

VA Veterans' Readiness and Employment: The Who, What and How of this Great Benefit

by Pete Demarkis - Senior Benefits Advocate

Hello and (hopefully) good end-of-winter to you all! While I am certainly not a groundhog, I am hoping we dodged a real winter and we're on our way to Spring. In any case, please continue to be safe out there on the road, and continue to be watchful for black ice on those colder days!

Today we will be discussing VA's Veterans Readiness and Employment benefit, or VR&E, previously known as Vocational Rehabilitation & Employment, or *Voc Rehab*. You may also hear or see this benefit called Chapter 31, as it refers to the section under Title 38 of the United States Code (38 USC, Ch.31). Feel free to educate yourself with some light reading here, <https://uscode.house.gov/view.xhtml?path=/prelim@title38/part3/chapter31&edition=prelim>.

Unfortunately, this benefit is currently only available to service-connected Veterans, and in some cases, family members and service members still on Active Duty. That said, for non-service-connected Veterans, or anyone else interested, you should feel free to reach out to PVA's similar program representatives, via the provided link (<https://pva.org/find-support/veterans-career-program/>).

What?: So, what is VR&E? Well, for service-connected Veterans, if one or a combination of some/all your service-connected conditions inhibits your ability to work or remain *gainfully employed*, VR&E assists in figuring out ways

to work around your limits, which can include providing resources to completely retrain you in a new field that better suits your needs and abilities. VR&E provides personal assistance via Counselors and other professionals, in areas such as finding your hidden or unknown talents, learning new skills or touching up on previously acquired talents and skills, finding a new career, starting your own business, or simply completing the necessary training to return to an old job. Best part about this program, aside from reestablishing or reinventing your future-professional-self, all resources are provided by VA. VR&E programs are tailored specifically to each individual, and follow one of, or a combination of five different tracks, which all lead towards attaining the ultimate goal and are accompanied by staff that see you through the program(s) in their entirety.

The **Reemployment track**, assists in getting the Veteran back to a former position, and can also support the employer in meeting the needs of the Veteran. After all, Veterans are protected under the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act (USERRA), and cannot be disadvantaged due to their military service (i.e. service-connected conditions). The VR&E program can help you get back to your old job, so long as a service-connected disability(ies) limits your ability to prepare for, obtain, and maintain *suitable employment* (a stable job that matches your abilities and interests and doesn't exacerbate your conditions).

In the **Rapid Access to Employment track**, Veterans are assisted in finding the right career to match the existing skills, education and experience. Resources provided can include professional or vocational counseling, resume writing, determining and applying for Veterans'

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SAVE THE DATE
NEPVA Chapter Golf Tournament
August 19, Hingham, MA
South Shore Country Club

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Denise Harvey Holly Warshaw
Maureen Morrison-Bohnwagner

NEPVA ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE

1208 VFW Parkway, Ste 301,
West Roxbury, MA 02132
Telephone: (617) 942-8678, 1-(800) 660-1181
FAX: (857) 203-9685;
Office Hours: Monday-Friday 9:00am-4:30pm

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Executive Director's Report

By Mark Murphy
Executive Director NEPVA

Dear Friends,

On Saturday, February 3rd I attended the 2024 New England Fishing Expo at the Royal Plaza Trade Center in Marlborough, MA. We had a table there with information about the Chapter and our NEPVA Bass Trail Fishing Program, where we accepted donations throughout the weekend in support of that program. It was wonderful to see and meet so many people who stopped by the table to learn more about our Chapter and to donate. The NEPVA Bass Trail is one of our most successful sports programs, and we are proud of the many ways in which it has developed and grown over the years.

Speaking of our the NEPVA Bass Trail, on January 31st I participated in a Zoom meeting regarding the PVA Bass Tournament Spring Series. Our Chapter has been invited by PVA to consider working with them to host a Bass Tournament Spring event sometime next year in 2025 as part of their annual series, so the meeting was to go over details in terms of the initial planning for that. Planning for an event like this takes a ton of time and effort, so that is why we are discussing this so early. Held at lakes and rivers known for excellent fishing opportunities, the PVA Bass Tour Series accommodates anglers interested in fishing from a boat or those who just want to enjoy the serenity of fishing from the bank. They host an open division on boats and a bank division to support all anglers. They have volunteer boat captains experienced in fishing the PVA Bass Tournament Series and the bank division creates a safe environment with knowledgeable volunteers who assist participants throughout the competition. I am excited for the opportunity we will have to be a part of the series next year.

The NEPVA Bass Trail
is one of our most successful sports programs,
and we are proud of the
many ways in which it
has developed and grown
over the years.

A major project that we completed over the last few weeks was finalizing all our financial disclosures, including our Annual Report and recent annual audit, which has now been submitted to PVA National. We are immensely grateful to Chapter bookkeeper Charlene Raikany who shepherded us from start to finish in getting all our books balanced and squared away for the annual audit. This crucial project took up a lot of my time as well over the past several weeks and months, so I am happy we are now done with it! And I am even happier that the



state of our Chapter finances is strong as we continue to progress along in this current fiscal year.

As I alluded to in my article last month, I am pleased to now share that we have a "Save the Date" for our 4th Annual New England PVA Chapter Golf Tournament: Monday, August 19th at the South Shore Country Club in Hingham, MA. More information to come!

Sincerely,

Mark Murphy
Executive Director



▶ Pushing Access Forward

2024 POLICY PRIORITIES



For more than 75 years, **PARALYZED VETERANS OF AMERICA**—the only congressionally chartered veterans service organization dedicated solely for the benefit and representation of veterans with spinal cord injury or diseases (SCI/D), like MS and ALS—has led the fight for accessibility and provided a full circle of support from the point of injury or diagnosis to all of life's milestones. With offices inside every Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) SCI/D center

across the U.S., PVA is unmatched. Staffed with licensed architects, medical professionals, legal experts, and leaders in research and education, PVA fights to help veterans with SCI/D receive the benefits they earned, the specialized health care they deserve, the accessible homes and vehicles they need, and the meaningful careers they want. PVA also advocates for disabled veterans with the greatest support needs to have equitable access to the same opportunities and freedoms available to all Americans.

To review PVA's policy priorities in depth, please visit [PVA.org](https://www.pva.org).

Protect Access to VA's Specialized Health Care Services

VA's health care system must receive sufficient funding in order to continue providing the specialty care needed by veterans with SCI/D. Without adequate funding, VA will not be able to properly care for veterans, hire and retain health care professionals and support workers, and maintain and expand VA's medical infrastructure. PVA advocates for proper funding for VA's SCI/D system of care through the **Independent Budget**—a partnership with DAV, PVA, and VFW. Critical reforms are also needed so VA can adequately meet veterans' health care needs.



Staffing

VA must effectively use the pay and workforce provisions approved in Public Law 117-103 (RAISE Act provisions) and the PACT Act (Public Law 117-168) to recruit and retain necessary health care professionals, particularly those needed for VA's SCI/D system of care. VA must also increase retention incentives and reform its hiring processes, including working with Congress to make needed reforms. Congress must also take additional action to boost pay caps for other providers not included in the RAISE Act provisions and PACT Act.



Infrastructure

VA's infrastructure processes need to be reformed and staffing increased to allow the department to effectively use needed funding. VA also must develop a nationwide infrastructure plan to better address the SCI/D system's unique care delivery model.

Washington Update

PVA Submits Statement for Hearing on Survivors' Benefits

On January 30, the House Veterans' Affairs Committee held a full committee oversight hearing on supporting our nation's surviving military families. The first panel was witnesses from the VA which included the Under Secretary for Benefits, Josh Jacobs. The second panel was witnesses from VFW, the National Military Family Association (NMFA), and the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS).

Committee members pressed VA for answers regarding claims processing delays, necessary improvements, and scrutinized the move of the Office of Survivors Assistance (OSA) to the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA). Congress questioned the staffing capacity of OSA lamenting that the office only has three employees. VBA pushed back claiming hundreds of VA staff worked with survivors across the country, they just didn't work within the OSA office.

The second panel, comprised mostly of survivors, shared stories of loss and their frustration with VA when it came to claims processing, repeated unjust denials, and other complications experienced when attempting to access benefits. Committee members asked thoughtful questions of the second panel and were surprised by many of their experiences as they tried to access their benefits.

PVA submitted a statement for the record which highlighted the unique needs of our members and the experiences of our surviving spouses and caregivers. Our statement addressed improving access to benefits for survivors, increasing the amount of Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC), providing access to additional DIC benefits for ALS surviving spouses, requiring parity for dependent children covered by the Civilian Health and Medical Program of the Department of Veterans Affairs (CHAMPVA), and addressing the employment needs of survivors. You can find PVA's statement [here](#). You can also watch the hearing [here](#).

Produced by PVA
Government Relations Department

Upcoming Webinar on PVA's 2024 Policy Priorities to Prepare for our National President's Testimony

Join us on February 27 at 3:00 PM ET for a webinar about how you can advocate for our 2024 policy priorities during PVA's upcoming congressional testimony. The webinar, which is open to the public, will feature a special intro by PVA National President Robert Thomas and an overview of our 2024 policy priorities, key legislation, and a preview of National President Thomas' testimony. We will also discuss ways you can get involved and a toolkit that can be used to help us spread the word on issues important to PVA members, their families, and caregivers.

To attend the webinar, please register by clicking [here](#). We look forward to your participation!

VA Reviewing Whether Psychedelics Can Treat PTSD and Depression

Last month, the VA issued a press release announcing that the department has issued a request for applications for proposals from its network of VA researchers, in collaboration with academic institutions, to study the use of certain psychedelic compounds in treating posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression.

Through this new research opportunity, VA intends to gather definitive scientific evidence on the potential efficacy and safety of psychedelic compounds such as Methylenedioxymethamphetamine (MDMA) and psilocybin when used in conjunction with psychotherapy to treat veterans with PTSD and depression. This is the first time since the 1960s that VA is funding research on such compounds.

Lykos Therapeutics recently announced that the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has accepted its new drug application for MDMA used in combination with psychological intervention provided by a qualified healthcare provider for individuals with PTSD. The FDA has granted the application priority review and has assigned a target action date of August 11, 2024. If approved, this would be the first MDMA-assisted therapy and psychedelic-assisted therapy available to treat individuals with PTSD in the U.S.

Government Relations Report

Dear NEPVA Members,

It's that time of year again – National PVA has announced the 2024 federal legislative priorities.

Our advocacy team is gearing up for another successful AD/LEG in Washington, D.C. in early June. We are committed to advancing these issues both in the Capital and in the district. If you are interested in joining our efforts and being trained on how to effectively advocate for paralyzed veterans, please reach out to me at kristen@pvanewengland.org. There are so many meaningful ways to get involved and make a difference in the lives of your fellow veterans. A great way to start is to check out the upcoming webinar on February 27th!

*Kristen McCone Gordon
Director of Government and Community Affairs*



I look forward to updating you on our legislative victories in 2024.

With gratitude for your service,

Kristen McCone Gordon

National PVA Hosts Advocacy Webinar

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PVA 2024 POLICY PRIORITIES

Protect Access to VA's Specialized Health Care Services

Expand Access to VA Long-Term Services and Supports

- Facility-Based Long-Term Care
- Home and Community-Based Services and Caregiver Supports

Improve VA Benefits and Health Care Services for Paralyzed Veterans and their Survivors

- Veterans and Survivor Benefits
- Transportation Programs and Supports
- Life Insurance Benefits
- Home Modification Grants
- Health Care and Benefits for Women Veterans
- Assisted Reproductive Technologies

Protect the Civil Rights of People with Disabilities

- Improve Access to Air Travel
- Increase Disability Access

Improve Access to Social Security Benefits

Increase Employment Prospects for Veterans with Disabilities

2024 POLICY PRIORITIES



Expand Access to VA Long-Term Services and Supports

VA's services span the spectrum from facility-based care to home and community-based services. Increased availability of long-term services and supports is crucial to the ongoing health of paralyzed veterans, as well as ensuring all veterans are able to receive the care they need throughout their lives in the setting of their choice.



Facility-Based Long-Term Care

VA must adequately assess the number of veterans with SCI/D who need facility-based specialty long-term care and implement policies that will increase beds and prioritize related infrastructure projects.



Home and Community-Based Services and Caregiver Supports

Congress and VA must increase access to home and community based-services, including expanding programs like Veteran-Directed Care and modernizing VA's Bowel and Bladder program for family caregivers. Congress and VA must also prioritize efforts to increase the direct care workforce that provides the services and supports veterans with SCI/D require to live in their communities. In addition, veterans must be authorized to receive a sufficient number of hours of support each week to ensure their daily needs are met.

VA must reform the Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers (PCAFC). Restrictive eligibility criteria have kept some paralyzed veterans from being found eligible for this program. For those veterans who are not eligible for the PCAFC, VA should provide them with more information about other programs available to help them, including the general caregiver program. VA must also ensure that veterans found eligible for the program are assigned the appropriate tier for their caregiving needs.



2024 POLICY PRIORITIES



Improve VA Benefits and Health Care Services for Paralyzed Veterans and their Survivors



Veterans and Survivor Benefits

Congress must increase VA Special Monthly Compensation/Aid and Attendance benefits for catastrophically disabled veterans to offset increased costs for home care and other needed supports.

Congress must continue to improve access to services and benefits for veterans who have experienced military sexual trauma.

Congress must pass legislation ending forfeiture of military retirement pay to receive VA disability compensation.

Congress must increase the rate of Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC) for surviving dependents and lower the eligibility threshold. Congress must also ensure survivors of ALS veterans have access to enhanced DIC benefits.



Transportation Programs and Supports

Congress must authorize veterans who have nonservice-connected catastrophic disabilities to receive adaptive equipment from VA to drive their vehicles. VA and Congress must also provide improved transportation services and supports that help veterans access needed health care, including increasing the beneficiary travel reimbursement rate and reforming the reimbursement process.



Life Insurance Benefits

Congress must reform VAlife to allow premium waivers for catastrophically disabled veterans and ensure ALS veterans' survivors receive these critical benefits.



Home Modification Grants

Congress must raise the rate of funding available through VA's Home Improvements and Structural Alterations grant program to allow eligible veterans to access needed housing modifications due to their disabilities.



Health Care and Benefits for Women Veterans

VA must consider the unique needs of women veterans with SCI/D when delivering and developing services and benefits, including those that are gender specific.



Assisted Reproductive Technologies

Congress must repeal VA's ban on IVF and authorize VA to provide assisted reproductive technology, including IVF, surrogacy, and gamete donation at VA for any veterans enrolled in VA health care.

2024 POLICY PRIORITIES



Protect the Civil Rights of People with Disabilities

Protecting the civil rights of people with disabilities is important to ensuring their ability to access the opportunities and freedoms available to all Americans to allow them to live, work, travel, and fully participate in society.



Improve Access to Air Travel

Congress must make systemic changes in the next FAA Reauthorization to improve air travel for people with disabilities, particularly wheelchairs users, by reforming the Air Carrier Access Act to add standards for aircraft accessibility and improve enforcement of the law. Congress must also improve paralyzed veterans' access to programs that facilitate the security screening process.



Increase Disability Access

Congress must enhance tax incentives to help businesses comply with their obligations under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Also, the Department of Justice (DOJ) must investigate more individual ADA complaints and publicly report information on filed and adjudicated complaints. DOJ must also issue long-overdue regulations related to hotel bed height and accessible medical equipment standards.

Industries creating new models and forms of transportation, including electric and autonomous vehicles, must ensure disability access as a matter of equity. Existing transportation providers must also increase accessible features to ensure greater access for people with disabilities.

Improve Access to Social Security Benefits



Congress must end the five-month wait for Social Security disability insurance benefits to ensure people with disabilities have financial support when they most need it. Congress must also ensure that caregivers who are out of the workforce due to caregiving responsibilities are able to receive credit under Social Security.

Increase Employment Prospects for Veterans with Disabilities



Congress must increase access to employment opportunities for veterans with significant disabilities through tax incentives for employers and improvements to supports provided to veterans through the state workforce system. VA's Veteran Readiness and Employment program must ensure veterans with catastrophic disabilities are able to fully access the services that allow them to return to work.

Service Officers Report

continued from page 1

Preference with federal, state and municipal employment, interview preparation and anything else that is needed to get you connected with the best-suited position for you.

The **Self-Employment track** is pretty much self-explanatory. VA can assist you in starting your own business, should this be an appropriate direction. Service-connected Veterans who have the ability and will to run a successful business, will be provided coordinated services, which include developing a business plan/proposal, conducting analyses of the business concept, guidance on obtaining resources to implement the business plan, and after-development reviews, evaluations and discussions of other viable options. VR&E will also provide any needed training in small-business operations, to include marketing, finances and other related areas.

by Pete Demarkis - Senior Benefits Advocate

In VA VR&E's **Employment Through Long-Term Services track**, Veterans service-connected for conditions that make it difficult to be successful in employment, education (or additional education) and training (or retraining) can be used in getting you to a place that better suits your current needs, abilities and interests. In other words, if your service-connected conditions prevent you from doing what you used to, VA will provide the resources to get the 'new you' retrained for something new. Resources provided can include multiple skills and interests assessments, job-market evaluations, field-specific education and/or training (think college, apprenticeships, internships, licenses, etc.), as well as career guidance. VR&E won't be done with you until you're in a new career and thriving, and will provide all the needed resources along the way.

Lastly, VR&E's **Independent Living track** can provide services for those of us who may not be ready to get back to work, however, would benefit from getting us to the point where we're living as independently as possible, and removing any barriers to other tracks. If a Veteran's service-connected condition inhibits their ability to work, or limits access to the community, the ability to interact with others or perform activities of daily living (ADL), program staff will provide counseling and education to identify goals, skills, interests, needs and abilities, creating goals and plans that may eventually lead to employment, and assist in obtaining benefits to adapt the home and/or vehicle and referrals to other support resources.

In addition to the above-identified tracks, VR&E also provides several other related programs and incentives for those participating. Follow the link to learn more about VR&E <https://www.va.gov/careers-employment/vocational-rehabilitation/>.

Who?: Ok, so now that we've discussed some of the possible routes for utilizing these benefits, let's briefly discuss who exactly is eligible. Eligibility is pretty straightforward; Veterans should've received a discharge other than Dishonorable, and are service-connected for a condition that is 1. Rated at least 10%, and 2. that/those disability(ies) limits the ability to prepare for, obtain and maintain a stable job that matches your abilities and interests and

doesn't exacerbate your conditions. The last part of eligibility dictates how long these benefits will be available to you. For Veterans discharged from a period of Active Duty prior to 01JAN2013, you will have 12 years to utilize VR&E from the date of discharge or the date you received notice of service-connection, whichever is later. For Veterans discharged after 01JAN2013, there is no time limit for eligibility as of today. In addition, please note that the period of eligibility may be extended if you're found to have a *serious employment handicap* (initial and extended evaluations provided).

How?: For those who are eligible, application for VR&E can be done several ways. If you're 'old-school,' like myself, you can mail your application (VA Form 28-1900) to "Department of Veterans Affairs VR&E Intake Center, PO Box 5210, Janesville, WI 53547-5210." You may also contact or visit your local VA Regional Office, as there are offices across the country, and you may check-in with your local VAMC, as there may be representatives available to assist. There is also an online application tool, using the following link, <https://www.va.gov/careers-employment/vocational-rehabilitation/>. In addition to applying through these resources, and as always, should you have any questions regarding VR&E, or any other VA healthcare or benefits-related inquires, feel free to reach out to your local PVA National Service Officer.

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BOSTON VA REGIONAL OFFICE

Joseph E. Badzmierowski
Director of Field Services
J.F.K. Federal Building - Room - 1575 C
BOSTON, MA 02203
phone: (617) 303-1395
fax: (617) 303-1396

WEST ROXBURY/BROCKTON VAMC

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Michael Snape, National Service Officer III
Bldg. 248, Room 112
Augusta, ME 04330
phone: (207) 621-7394
fax: (207) 621-4829
Serving Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont

BRONX SCI

Amauris Polanco, National Service Officer III
Paralyzed Veterans of America
James J. Peters VAMC
130 West Kingsbridge Rd., Room 1D-52A
Bronx, NY 10468
phone: (718) 584-9000 ext. 6272

MANHATTAN

Zachary T. Nuetzel, National Service Officer
Paralyzed Veterans of America
201 Varick St., Room 4W59.50
New York, NY 10014
phone: (212) 807-3114
zacharyn@pva.org
Serving New York, New Jersey and Connecticut

SYRACUSE VAMC

Charlie Tocci, East-North Area Manager
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OUR VETERAN JOURNEY 2023-2024

From the bedside to the transition home and beyond, PVA fights for catastrophically disabled veterans, their families and caregivers at every twist and turn along their life journey. PVA advocates before Congress to ensure their claims are filed, their benefits are secured, and that they receive specialized, veteran-centric health care. PVA also works to ensure our members' voices are heard year-round and that they are given equitable access to meaningful careers, adaptive housing and automobile grants, accessible communities, assisted reproductive technologies, and more. And when a veteran has passed on, PVA works to ensure their families are taken care of.



Protect Access to VA's Specialized Health Care Services
S. 10 VA CAREERS Act
H.R. 3225/S. 42 BUILD for Veterans Act
✓S. 2174 VA Minor Construction Threshold Adjustment Act of 2023
S. 2516 Veterans Accessibility Act of 2023



Expand Access to VA Long-Term Services and Supports
H.R. 542/S. 141 Elizabeth Dole Home and Community Based Services for Veterans and Caregivers Act
H.R. 1815/S. 495 Expanding Veterans' Options for Long Term Care Act



Increase Access to Home Modifications
H.R. 2818/S. 3290 Autonomy for Disabled Veterans Act
H.R. 4047 Autonomy for All Disabled Veterans Act



Improve Veterans and Survivor Benefits
H.R. 303/S.1515 Retired Pay Restoration Act
H.R. 333 Disabled Veterans Tax Termination Act
H.R. 1282/S. 344 Major Richard Star Act
H.R. 1083/S. 414 Caring for Survivors Act
H.R. 2441/S. 1028 Servicemembers and Veterans Empowerment and Support Act
H.R. 3790/S. 1590 Justice for ALS Veterans Act



Improve Access to Assisted Reproductive Technologies
H.R. 544 Veterans Infertility Treatment Act of 2023
H.R. 5492/S. 2801 Veteran Families Health Services Act of 2023



Improve Access to Air Travel
H.R. 1267/S. 545 Air Carrier Access Amendments Act
H.R. 3082/S.1459 Mobility Aids on Board Improve Lives and Empower All Act



Increase Employment Prospects for Veterans with Disabilities



Improve Access to Social Security Benefits
S. 3400 We Can't Wait Act
H.R. 883/S. 320 Stop the Wait Act
H.R. 671 Social Security Enhancement and Protection Act
H.R. 3729/S. 1211 Social Security Caregiver Credit Act
H.R. 4583/S. 2280 Social Security 2100 Act

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Paralyzed Veterans of America
New England Chapter
1208 VFW Parkway, Suite 301
West Roxbury, MA 02132

tel: 617 942-8678
800 660-1181
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Email: info@pvanewengland.org

Office Hours: Monday-Friday 9:00am-4:30pm



Paralyzed Veterans of America

New England Chapter

**Visit Us on the internet at
pvanewengland.org
for all the latest event info**

Join Us at Our Upcoming Events

additional dates to be announced soon.

PVA Bass Trail Tournaments-TBA

VA Summer Sports Clinic, July 22-26, Rhode Island

National Veterans Wheelchair Games, July 25-30, New Orleans

NEPVA Chapter Golf Tournament August 19, Hingham, MA

Annual Shooting Events

Annual Boccia Tournament