

GUEST EDITORIAL

The Eastern Paralyzed Veterans Association: Serving and expanding

Let us begin by thanking the editors of this outstanding journal for providing us the opportunity to inform its readers about the new and evolving Eastern Paralyzed Veterans Association.

A chapter of the national Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) for 56 years, the Eastern Paralyzed Veterans Association became an independent, free-standing national veterans service organization on January 29, 2003. The very next day at a meeting in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, the Honorable Anthony J. Principi, the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, handed us a letter certifying us as a national veterans service organization, thereby empowering us to continue to represent our more than 2,300 members in matters before the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). We were then, and we continue to be, deeply grateful to Secretary Principi for his confidence in the work of our Association by providing this certification to us. One aspect of our group that has not changed is the service we provide to our members to help them obtain VA benefits and quality VA healthcare.

We believe it is important to note that the process of separation from the PVA commenced under the leadership of the late James J. Peters, the Executive Director of this wonderful organization for more than three decades. I was truly fortunate to work very closely with Jim throughout his tenure here. He was a dynamic person with tremendous vision and an outstanding record of achievement in behalf of paralyzed veterans.

We miss Jim a great deal each day, but we completed the effort to become a stand-alone association because it was what Jim would have wanted us to do. Those readers who knew Jim will recall the tremendous energy that he devoted to improving the quality of healthcare for paralyzed veterans. We share Jim's passion about this issue. To have a genuine impact on the VA healthcare system, one needs to spend big chunks of time at the Capitol, so in March of this year, the Eastern Paralyzed Veterans Association opened a small Washington, DC, office at 1146 19th Street NW. Through a stronger presence inside the Beltway, we hope to influence the Congress to fully fund the VA healthcare system



Gerard M. Kelly
Executive Director
Eastern Paralyzed Veterans Association

and to distribute these funds equitably across this great nation.

Another change of which we are certain, but are unsure of when it will occur, involves our name. At some point before January 29, 2005, the Eastern Paralyzed Veterans Association will become the United Spinal Association. We are currently working through, with some experienced outside assistance, how to position ourselves appropriately so that our name change has the minimum impact on both our members and donors. We want to be certain

that both of these groups recognize us easily when we are the United Spinal Association.

The Eastern Paralyzed Veterans Association, since the beginning of our growth in the 1970s under Jim Peters' leadership, has always taken great pride in its work on major disability issues in our nation. Back in those days and in a variety of ways, we started to seek better accessibility to multifamily housing, public transportation systems, and commercial airports and aircraft. Our efforts then were local, with such agencies as New York City Transit, the New Jersey Department of Community Affairs, and Rehabilitation International's Access to the Skies program. We enjoyed some success, and a good deal of what we accomplished in our home area became important federal laws like the Air Carrier Access Act of 1986, the Fair Housing Amendments Act of 1988, and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990.

Since the adoption of these and other laws, the Eastern Paralyzed Veterans Association has worked tirelessly to educate the public, disabled and non-disabled, about how to comply with them. We plan to stay on this course in the months ahead and in fact to expand our public education as resources allow. Disability advocacy is yet another hallmark of our Association, which will continue in our new life as the United Spinal Association.

At the time of this writing, other significant changes and expansion of our programs and services are under consideration or in the development stage, so reporting them at this time may be premature. However, I can tell you about a few ideas, which came from a long-range planning effort undertaken by a committee of our Board of Directors in 2002.

While the Eastern Paralyzed Veterans Association has 2,300 members in some 37 states, the vast majority of our members live in New York, New Jersey, and eastern Pennsylvania. We are a regional organization currently, looking to evolve into a

national group. When the time came to expand during our 1970s spurt of growth, we chose then to open regional offices—in Buffalo, New York, and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. This system has worked extremely well for us over the years, so if expansion occurs in our future, it will no doubt be accomplished by opening branch offices.

We are also looking at ways to grow our membership. One idea is to open our membership to people of all ages with some type of spinal cord paralysis. This approach seems to be the most sensible, because some of the programs we run, such as Research, Advocacy, Legislation, and Legal Affairs, help folks, veteran or not, to lead productive lives. The theory is that we have been helping people, and not just veterans, with paralysis throughout this land for many years. Why not invite such folks to become members? While no final decision on membership growth has been made, allowing nonveteran paralyzed persons to join our group seems the natural next step.

Should we decide to seek members nationally, we have an outside entity reviewing the type of benefits we would need to provide to attract large numbers of new members. This seems to be yet another potentially good next step into our future. We need to see what this type of benefits package would cost us before considering it further.

While we have made several important changes, veterans benefits service and disability advocacy continue to be the strong suits of the Eastern Paralyzed Veterans Association. You can be sure that our future will include more changes, but you can be equally certain that our long tradition of advocating for quality veterans healthcare and benefits will continue as we expand and change our programs to meet the needs of our growing and changing membership.

Gerard M. Kelly