MOUNTAIN STATES CHAPTER NEWSLETTER | COLORADO, MONTANA, NEW MEXICO, UTAH & WYOMING

ELEVATIONS

NATIONAL VETERANS WHEELCHAIR GAMES

SEPTEMBER 2026 | QTR. #3

PVA
Paralyzed Veterans of America
Mountain States Chapter

OUR QUARTERLY IMPACT

588
ACTIVE MEMBERS
507 men & 81 women

10
NEW MEMBERS
joined the Mountain States Chapter

1,492
VOLUNTEER HOURS
contributed by members, caregivers & community supporters

$36,500
AWARDED IN GRANTS
to members & community partners to support quality of life & education

ELEVATIONS

The Paralyzed Veterans of America Mountain States Chapter is a nonprofit organization serving veterans living with spinal cord injuries and disorders, including multiple sclerosis and amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, across Colorado, Montana, New Mexico, Utah and Wyoming. Chartered in 1955 and led by veterans, the Chapter creates opportunities for connection, supports disability rights advocacy and shares trusted resources—so no veteran faces life with paralysis alone.

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Erin Cavit	President
Renae Byrd McMinn	Vice President
Rachel Ploeger	Treasurer
Darron Dunson Sr.	Secretary
Izzy Abbass	Director
Andrew Lewis	Director
Jeff Teasley	Director
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Cover: Mountain States Chapter member Johelmy Figueroa focuses on her next shot during the nine-ball competition at the National Veterans Wheelchair Games in Detroit in July. She went on to win silver. Over the weeklong event, Figueroa competed in eight adaptive events and won six medals. Photo courtesy of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

Back Cover: Maverick Lewis, a Mountain States Chapter member, nears the summit of Colorado's Quandary Peak in June with staff from the Rocky Mountain VA Medical Center. A year earlier, Lewis could not climb a flight of stairs.

SEPTEMBER 2026

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MESSAGE FROM ERIN CAVIT

This is my first message to you as president of the board of directors, and let me begin by saying I am humbled and honored to serve you. I also greatly appreciate the support I have received from you over the last five months.

Supporting one another is at the heart of this organization, and that was on full display at the National Veterans Wheelchair Games in July. I attended for the second time and competed in swimming (my favorite), bowling and several other events. But the most fun I had was cheering on our Chapter members from Utah, New Mexico and Colorado and reconnecting with many of you I've met over the past year. In all, 25 Chapter members represented us at the Games, and I look forward to the day when all five of our states are represented.

I'd like to share some of the less visible work happening across the Mountain States Chapter. Much of what we do as your board of directors takes place behind the scenes. This work helps keep the Chapter strong and ensures we can continue supporting veterans and their families for years to come.

One of our top priorities has been building a stronger, more effective board. We have been reviewing our policies and procedures, clarifying roles and responsibilities and making sure our expectations are clear and up to date. The goal is to strengthen accountability and give us a solid foundation for the future.

That work carried into July, when Paralyzed Veterans of America's chief financial officer and vice president both visited the Chapter's office in Aurora for a routine review (which every PVA chapter undergoes). Their visit offered valuable expertise and gave us a chance to look closely at our finances, operations and procedures and identify ways to improve.

Reviews like this help ensure we are meeting PVA's standards and operating as a responsible veterans service organization.

On a more fun note, I also traveled to Wyoming with Executive Director John Henderson to meet with Chapter members and leaders at the Cheyenne VA Medical Center. We were joined by PVA National Vice President Josue Cordova and National Treasurer Tom Wheaton.

The visit included an August 1 luncheon for members, caregivers and VA staff and gave us a meaningful opportunity to connect with our Wyoming community. We look forward to returning and continuing to build those connections. Many thanks to newly elected board member Jeff Teasley and his wife, Cathy, for helping organize the visit.

Looking ahead, we're focused on building a strong Chapter—one that you feel connected to and proud to be part of.

Fundraising will be an important part of that work. Donor support helps us provide Quality of Life Grants, assist members traveling to the Wheelchair Games and expand activities across our five-state region.

We need your help, too. If you have fundraising ideas or can lend a hand, please reach out. Aside from Executive Director John Henderson, our Chapter relies on volunteers. To everyone who gives their time, talent and support, thank you. Your contributions make a difference, and I am excited about what we can accomplish together.

Top: Erin Cavit competes in bowling at her second Wheelchair Games in July.

Right: Chapter members Rachel Ploeger, left, and Tom Wheaton, seated, meet with Colorado Rep. Brittany Pettersen, right, during PVA's Advocacy Legislation Seminar in Washington, D.C. Wheaton also serves as PVA's national treasurer.

PVA MEMBERS ADVOCATE on CAPITOL HILL

When Rachel Ploeger opened the large oak door to U.S. Rep. Gabe Evans' Washington, D.C., office, she was nervous. The talking points she had rehearsed—legislative priorities alongside her personal story—swirled in her head. Her meeting was scheduled for just 15 minutes. Would she have enough time to make her case?

Ploeger, a Colorado resident and member of the Paralyzed Veterans of America Mountain States Chapter, had traveled to Washington in June for PVA's annual Advocacy Legislation Seminar. She joined about 175 PVA members, caregivers and staff from across the country, including Mountain States Chapter member and Board President Erin Cavit.

After a day of training, participants spread out across Capitol Hill to meet with lawmakers in a concentrated push to build support for legislation affecting veterans with spinal cord injuries and disorders (SCI/D). Their priorities included protecting the Department of Veterans Affairs' SCI/D system of care, improving bowel and bladder services, increasing compensation for veterans with the most severe disabilities, and increasing survivor benefits.

Over two days, they visited about 300 congressional offices. While Cavit met with lawmakers and congressional staff from New Mexico, Montana and Wyoming, Ploeger focused on Colorado. One meeting was in the office of Rep. Evans, R-Colo.

Inside, beneath Colorado and American flags, Ploeger was greeted by two aides. She told them how a trip to Washington at age 15 inspired her to join the Air Force. She shared how she was later diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, and how the care she received through the VA SCI/D clinic far exceeded the care she had received in private health care. When Ploeger shared statistics about the high prevalence of multiple sclerosis and amyotrophic lateral sclerosis among veterans, the aides were "blown away," she said, and asked, "How can we help?"

The meeting, originally scheduled for 15 minutes, lasted more than an hour—a testament to the impact of face-to-face advocacy. The experience, Ploeger said, was "powerful" and helped strengthen relationships she and other PVA members can build on as they continue to advocate for veterans.

Are you interested in joining next year's advocacy effort? Reach out to us at info@mscpva.org.

EVENT RECAP

AT THE NATIONAL VETERANS WHEELCHAIR GAMES

25 Mountain States Chapter members competed in this year's Games, where veterans pushed themselves and one another.

Four minutes into an adaptive fitness competition, Johelmy Figueroa's arms were burning. She was hustling through a series of seated exercises, pushing to complete as many rounds as possible in eight minutes. Adding to the challenge, the overhead press required her to lift a 35-pound dumbbell—20 pounds heavier than the one she had trained with.

"I don't know if I can keep doing this," the U.S. Army veteran remembers thinking.

Figueroa, who lives in Albuquerque, was among 25 Mountain States Chapter members who traveled to Detroit in July for the annual National Veterans Wheelchair Games. The event drew about 500 veteran athletes from across the country. Over six days, they competed across nearly two dozen adaptive sports, including wheelchair rugby, basketball, power soccer and an obstacle course race known as slalom.

"The whole week, it's like I'm the same as everyone else, and it doesn't matter what my disability is," said Figueroa, who attended for the third time.

"I don't feel the stress of having to explain why I'm in my wheelchair."

That deep sense of belonging is part of what keeps bringing her back. "The Games put life back into me," she said. "I felt so much joy."

The crowd was especially enthusiastic during adaptive fitness, and Figueroa could hear her teammates and even her grandfather shouting, sometimes screaming, encouragement. "The feeling I got from everybody cheering me on made me know I could do it," she said. To her surprise, she won gold in her division.

While winning medals certainly feels good, athletes say the Games are about far more. Navy veteran Joe Moscynski, from Clifton, Idaho, competed in his first Games and won gold in a trivia competition called motor rally. But the highlight of the week, he said, was the time in between events getting to know other veterans. Conversations flowed without effort.

"I was talking brother-to-brother to people I didn't even know," Moscynski said. "It was like I already knew them."

Air Force veteran Harold "Steve" Taylor, who lives in Aurora, Colorado, came back for his eighth Games. While the 73-year-old competed in his usual events, cycling and power soccer, he also tried something new: wheelchair basketball. The experienced players on his team, rather than making him feel out of place, offered tips and encouragement.

"The camaraderie of each other, the spirit of each other was fantastic," he said. "It really lifted my spirits." Taylor was happy to win gold in the 10-kilometer cycling event, but the medal was not what defined the experience. "I went there to help people. I inspire people, and people inspire me, and that's what makes it so great."

Top: Chapter member Mike Solano, left, joins his softball team for a pregame huddle at this year's Wheelchair Games in Detroit. Solano and his team went on to win gold.

Left: Harold "Steve" Taylor races his handcycle to a gold medal in the 10K at the Wheelchair Games in Detroit. Taylor said the camaraderie among the veterans was one of the best parts of the Games.

EXPANDING OUR REACH ACROSS THE MOUNTAIN STATES

The Mountain States Chapter is one of 33 chapters of Paralyzed Veterans of America and serves the largest geographic region, covering Colorado, Utah, New Mexico, Wyoming and Montana.

NEW MEXICO

On May 27, more than 60 people, including inpatients, outpatients, family members and hospital staff, came together for lunch at the Raymond G. Murphy Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Albuquerque. The lunch was sponsored by the Mountain States Chapter and held in the outdoor courtyard at the Spinal Cord Injury and Disorders Center.

"The turnout blew me away," PVA National Treasurer Tom Wheaton said. He drove from his home in Colorado to attend the event and met for about two hours with Dr. Michiko Paschall, chief of the SCI/D Center. Josue Cordova, PVA National vice president, and John Henderson, Mountain States Chapter executive director, also participated in the meeting. "We discussed ways PVA and the VA can collaborate to continue encouraging and serving our veterans," Wheaton said.

Joining the Albuquerque visit were Renae McMinn, Chapter vice president, and Cody Smith, the Chapter's sports and recreation committee chair. They connected with potential and existing PVA members and attended recreational therapy sessions designed to help prepare veterans for the National Veterans Wheelchair Games.

COLORADO

The Chapter hosted a booth at the El Paso County Veterans Expo on June 10 in Colorado Springs.

Chapter members Andrew Lewis, Scott Miller and Dan Spotts supported the event, along with longtime volunteer Garrett Miller.

For Lewis, the expo was a valuable opportunity to connect with the broader veteran community, including active-duty service members, reservists and retirees.

From June 19 to 21, the Chapter supported a booth at the inaugural USA Pickleball Wheelchair National Championships, also in Colorado Springs. Garrett Miller coordinated the effort, and Chapter members Cody Smith, Andrew Lewis and Wayne Bennett competed in the tournament.

Top: At the VA medical center in Albuquerque in May, Tom Wheaton, center, connects with veterans during lunch sponsored by the Mountain States Chapter.

BUILDING CONNECTIONS IN WYOMING

For Chapter member Jeff Teasley, the turnout at an August 1 lunch in Cheyenne marked encouraging progress in strengthening PVA's connections with veterans across Wyoming.

About 20 people attended the PVA-sponsored event, including Chapter members, spouses, caregivers, grandchildren and three employees from the Cheyenne VA Medical Center. Teasley and his wife, Cathy, who live in Cheyenne, helped organize the lunch. Also in attendance were Josue Cordova, PVA National vice president, and Tom Wheaton, PVA National treasurer, along with Erin Cavit, Mountain States Chapter board president, and John Henderson, Chapter executive director. The presence of PVA leaders made a powerful impression on Teasley. "They came, and that showed me that they care," he said. "To hear the excitement from them and the support, I don't have words for it."

During lunch, Cavit reiterated the Chapter's commitment to serving veterans in Wyoming.

"If you need something, let us know," she told the group.

"We can't solve every problem in the world, but we'll sure stand up and support you."

The event also created opportunities for new connections. Even Teasley, who seems to know nearly everyone in the area, met someone new: Bruce Kuker, a Texas Chapter member and avid trap shooter who recently moved to Cheyenne.

Teasley said the two exchanged phone numbers. "I have a brand-new over-and-under shotgun that I got from my brother when he passed away, so I connected with Bruce, and he's going to teach me how to trap shoot."

Teasley, who joined the Mountain States Chapter Board of Directors in July, said he is excited about PVA's momentum in Wyoming and looks forward to creating more opportunities for veterans to connect.

Top: From left, PVA member Bruce Kuker, his wife, Susan Soto, and Mark and Michelle Williams pose for a photo after a PVA-sponsored lunch in Cheyenne, Wyoming. Michelle is the SCI/D coordinator at the Cheyenne VA Medical Center.

INTERESTED IN ADVERTISING WITH US?

Reach veterans, families, caregivers, community partners and supporters across Colorado, Montana, New Mexico, Utah and Wyoming.

Your ad directly supports the PVA Mountain States Chapter and helps fund programs, resources and opportunities for veterans with spinal cord injuries and disorders.

CONTACT INFO@MSCPVA.ORG FOR RATES AND AVAILABLE AD SIZES.

NEW BOARD MEMBERS

Jeff Teasley and Darron Dunson joined the Board of Directors on July 1 to begin two-year terms.

MEET JEFF TEASLEY

Accompany Jeff Teasley through the halls of the Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Cheyenne, Wyoming, and you won't get very far. That's because, having spent most of his 67 years in the area, raising a family, coaching youth sports, volunteering and receiving care at the VA, Teasley seems to know nearly everyone, staff and patients alike. He frequently stops to chat.

"I have the gift of gab," Teasley said by way of explanation. But watch the U.S. Navy veteran interact, and it's clear his conversations go beyond small talk. While they often begin with a joke or good-natured teasing, his exchanges are genuine and focused on making a connection.

For example, Teasley regularly makes a point of sharing information that could help other veterans. When he recently ran into Chapter member Kevin Teppo at the commissary, Teasley told him about a grant he might qualify for.

"Teasley's dedicated to PVA," Teppo said. "He always has been. And he's willing to do the work."

For Teasley, that work includes creating opportunities for veterans with spinal cord injuries and disorders to participate in activities and connect with others. Isolation, he knows, can exacerbate the challenges veterans already face. In the near term, he's focused on adaptive cycling, fishing and hunting—activities some veterans may not realize are still possible.

Teasley's approach is grounded in a lesson passed down by his grandmother. "Can't never could do nothing," she used to tell him when he was a boy. To him, it means saying "I can't" will keep you from trying.

Now, his wife of 47 years, Cathy, uses the phrase to remind him not to sit around, a nudge he sometimes needs. Teasley hopes to carry that message to fellow veterans in his new board role: get out and focus on what you can do.

Top: Jeff Teasley, left, addresses PVA members and their families during a PVA-sponsored lunch in Cheyenne, Wyoming. Mountain States Chapter Executive Director John Henderson, right, listens after introducing him.

Right: Darron Dunson Sr. at the PVA National Convention in Las Vegas in May.

MEET DARRON DUNSON SR.

Darron Dunson Sr. was born and raised in Pensacola, Florida, and joined the Marine Corps at 18, to the surprise of his dad, an Army veteran. Following his service, Dunson and his wife moved to Denver, where they raised two children and he went back to school. After earning a bachelor's degree in criminal justice and a master's degree in educational administration and policy, he went on to spend more than 20 years working in K-12 education, including as a dean of students for Denver Public Schools.

"I loved watching the kids blossom and seeing them grow into their own," he said.

Dunson also worked as an expulsion hearing officer, reviewing and advising on student-discipline cases. That experience and his knowledge of legal issues would later prove useful in another role: In May, he was elected chairman of Paralyzed Veterans of America's National Judicial Committee.

His involvement with PVA began in 2019, when he learned about the organization from a friend. "The people were so welcoming," he said. That year, he attended his first National Veterans Wheelchair Games in Kentucky and became the Chapter's treasurer, a role he held for four years. Board members recall his quiet nature, careful attention to detail and a phrase he'd say at nearly every meeting: "I'm fair, but I'm stingy."

Chapter Board President Erin Cavit served alongside Dunson during his time as treasurer. "I always liked the way he took care of business," she said. "I'm thrilled he's on the board again."

MY JOURNEY UP A 14,000-FOOT MOUNTAIN

BY MAVERICK LEWIS
Member of PVA Mountain States Chapter

At 68, I did something I never thought was possible.

For years, I could barely walk 25 feet without stopping to rest. Whenever I tried, my feet would drag and flop downward. It's called foot drop, and mine was the result of a spinal cord injury I sustained during a training exercise in the Marine Corps. I relied on a walker and leg braces to get around, but my legs were weak. Once I fell in my driveway and couldn't get up, so I dragged myself to the mailbox and used it to pull myself back up.

Over the years, I underwent six spine surgeries, including three separate fusions in my neck and lower back. Complications from one surgery damaged my nerves and left me in constant pain. I couldn't tie my shoes or button my shirt.

Martial arts training, which I did earlier in life, taught me to hide my pain, so I never complained. But after nearly 30 years, I was depressed. What often circled in my head was, I'm useless. I'm a failure.

Last year, the pain got so bad I went to the nearby Rocky Mountain Regional VA Medical Center in Aurora, Colorado. The doctor told me that because of my spinal cord injury, I was eligible for treatment at the Spinal Cord Injury and Disorders (SCI/D) Center. That's how I got referred to Dr. Liam Kiernan, one of the Center's physical therapists. Someone scheduled me for physical therapy. I didn't expect much, but I showed up. Thank goodness I did because those sessions and the people I met changed my life.

A few months in, Dr. Liam asked if I had any big goals. His question reminded me of a long-forgotten dream I had of hiking one of Colorado's 14,000-foot peaks. When I mentioned it, Dr. Liam didn't even pause. "Let's start training for it," he said. I was floored.

"There's no way! I'm 68 years old and I can't even climb stairs," I said.

But the way he believed in me gave me a little hope. I agreed to try.

Dr. Liam created a plan and picked a target—14,272-foot Quandary Peak near Breckenridge, Colorado. I started training in November 2025.

Three times a week, we'd meet at 6:30 a.m. at the hospital, where Dr. Liam would unlock the doors. He'd stretch my

legs, massage my back and neck and, depending on the day, use cupping or dry needling therapy. He'd guide me through walking and body-weight exercises, eventually adding squats and pushups. Some days, he'd attach cuffs below my knees that sent tiny electrical pulses into my muscles. Later, I used a newer device that sent electrical signals to my spinal cord through a patch on my neck. Dr. Liam said the treatment might help regenerate my damaged nerves.

Dr. Liam would also take me to the empty hospital stairwell for conditioning. I hated climbing stairs. I'd heave each leg up, pausing after every couple of steps to catch my breath. I'd think, There's no way I can climb a mountain. But Dr. Liam would say, "You can do this." So, I kept going.

By the end of January, I noticed a shift. I could get up off the floor by myself. I could climb stairs slowly but continuously for an hour. One day, I counted 800 stairs.

As I started feeling better, I joined Dr. Liam's Wednesday afternoon open gym sessions at the SCI/D Center. I met other PVA members, and we encouraged one another. Sometimes, we talked more than we exercised.

Then, life tested me in a different way. In mid-February 2026, I lost my dog, Onyx, my companion for 13 years. Two weeks later, my home of 30 years caught fire, and we lost everything. My wife said that if Onyx had been alive, he wouldn't have been able to get out of the house. "I know you, Mav," she said. "You would've gone back inside to try to save him, and you probably wouldn't have made it out yourself."

We may not understand why certain things happen in our lives, but I believe God has a plan. Sometimes, the things we see as tragic also make us stronger.

At the time, I was devastated, but I kept showing up for PT. With my life in chaos, training was one routine I could hold on to.

By April, my training sessions extended from 60 to 90 minutes. One day, I climbed 2,000 stairs. Dr. Liam tracked my elevation gain.

We put my fitness to the test with real hikes, including Bear Peak in Boulder and the Manitou Incline near Colorado Springs, the largest staircase in North America, which gains 2,000 feet in less than a mile.

Those hikes gave me some confidence, but they were hard and left me exhausted. When we started climbing

REFLECTIONS (CONT.)

Quandary Peak early on the morning of June 16, I didn't let on, but I had doubts about whether I could make it.

As we climbed, the trail got rockier. Every step became a challenge. I kept slipping and scraping my arms and legs. Soon, we were hiking alongside a cliff. Although I had hiking poles to help me balance, I knew one misstep and I'd be gone.

Two and a half hours in, at 12,000 feet, my legs seized with cramps. We stopped so I could catch my breath. By 13,000 feet, the mountain became even steeper and the trail disappeared under loose rocks and chest-high granite boulders. Dr. Liam kept scouting ahead to find the best route.

When he'd ask me how I was doing, I'd say, "Piece of cake." But I was hurting.

I kept my head down and concentrated on each step. The mountain demanded all my strength. That last stretch felt like hours. I remember the moment Dr. Liam said, "Look up, Mav. You made it." It was windy, cold and beautiful.

That day was emotional. After all my injuries, I had lost confidence in myself. Reaching the summit changed that. It shifted my perspective, and I realized I was capable of more than I thought.

None of this would have happened without the support of the SCI/D Center staff. They treated me not just as another patient but as a person they really cared about. They helped me believe I could do better, and I did.

To my fellow veterans, don't lose hope, no matter how severe the injury or how heavy the situation may feel. We have endured things most people will never understand, and we carry a strength that doesn't disappear just because life changes. We may be veterans, but we are all still warriors. Warriors never give up!

Previous page, left: Maverick Lewis poses for a photo at the summit of Quandary Peak near Breckenridge, Colorado, after completing a hike he once thought was impossible.

Previous page, right: Maverick Lewis, second from left, uses hiking poles as he climbs the steep, rocky terrain on Quandary Peak with three staff members from the Rocky Mountain VA Medical Center.

Right: Maverick Lewis, right, stands with Jonas Ely, a recreation therapist at the Rocky Mountain VA Medical Center, during a training hike up Bear Peak in Boulder, Colorado. The hike helped prepare Lewis for the more difficult climb up Quandary Peak.

Paralyzed Veterans of America

ALL WHEELS UP

ACCESS TO THE SKIES SUMMIT

Ready for takeoff? **Paralyzed Veterans of America** and **All Wheels Up** are co-hosting the Access to the Skies Summit on October 1, from 10:00 am–2:00 pm MT in Colorado Springs, Colorado.

Join us for this FREE, one-of-a-kind event designed to update members of the disability community on efforts underway to make air travel more accessible now and in the future! Hear from inspiring speakers representing PVA, the U.S. Department of Transportation, airlines, airports, aircraft manufacturers and other stakeholders.

Don't miss engaging sessions like:

- How Should You Prepare for Your Air Travel Journey?
- How Should You Handle a Problem During Your Trip?
- What Does the Future of Accessible Commercial Aviation Look Like?

Choose to attend in person at Hotel Polaris (Colorado Springs, Colorado) or join us virtually from anywhere!

Reserve your spot now—scan the QR code.

DID YOU KNOW?

ARC-EX SHOWS PROMISE FOR

IMPROVING HAND & ARM FUNCTION

Mountain States Chapter member Ismael Baca shares his experience with the device and the changes he's noticed.

Ismael Baca didn't believe what was happening. For the first time since sustaining a spinal cord injury 11 years earlier, he was holding a fork and moving his hand, and the fork didn't fall on the floor. Baca was trying a new device called ARC-EX. He asked his therapist to turn it off. Then, he dropped the fork.

"I started sobbing like a little kid," he said. "I just felt like there was a little bit of hope." Baca, who has a C5/C6 spinal cord injury, continued using the ARC-EX System about three times a week for more than four months. The device sends electrical signals to the spinal cord through electrodes on the skin.

He noticed steady gains in his grip strength and finger dexterity, even outside of therapy. He credits the treatment with helping him use a fork to feed himself, open a door and get dishes out of a cabinet.

"My life has gotten easier," he said. "I tell everybody I talk to to try it."

He noticed other changes, too. Shoulder pain, which had woken him up most nights, disappeared. His bowel function became more predictable. His core strength improved, which he said makes driving easier because he can hold himself up better.

But one of the changes that meant the most to him was being able to hold his newborn grandson. When Baca's granddaughter was born five years ago, he could hold her for only about 10 seconds—just long enough for a photo. When his grandson was born in August, he held him for an hour.

Baca's experience is one example of what ARC-EX can do, but results vary from person to person. Jenny Suggitt, an occupational therapist and associate marketing director at ONWARD Medical, which makes ARC-EX, explains more about the technology in the Q&A below.

What is ARC-EX?

ARC-EX is the first system cleared for non-invasive spinal cord stimulation for people with spinal cord injury. It delivers transcutaneous electrical spinal cord stimulation in conjunction with functional task practice in the clinic and with take-home exercises at home to improve hand sensation and strength.

How does ARC-EX work?

Transcutaneous spinal cord stimulation excites the spinal cord so that signals weakened by injury can drive movement. That movement enables rehabilitation that results in improvement in hand strength and sensation. ARC-EX delivers spinal cord stimulation through electrodes on the skin at the back of the neck. A rehabilitation professional programs the stimulation according to each individual's needs and provides take-home exercises to maximize improvement.

What are its uses and potential benefits?

Results of the Up-LIFT clinical study showed that 90% of study participants improved strength or function, 87% reported improvement in quality of life, and benefits were observed up to 34 years post-injury. The study also reported less spasm frequency, improved sleep quality and improved upper body sensation and sense of touch.

How soon does it start working?

Results vary by individual.

How do you decide if someone is a candidate for ARC-EX?

ARC-EX is for people ages 18-75 with chronic, incomplete cervical spinal cord injury (C2-C8). A rehabilitation professional will evaluate if ARC-EX is appropriate for the individual.

What are the side effects?

During ARC-EX therapy, it is completely normal to feel sensations like buzzing, tingling or mild neck contractions. Common side effects are generally mild and temporary, such as skin redness or irritation and temporary muscle spasms or stiffness. As with any spinal cord stimulation, patients should be trained to monitor for autonomic dysreflexia (a sudden change in blood pressure) and stop stimulation immediately if it occurs. Your healthcare professional will train you on warning signs and ensure proper electrode placement and setup.

How can veterans access ARC-EX?

ARC-EX is available to order through the VA. Veterans should contact their VA primary care team through My HealtheVet to request a rehabilitation consultation to determine if ARC-EX is appropriate.

Top: Nicole Hartom, a physical therapist at the VA medical center in Albuquerque, places electrodes on the back of Ismael Baca's neck before an ARC-EX therapy session.

Left: During a therapy session with the ARC-EX System at the Albuquerque VA Medical Center, Ismael Baca uses one hand to place pegs into a pegboard—something he never imagined he would be able to do after sustaining a C5/C6 spinal cord injury.

VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT

MEET CODY SMITH
SPORTS & RECREATION COMMITTEE CHAIR

If you're involved in adaptive sports around Denver, chances are you've crossed paths with Cody Smith. Earlier this year, he became chair of the Mountain States Chapter's Sports and Recreation Committee.

Smith grew up in Baltimore, racing dirt bikes and playing ice hockey. Eager to see the world and learn new things, he joined the Navy at 22. While stationed in California, he met his future wife, Veronica, who was serving on the same ship. After his service, he became a top salesman at Harley-Davidson in Irvine.

"I thought I was going to do that the rest of my life," he said.

But in 2015, while Smith was riding his Harley XR1200 on the Pacific Coast Highway, a driver making a left turn pulled into his path and struck him. Smith sustained broken arms and shoulders, a traumatic brain injury, a C7 fracture, a T9 spinal cord injury, collapsed lungs and other injuries. He spent five days on a ventilator in intensive care while his family waited to see whether he would survive. His recovery took years.

In 2020, he tried his first adaptive sport: CrossFit. Something clicked. He found joy again in moving his body, training and getting fit.

Today, he lives in Denver and handcycles off-road, plays pickleball and lifts at the gym. But his No. 1 sport is wheelchair lacrosse, which he plays every Sunday with the Colorado Rolling Mammoths.

"It's given me a sense of purpose and a sense of belonging," he said. "It's a community that feels like a family."

Sports have had such a positive impact on his life that Smith wants other disabled veterans to experience the same thing. "At first, it's not going to be easy. But it gets better. And the better you get at it, the more fun it is."

Smith said he's indebted to Paralyzed Veterans of America for helping him receive VA benefits. Now, as chair of the chapter's Sports and Recreation Committee, he wants to give back by helping other veterans get involved in adaptive sports. "The people before me busted their asses to build this," he said. "I want to carry the torch."

Bottom: During a recent trip to Albuquerque, Cody Smith, right, shows Mountain States Chapter Executive Director John Henderson exercises he does to maintain shoulder strength and mobility.

SUPPORT VETERANS LIVING WITH SPINAL CORD INJURIES AND DISORDERS.

Help fund programs that expand peer mentoring and increase access to adaptive sports and recreation.

Expand advocacy, outreach & chapter programs.

Improve access to adaptive sports & recreation.

Connect veterans to benefits, resources & peer support.

PVA
Paralyzed Veterans of America
Mountain States Chapter

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PVA NATIONAL DIRECTOR

UPDATE FROM IZZY ABBASS

One of the responsibilities of every national director is representing the members of our Chapter in decision-making at Paralyzed Veterans of America National. That means reviewing budgets, participating in committee work, debating policy and voting on resolutions that shape the organization and our advocacy on behalf of veterans with spinal cord injuries and disorders. I take that responsibility seriously because every vote I cast represents all members of the Mountain States Chapter.

With that responsibility in mind, I will be submitting a resolution for consideration at the Fall Board of Directors meeting in November that would require PVA national officer elections to use a secret ballot. The purpose is simple: to ensure every national director can vote according to their judgment and the interests of the members they represent, free from concern about how others may view their vote.

My first PVA National Convention was five years ago, and I have learned an incredible amount since then. One practice, however, has always stood out to me. During national officer elections, every national director's vote is displayed openly as it is cast. Having served with numerous organizations over the years, I found that surprising. Like many of us, I grew up learning that one of the cornerstones of American democracy is the secret ballot—thank you, Schoolhouse Rock.

Secret ballots have long been recognized as a way to encourage honest, independent decision-making. Leaders should be elected based on their qualifications, vision and ability to serve the membership—not on how individual votes might be interpreted by others. While open voting is appropriate in many situations, I believe officer elections are one area where protecting the privacy of each director's vote ultimately strengthens confidence in the election process.

Thank you for the continued opportunity to represent you as your national director. Your ideas, concerns and perspectives help guide my work, and I encourage you to reach out whenever you have questions or suggestions about the direction of PVA.

Izzy Abbass

SUPPORT & CONNECTION

MS SUPPORT CALLS

For many veterans, "push through it" is deeply ingrained. But for those living with multiple sclerosis (MS), learning how to pace themselves can be just as important.

That was one of the topics members discussed during the Mountain States Chapter MS Committee's latest support call.

The discussion was part of the Chapter's ongoing efforts to support members with MS and their caregivers. The monthly calls, held via Zoom, were launched earlier this year to create more opportunities for connection and shared learning.

The conversations often focus on the practical challenges of living with MS. Recently, members exchanged ideas for managing fatigue, heat sensitivity and spasticity, including cooling techniques, medical cannabis and acupuncture.

Future calls will include guest speakers in physical therapy, neurology and mental health. Members are also encouraged to suggest topics.

To learn more, email info@mscpva.org.

Left: Izzy Abbass uses a Zeen, a nonmotorized mobility device, while hiking in the Indian Peaks Wilderness in north-central Colorado at about 10,500 feet.

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ARC EX® is the first FDA-cleared, non-invasive spinal cord stimulation therapy designed to improve hand strength and sensation in people with chronic, incomplete cervical spinal cord injury (SCI).

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BOOTS & WHEELS ON THE GROUND IN MONTANA

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S DESK

BY JOHN HENDERSON

As someone who uses a wheelchair, I never thought I'd be able to comfortably float on a boat on a river.

But I did, one August morning in Montana, where I joined an excursion down the Madison River led by Ability Montana. Without transferring out of my chair or having to trust strangers to carry me, I rolled up a ramp and onto an adapted raft. Even after we pushed off, gliding down the river's gentle flow, I could turn my chair in any direction. I was so comfortable, I followed guide and volunteer Todd Hoar's instructions and I learned how to cast a fly rod.

Like a lot of veterans, I carry things with me that don't easily shut off. But being on the river in the comfort of my own chair, with guides with decades of experience, gave me a kind of quiet I don't often find. For a few hours, my mind stopped racing and I enjoyed the river.

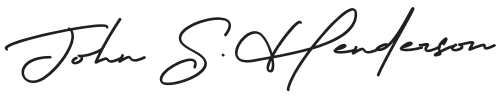
The trip was part of the Mountain States Chapter's boots-and-wheels-on-the-ground effort to build stronger connections in Montana. I was joined by Board President Erin Cavit and her husband, as well as Vice President Renae Byrd McMinn and her longtime friend. We spent two days at Camp Bullwheel near Ennis, where Patrick Quinn and the Ability Montana team gave us a taste of their programs and their style—relaxed and exceptionally capable.

"It was amazing," Renae, who had never fly fished, told me later. "Patrick was not just an instructor. He wanted me to succeed and he adapted to my needs." As proof, Renae caught the day's only fish.

On our second day, we left camp on bikes and rode a mostly flat gravel road to explore the area.

Our trip also included a day at Fort Harrison VA Medical Center in Helena, where we set up a PVA information table in the lobby. We spent time with staff, including Mike Bassett, recreation therapy supervisor. We met veterans living with multiple sclerosis and spoke with a caregiver who recently lost her husband to amyotrophic lateral sclerosis. It was a reminder that outreach doesn't always require a big event. Sometimes it can be as simple as showing up, listening and letting veterans with disabilities know they are not alone.

Later, in Bozeman, we had coffee with Mountain States Chapter member Jean-Paul "JP" Lauren and visited Eagle Mount, which offers recreation activities for people with disabilities. This trip was the start of building deeper relationships with people and organizations in Montana, and we can't wait to go back.



Top: Mountain States Chapter Executive Director John Henderson, right, floats down Montana's Madison River on an adapted raft as volunteer guide Todd Hoar shows him how to cast a fly rod.

NATIONAL SERVICE OFFICERS

FREE TSA PRECHECK
AVAILABLE FOR CERTAIN VETERANS

BY JASON MCDONALD

West-South Area Manager & Senior National Service Officer
Paralyzed Veterans of America

The Transportation Security Administration and the Department of Veterans Affairs are implementing the Veterans Expedited TSA Screening (VETS) Safe Travel Act.

This means certain veterans with service-connected disabilities can enroll in or renew TSA PreCheck at no cost. This is part of a broader TSA program that also offers free or discounted PreCheck enrollment to certain service members and military families.

As you may know, TSA PreCheck allows eligible travelers to use dedicated lanes to get through security checkpoints at U.S. airports. Travelers generally don't have to remove their shoes, belts or light jackets, or take electronics or certain liquids out of their carry-on bags. This can make the process quicker and easier.

Disabled veterans eligible for free TSA PreCheck enrollment or renewal must meet all of the following requirements:

- Be enrolled in VA health care;
- Have a qualifying service-connected disability such as permanent blindness, loss or loss of use of a limb, or full or partial paralysis; and
- Use a VA-issued wheelchair or prosthetic limb because of the disability.

If you meet these requirements, log in to your VA.gov account.

- Go to the Benefits letters and documents section.
- Look for the TSA PreCheck Application Fee Waiver Letter.
- Download the letter.

Then, visit **https://www.tsa.gov/precheck/military/vets-safe for instructions** on how to apply or renew through an authorized provider, CLEAR or IDEMIA. If for some reason you don't see the letter, contact your local service office for assistance. Receiving the waiver letter doesn't guarantee acceptance into TSA PreCheck, but it's worth looking into if you have an upcoming flight.

TSA PRECHECK BENEFITS FOR THE MILITARY COMMUNITY

Uniformed service members: **Free**

Eligible military survivor family members: **Free**

Military spouses: **$25 discount**

Certain disabled veterans: **Free**

More info: https://www.tsa.gov/precheck/military

Jason McDonald served more than 21 years in the U.S. Army and received the Knowlton Award for significant contributions to Army Military Intelligence. He joined Paralyzed Veterans of America in 2016 and has since dedicated his work to serving veterans across the globe, but primarily in Nevada and Utah.

ELEVATIONS