforcement partners (police departments, sheriff departments, courts, and jails), and local, state, and federal agencies with reliable, detailed information about veteran eligibility for services.

Users submit identity attributes for homeless individuals (name, date of birth, Social Security number, gender) and SQUARES will return information regarding the veteran's status and eligibility for healthcare and a list of specific services such as veteran's verification, homeless programs, suicide prevention, and legal services.

SQUARES was deployed to production in March 2018. Use the button below to access a video overview of how SQUARES is making a major impact within the veteran community.

SQUARES Promotional Video

VA to Honor Vietnam Veterans at Wall in DC Ceremony

Photo Caption: Vietnam Veterans Memorial, site of special VA ceremony honoring Vietnam era veterans on March 29, National Vietnam War Veterans Day.



Secretary of Veterans Affairs Doug Collins has announced VA's first-ever Vietnam Veterans Day Ceremony on Sunday, March 29, at 10:00am at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in the Nation's Capital. The public is invited to attend but especially the Nation's Veterans and most specifically those who served during the Vietnam era.

Although no information is yet available about a possible livestream of the event, **BVA Happenings** will keep abreast of any additional publicity that may include an opportunity to view and/or listen to the proceedings online. Such webcasts are sometimes announced only a few days before an event.

CHAMPVA Offers Critical Assistance to Veterans' Beneficiaries



VA's Civilian Health and Medical Program, known by the acronym CHAMPVA, is a health care benefits plan for veterans' beneficiaries (spouse, surviving spouse, and under age 18 dependents or those over 18 years of age and in school) who meet certain criteria.

CHAMPVA shares the cost of health care services and supplies such as:

- Ambulatory surgery
- Durable medical equipment
- Family planning/maternity
- Inpatient/outpatient services, mental health services, preventative, specialist and primary care visits, pharmacy, skilled nursing care, and organ transplants.

Generally, no referrals or authorizations are needed prior to care, the only exceptions being dental services and bone marrow transplants.

To be eligible for CHAMPVA, one of the following must be true:

- Spouse or dependent child of a veteran who has been rated permanently and totally disabled from a service-connected disability.
- Surviving spouse or dependent child of a veteran who died from a service-connected disability.
- Surviving spouse or dependent child of a veteran who was, at the time of their death, rated permanently and totally disabled from a service-connected disability.

Veterans' family members who qualify for TRICARE are not eligible for CHAMPVA.

Additional information and resources about CHAMPVA benefits, how to apply for benefits, supporting documents needed for an application, what happens after submitting an application, filing a claim if the provider does not do so, updating other health insurance information after enrolling, and how to contact VA with additional questions are all provided via a click of the button below.

Comprehensive CHAMPVA Resources

Next Week's Events

Adaptive Sports and Activities Interest Group

The link above provides direct access to the meeting.

Date and Time: March 10 (Tuesday), 7:00pm Eastern Time

Meeting ID: 894 8328 4992, Passcode: 1945

The session will address upcoming VA national events for which BVA members are able to apply and participate.

VetTech and Educational Series

The link above provides direct access to the meeting.

Date and Time: March 11 (Wednesday), 3:00pm Eastern Time

Meeting ID: 873 9159 8202, Passcode: 1958

The session will address a topic relevant to assistive technology for the blind and visually impaired. The specifics of the session will be shared in next Tuesday's reminder.