



Paralyzed Veterans of America

Mountain States Chapter

ELEVATIONS

(because none of our 5 states are below 2,800 feet)

Mountain States Chapter Newsletter

Jan-Feb 2025

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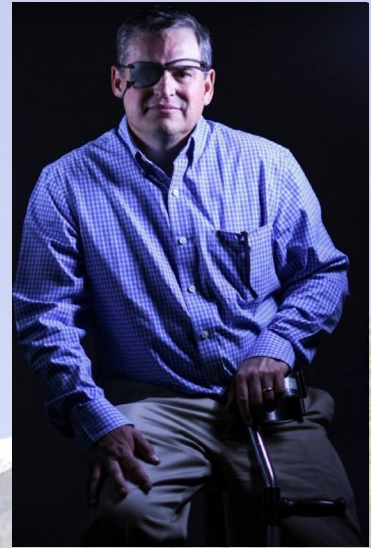
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From the President

Eric Allen

eric@mscpva.org



Over the past year, I've had the honor of meeting many of you as I traveled across the five-state region.

The camaraderie and shared experiences among us have been profoundly eye-opening. Each member has a unique story about their journey through illness or injury, yet so many of our paths intersect and parallel one another. Today, I'd like to share my journey with the Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) and multiple sclerosis (MS) with you. I'm confident that parts of my story will resonate with many of you.

Like many veterans I've met, I had no idea that I was eligible for VA benefits for decades. I thought I didn't need them—I had what I believed to be great insurance through my job. And honestly, I assumed VA services were reserved for war heroes or those with catastrophic injuries. My perspective changed when I contracted tuberculosis while stationed in Germany during Operation Desert Shield/Desert Storm. When the private sector refused to treat my MS after learning about my tuberculosis, I was forced to turn to the VA as my last hope.

The journey wasn't easy. It took ten months to treat the tuberculosis and restart MS treatment. During that time, my condition worsened. I went from walking to using a wheelchair, lost vital bodily functions—including my ability to swallow—and suffered new lesions on my brain, spinal cord, and eyes. At my lowest point, even basic math became impossible. I felt hopeless. But amid the challenges, I discovered that the VA hospital was filled with dedicated, compassionate people who were there to help.

My first interaction with the PVA came when a service officer visited me in the hospital. At the time, I was angry and resistant. I wanted a cure, not advice or activities. I didn't engage with the PVA again for three years, though I kept receiving their magazine, *Paraplegia News*. While bedridden, I decided to flip through it one day to find out how to cancel it. That's when I saw a familiar face: Alan Jones, my former company commander, featured in an article about his recovery after hitting an IED in Iraq. Although our injuries were vastly different, the emotional struggles he described mirrored my own. Inspired, I kept the article by my bedside and made a note to reach out to him someday.

Years passed, and I finally began listening to my care team and taking steps to repair both my mind and body. I started focusing on small, manageable goals and learned to appreciate the progress I made each day, no matter how incremental. Before I could reconnect with Alan, he stepped down as the chapter president. But fate had another plan. I received a call from the new chapter president, and his voice was strikingly familiar—it was Izzy Abbass, my former squad leader.

Izzy encouraged me to get involved with the Mountain States Chapter. At first, I doubted what I could contribute. I was still bedridden much of the time, struggling with poor vision, a non-functioning bladder, bowel issues, and constant pain. But I listened in on board meetings and realized something powerful: every one of us, as paralyzed veterans, faces challenges—physical, emotional, and mental. Yet, by working together, we can support one another and navigate these obstacles far better than we ever could alone.

Over the next five years, I moved from board member to secretary, vice president, and now president. It's been a tremendous learning experience. The PVA is a 70-year-old, \$100 million nonprofit organization chartered by Congress, deeply embedded in the nation's largest healthcare system. But at its core, it's a community of 15,000 paralyzed veterans dedicated to making the world a better place for those who will inevitably follow us.



Eric, Alan and Izzy
Three Presidents
(and three infantrymen)

**So, I ask you—
are you ready to
step up?**

Thank You



During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, Comcast introduced our chapter to an innovative initiative called Lift Zones. This program was designed to partner with thousands of nonprofit organizations and municipal entities nationwide to provide robust WiFi solutions, powered by Comcast Business.

Comcast identified the MSCPVA office as an ideal location for a Lift Zone, particularly given our strong connection to the Veteran community and our proximity to several public schools in the area.

We also identified two key groups that would greatly benefit from the Lift Zone initiative: the VA's Veteran Readiness and Employment (VR&E) program, which helps Veterans transition to meaningful careers, and Salute Colorado, a program offering advanced transition strategies for Veterans. Both organizations have made excellent use of the enhanced connectivity and resources provided by the Lift Zone.

With Comcast's support, our training room has become a hub for career development, hosting one-on-one career advice sessions through the VA's VR&E program and successful classes for small groups. Salute Colorado has also conducted multiple cohorts of its impactful Valor Bridge program, often described as a "mini-MBA."

Recently, Comcast expanded its support with a donation of 10 laptops, which will be used in our offices and programs to further assist the Veteran community.

Thank you, Comcast, for your dedication to empowering Veterans and strengthening our community!



Join Us for the Reeve Summit in Denver!



The Mountain States Chapter of the Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) is excited to announce the upcoming **Reeve Summit 2025**, hosted by the Christopher & Dana Reeve Foundation. This impactful event will take place from **March 10 to 12** at the Sheraton Denver Downtown Hotel in Denver, Colorado.

The Summit brings together individuals impacted by paralysis—including veterans, caregivers, family members, policymakers, and community leaders—to connect, learn, and inspire action for meaningful change. We hope you will join us for this amazing event and we have secured 20 spots for chapter members.

Why Attend?

The Reeve Summit offers unique opportunities to:

- Hear from **keynote speakers** who are leaders in paralysis research and advocacy.
- Participate in **breakout sessions** covering topics such as disability representation, mental health, inclusive healthcare, and more.
- Network with advocates, changemakers, and community members from across the country.
- Visit the **exhibitor hall** showcasing the latest technologies and services designed for the paralysis community.

Event Details:

- **Dates:** March 10–12, 2025
- **Location:** Sheraton Denver Downtown Hotel, Denver, CO
- **Registration:** [Reeve Summit 2025 Registration](#)

Hotel Accommodations:

The Mountain States Chapter has also reserved covering the cost for a block of rooms at the **Hyatt Regency Aurora-Denver Conference Center** near Colfax in Aurora for the nights of **March 10 and 11**. This convenient location is just a short distance from the summit venue. Members requiring **ADA-accessible rooms** are encouraged to contact the hotel directly to reserve accommodations.

- **Hotel Contact Information:**
 - Hyatt Regency Aurora-Denver Conference Center
 - Phone: **(303) 365-1234**

Rooms are available on a **first-come, first-served basis**, so contact the Chapter early!

Accessibility:

The Reeve Foundation is committed to making the summit fully accessible, with features such as ASL interpretation, live captioning, and more. If additional accommodations are required, please notify the chapter in advance.

Register and Inform Us of Your Attendance:

To attend the Reeve Summit 2025, please contact the chapter first – we have 20 reduced cost registrations and then you will be asked to sign up directly through the event website:

[Reeve Summit 2025 Registration](#)

Visit the chapter's website or contact us directly for more information. Info@mscpva.org.

Don't Miss Out!

We encourage all members to join us at this impactful event. The Reeve Summit is a unique opportunity to engage with the paralysis community, gain valuable insights, and drive change.

If you have any questions about registration, accommodations, or the chapter meeting, please contact us directly.



Rachel Ploeger
MSCPVA Treasurer

**We look forward to
seeing you there!**

Mountain States Chapter Meeting:

In conjunction with the summit, the Mountain States Chapter will hold a **chapter meeting** in one of the hotel conference rooms on either **March 10 or 11**. Meeting details will be announced soon.



Legislative Updates

Senator Elizabeth Dole 21st Century Veterans Healthcare and Benefits

Improvement Act: On January 2, the President signed the Senator Elizabeth Dole 21st

Century Veterans Healthcare and Benefits Improvement Act (S. 141). This legislation addresses some of the biggest legislative priorities for PVA, like eliminating the cap on the amount the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) can pay for care in the home; increasing access to home and community-based services, like Veteran Directed Care; and strengthening supports for caregivers.

Other PVA-endorsed provisions in the bill allow veterans' survivors to retain their eligibility for education benefits and create a pilot program for the VA to furnish assisted living services for certain veterans in rural areas. PVA and our advocates worked tirelessly over the past few years to get these critical, life-changing provisions across the finish line. We look forward to working with the VA on implementation.

VETS Safe Travel Act: On January 4,

the President signed an amended version of the VETS Safe Travel Act (H.R. 7365). This bipartisan legislation, introduced by Rep.

Paul Gosar (R-AZ) and Sen. Todd Young (R-IN), provides free access to TSA Pre✓® for certain eligible veterans who otherwise meet the requirements of the program. Prior

to passage in the House, the bill was amended to limit eligibility to veterans with service-connected disabilities. In order to be eligible, the veteran must meet all of the requirements for TSA Pre✓® and be service

connected for limb loss, paralysis, or permanent blindness and as a result use a wheelchair, prosthetic limb, or other assistive device to aid with mobility. This bill was a 2024 PVA policy priority.

DOT Final Rule on Air Travel: On

December 16, 2024, the Department of Transportation (DOT) released a final rule on ensuring safe accommodations for wheelchair users in air travel. The final rule resulted, in part, from PVA's February 2022 DOT petition to initiate rulemaking, as well as follow-up letters on the topic. The new requirements, many of which go into effect in January 2025, will dramatically improve the air travel experience for people with disabilities. These changes represent the culmination of a multi-year effort spearheaded by PVA to improve the safety and dignity of wheelchair users in air travel. Thank you to everyone who shared their air travel stories, filed complaints, and commented on the proposed rule.

Legislation from Around the Chapter

Legislation Pertinent to Veterans with Disabilities:

- **S.B. 108: Veteran Access to State Parks**
 - This bill initiates a one-year pilot program granting limited free access to state parks for veterans holding an Interagency Military-Lifetime Pass and residing in the state.
- **H.B. 210: Disabled Veterans Parking Amendments**
 - Sponsored by Representative Ashlee Matthews and Senator Wayne Harper, this legislation allows individuals with a disabled veteran license plate or Purple Heart license plate to park in accessible parking spaces without displaying an additional placard, simplifying access for disabled veterans.
- **H.B. 46: Veterans and Military Affairs Commission Amendments**
 - This bill extends the sunset date of the Veterans and Military Affairs Commission to 2030, ensuring the continued support and advocacy for veterans' issues within the state legislature.



Utah

2024 Election Property Tax

Constitutional Amendments

During the 2023 Legislative Session, HJR-5 and HJR-6 were passed. The constitutional amendments proposed by these resolutions were submitted for their approval or rejection at the next general election in November 2024.

- **HJR-5** proposed an amendment to the New Mexico Constitution to increase the Veteran's property tax exemption for honorably discharged members of the armed forces and their widows and widowers from \$4,000 to \$10,000. The amount after 2024 will then be adjusted for inflation.
- **HJR-6** proposed an amendment to the New Mexico Constitution to extend the current property tax exemption for 100% disabled veterans and their widows and widowers to veterans with less than 100% disability and their widows and widowers, basing the amount of the exemption on a Veteran's federal disability rating as determined by federal law.



New Mexico

Currently, the New Mexico Taxation and Revenue Department is waiting for final documentation from the Secretary of State's office indicating the outcome of the proposed constitutional amendments.

Some of you may not be aware, but Laura Gibson has left her role as the Executive Director of the Chapter. We wish her all the best in her future endeavors and thank her for her dedication and contributions. With her departure, we are now searching for a new Executive Director to build on the incredible momentum our Chapter has achieved recently. Ideally, we hope to find a candidate who is a veteran and, even better, someone who is already a member of our Chapter.

If you are interested in this role or know someone who would be an excellent candidate, we strongly encourage you to apply or share this opportunity with them.

Position Title: Executive Director, Mountain States Chapter, Paralyzed Veterans of America

Location: Colorado, Montana, New Mexico, Utah or Wyoming

Position Summary:

The Executive Director serves as the chief executive officer of the Mountain States Chapter of PVA, responsible for leading the organization in achieving its mission of advocating for and supporting veterans with spinal cord injuries and related disabilities. This includes overseeing daily operations, fundraising, advocacy, financial management, and program development while fostering a culture of collaboration, inclusivity, and service. The Chapter has established excellent relations with the Eastern Colorado VA, specifically the Spinal Cord Injuries and Disorders clinic where many of our members receive their care. Selected candidate will be required to occasionally travel to National events and to some event located throughout the chapter. Position will also require a regular presence at the VA Hospital.

Key Responsibilities:

Leadership & Strategy

1. Develop and execute strategic plans in alignment with the mission and goals of the PVA chapter.
2. Act as the primary spokesperson for the chapter, representing its interests to members, stakeholders, and the community.
3. Foster relationships with local, state, and national organizations to enhance advocacy efforts and visibility.
4. Build relationships within the business community across the geographic expanse of the chapter which may include events and general chapter operations.

Board Relations

1. Work closely with the board of directors to ensure alignment on goals and strategies.
2. Provide regular updates on chapter activities, financial health, and strategic initiatives.

Fundraising & Development

1. Develop and implement fundraising strategies, including events, grants, and donor relations.
2. Cultivate relationships with donors, sponsors, and community partners to secure financial support both for chapter operations and events throughout the 5 State reach of the Chapter.

Operations Management

1. Oversee day-to-day operations, ensuring efficient management of programs, staff, and volunteers including supervising a small staff of 2-3 individuals and cultivate culture of training and growth for employees.
2. Monitor program effectiveness, ensuring alignment with the chapter's mission and objectives both at the chapter level and how it relates to the PVA National organization.
3. Maintain compliance with all legal and regulatory requirements including fundraising operations and human resources.
4. Provide reporting to the National PVA office on requested items including volunteer hours, finances and activities.

Financial Oversight

1. Prepare and manage the annual budget in coordination with the board of directors.
2. Oversee financial reporting and ensure sound fiscal management of the Chapter.
3. Oversee employee compensation and benefits.

Communications/Marketing

1. Ensure web presence and social media efforts are regularly updated with current information and efforts.
2. Coordinate with PVA National's efforts on key initiatives including legislation and accessibility.
3. Ensure the Chapter produces a bi-monthly (every other month) newsletter to be sent to all members and supporters.

Qualifications:

1. Bachelor's degree in nonprofit management, business administration, public administration, or a related field (master's preferred).
2. Minimum of 5 years of leadership experience in nonprofit management, preferably within veterans' services or disability advocacy.
3. Strong understanding of the challenges faced by veterans with spinal cord injuries or related disabilities.
4. Proven experience in fundraising, grant writing, and financial management.
5. Excellent communication and interpersonal skills.
6. Ability to build relationships with stakeholders, partners, and the veteran community.

Compensation & Benefits:

1. Salary range: \$60k-75k per year, commensurate with experience. Bonuses dependent upon meeting success metrics.
2. Benefits include [health insurance, PTO, retirement plans, etc.].

Application Instructions: Interested candidates should submit the following:

1. A cover letter detailing their experience and vision for the role.
2. A resume highlighting relevant achievements. With Three professional references.

Applications accepted through February 14, 2025.

Getting off the pavement!

Eric Allen, MSCPVA President

Recently, I attended an outdoor event with many wheelchair users. While waiting for the event to begin, I noticed that everyone in wheelchairs stopped where the pavement ended. Despite the ground being flat, level, and smooth, no one ventured forward. It got me thinking: how can we, with disabilities, move forward and explore the backcountry?

Over the past year, I've tested a variety of devices across the Mountain States. I've always loved the outdoors and refused to let paralysis keep me from my favorite hunting and fishing spots. While 4x4 vehicles and ATVs can get you off the beaten path, they have limitations and are often prohibited in certain areas. I needed something that could take me deeper into nature, where the noise of civilization fades, and my soul can rejuvenate.

This year, my goal was to hunt solo in the backcountry again. After testing various modes of transportation, I found a few that enabled me to succeed and return to places I thought were out of reach.



ATVs and UTVs

ATVs and UTVs are amazing for accessing remote areas. My favorite is an old Can-Am with a pass-through design. On good days, I can transfer onto a traditional ATV, but the pass-through design makes it easier when I can't. I've also seen creative homemade modifications for those with limited abdominal function. Older models are affordable and accessible, making them a good starting point for many.

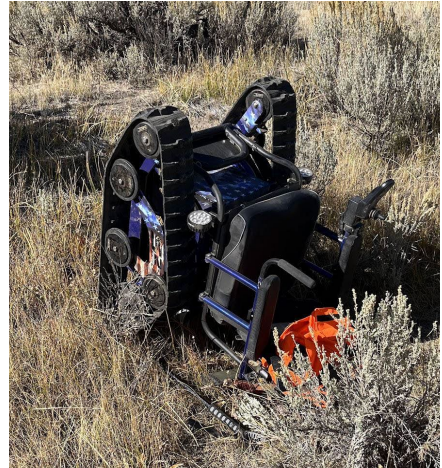
Track Chairs

Track chairs are a game-changer for off-road exploration. I tested several models this year, and my favorite was the **Trackmaster**, which I used during an antelope hunt in northeastern Colorado. This lightweight, 250-pound chair handled rough terrain with ease, carrying me and my gear miles into the backcountry. The lithium batteries can support up to 400 pounds and travel over 12 miles on a single charge. It even conquered hills that would've been challenging when I was 20.

While I preferred the Trackmaster, other options, like **Action Trackchairs**, offer features like seat-leveling and advanced seating configurations. Seat-leveling is essential on uneven terrain, especially in situations where things get tense. Advanced tracks also performed remarkably well on snow and ice, providing stability even on steep, slippery terrain.

However, track chairs have drawbacks:

1. They aren't permitted everywhere.
2. They can damage the ground (they'll ruin a lawn).
3. Some tracks leave black marks on floors and concrete.
4. Foot positioning is critical; I learned to strap my foot down after it got caught in the tracks.
5. Rough rides can exacerbate bowel, bladder, and muscle spasm issues.
6. They're not invincible—exercise caution, especially without wheelie bars.



I learned this the hard way when I rolled down a hill. Thankfully, I was wearing a seatbelt and riding a 250-pound machine rather than a 600-pound one. Despite some scrapes and bumps, I made it to the bottom in one piece, and the machine was unharmed.

Frontier All-Wheel Drive

My favorite backcountry ride is my **Frontier All-Wheel Drive**, a device I've had for over 10 years, courtesy of the VA. It has many advantages over a track chair:

- A smoother ride.
- Great performance in tough terrain, like wheat and cornfields.
- Faster speeds.
- ADA compliance, allowing it anywhere a person can legally walk.
- Superior stability with its four wheels acting as outriggers.

However, it has its downsides:

1. It's heavy (435 lbs), making transport a challenge.
2. The outdated sealed lead-acid battery system requires frequent replacement (yearly in my case).
3. Tires can go flat, though puncture-proof tubes have solved this issue.
4. It struggles in deep snow or loose gravel.
5. It doesn't handle sand well or jump curbs as effectively as a track chair.

Despite these drawbacks, my Frontier has been indispensable. During a recent elk hunt, it brought me within half a mile of the bull I was tracking. From there, I crawled due to the steep terrain, but the Frontier carried me and the meat 3.5 miles back to the truck, sparing my son's back.

Final Thoughts

Where there's a will, there's truly a way. With the right tools, even the backcountry can be accessible. I always carry a GPS tracker and satellite pager, giving my loved ones peace of mind while I explore. Whether it's a track chair, ATV, or all-wheel-drive device, find what works for you and rediscover the freedom of the great outdoors.

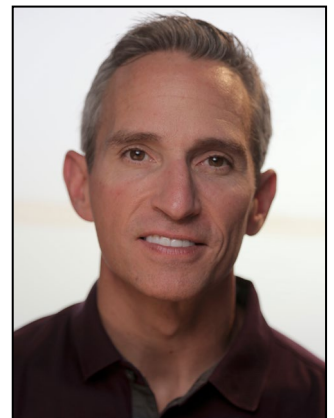
Adaptive Sports Trailer for the Salt Lake City VA

One thing our Chapter Rep in Utah (John Henderson) brought to our attention, was the need for a trailer to get equipment out to where it could actually be used, Working with Shannon who handles the rec therapy program at the Salt Lake VA, After developing the specifications, the Chapter purchased a used trailer to transport their bicycle team and winter sports participants. This trailer will Be based in Salt Lake City but they will use it to travel to many other states for events such as the Golden Age Games, the National Veteran Wheelchair Gamez and other competitions. A special thanks to our President Eric, who drove the trailer out to Salt Lake.

Additionally, this trailer will be parked at the SLC VA and provide great awareness for the chapter. The graphic wrap feature our logo, a bar code to scan to join and the VA Logo.

Look for it at the Wheelchair Games in Minnesota this Summer!

John Henderson
MSCPVA Board –
Utah POC



Scenes from the Chapter

