For 125 years, Volunteers of America (VOA) has served on the frontlines helping countless people in need. In 1896, when social reformers Ballington and Maud Booth founded VOA, it was for the same mission we maintain today—to serve the country’s most vulnerable. From homeless veterans to seniors and families in need to at-risk youth, men and women returning from prison, and those recovering from addiction, our organization continues to transform and empower lives in 400 communities nationwide.

In 2021, as we celebrate our 125th anniversary, VOA has become one of the nation’s largest and most comprehensive human services organizations with 16,000 paid professionals, touching the lives of 1.5 million people a year. We operate 30 affiliates in 46 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico. Most recently, VOA launched programs to help those with moral injury. “Volunteers of America has become one of the largest charities in the U.S.,” National President Mike King explained. “When the organization sees an area where assistance is needed, it mobilizes.”

About the word “volunteer”: When we were founded, volunteerism had a different meaning. To “volunteer” meant to serve others as a vocation. Early members of VOA called themselves “Volunteers,” and carried out their ministry and social services work under the slogan, “For God and Country.”
March 8, 2021

Dear friends and family,

During our 125-year history, Volunteers of America has been on the frontlines serving those most in need of our help. As the world battled the plague of COVID-19, the past year has genuinely put our collective resolve to the test. But as we have for more than a century, the people who make VOA a genuinely great organization have stepped up to assist a rapidly growing population affected by the pandemic, doing so with a passion and energy that fills me with pride.

In the pages of this special 125th Anniversary Edition of Gazette, you will read the remarkable stories of dedicated helpers nationwide. Each of our regional affiliates contributing to this issue illustrates the wide variety of services we provide across the United States. These inspiring stories show that we continue to follow the motto of our co-founders Maud and Ballington Booth— “to go wherever we are needed, and do whatever comes to hand.”

Volunteers of America has served this nation’s citizens through two world wars, the Great Depression, natural disasters such as Hurricane Katrina, and now, COVID-19. Faced with the current crisis, we continue to innovate and evolve to meet the needs of today. Expansion of online services, new healthcare delivery models, a growing understanding of moral injury, and many other innovations are represented in this special edition of Gazette.

While the present seems dark at times, I know the future—both for our country and Volunteers of America—shines bright. By reaching out to help neighbors in need, we will emerge on the other side of the horizon stronger than ever, able to meet new challenges well into the future.

Sincerely,

Mike King
National President & CEO
Volunteers of America

The Little Mother:
Maud Ballington Booth

Maud Elizabeth Charlesworth was born in the peaceful, beautiful, little village of Limpsfield, Surrey, on September 13, 1865. “Happy is the child born in the country, away from ugly streets and city noise and dirt,” she, as Maud Ballington Booth, would later write in the first line of her memoirs, “A Rector’s Daughter in Victorian England.” Her carefree childhood could not begin to foreshadow the blood, sweat and tears of commitment to mission that would manifest well into her later years, making her one of the most remarkable and beloved female leaders in America.

“The contrast between her restricted, upper-class upbringing more than a century ago and the career she developed is fascinating,” wrote her biographer, Susan F. Welty. “The stratified, class-conscious, religiously rigid society in which she grew up differed sentimentally and technologically from that in the late 20th century; but the human problems in different dress are much the same: to establish one’s own identity, to learn how to live a good life in a family and to discover how to bridge the gap between the rich and the poor in society. Some of Maud’s attempted solutions were funny, but anyone laughing at them is gaining at the same time a better understanding of his forebears and more sympathy for his own generation and its puzzle to find better solutions.”

And that she did. Almost singlehandedly reforming the treatment of prisoners in the United States penal system; creating new beginnings for unwanted and unmarried women with children; providing city-dwelling children “fresh air” camps in the country; feeding and clothing the poorest of the poor, and all the while, delivering these services without indignation, but always with the promise of hope for bettering oneself and circumstance.

Mobilizing the Human Spirit

The following excerpts dispersed throughout this issue of the Gazette are part of The Human Spirit Initiative, an effort to turn historical data into an inspirational tool for all interested in the role of human services and civic engagement in the United States in the 20th and 21st centuries. Volunteers of America is most grateful to the late Anne Nixon, who collaborated with the organization in collecting and preserving this historical information about Maud and Ballington Booth for future generations.
The Adolescent Residential Center for Help (ARCH) treatment program is for adolescents aged 12-18 diagnosed with a substance use disorder and may also present with co-occurring mental health disorders. Length of stay is individualized based on each client’s unique needs aligned with the American Society of Addiction Medicine (ASAM) dimensions and severity.

ARCH allows youth to address their substance use and mental health needs in a structured, therapeutic environment where they are given a chance to learn and apply coping skills, examine their maladaptive behavior patterns and replace them with an effective daily program of recovery, improve upon and build healthier social and familial relationships, increase their readiness for change, practice relapse prevention, and address any issues that have contributed to their relapse cycle as they actively integrate back into their home community.

ARCH is housed in a state-of-the-art facility in Eagle River, Alaska. The 16-bed facility provides on-site mental health and behavioral health services from a highly qualified clinical team, consulting psychiatrist, and consulting psychologist. ARCH residents are provided 20 or more hours of therapeutic behavioral health services in a group setting per week and may receive additional clinic services to address any co-occurring mental health needs, including vocational skill training and milieu counseling. Meals are provided at no charge to residents.

ARCH partners with the Anchorage School District to provide an on-site high school, McKinley Heights, managed by one Anchorage School District teacher and one teacher’s aide. Students are given individualized lessons with specialized services for learning disabled and developmentally delayed adolescents. The school and the ARCH treatment team are in close collaboration to ensure school and treatment are combined in the most beneficial way for our clients.
Volunteers of America Chesapeake & Carolinas

Dawud Abdul-Wakil Gets Cooking!

Dawud Abdul-Wakil has always loved to cook. When he was little, his friends would be playing outside, but he wanted to be in the kitchen with grandma. At 19, he enrolled in a culinary program, but he was young and couldn’t keep his focus. Since then, he has worked in a wide variety of jobs, many within the food industry. But over the years, there were troubles and mistakes made.

At 40, Dawud found himself separated from his family, homeless, and in a dark, negative place. Then through the Arlington Education Center, he heard of an opportunity for a scholarship with La Cocina VA (LCVA). “That day changed my life!” said Dawud, “It was like I could, at last, see the light at the end of the tunnel.” Now mid-way through the training program, in a class with students from all over the world of different ages and backgrounds, he has found a supportive place to grow. “Everyone is so welcoming. It’s a very positive vibe here. The staff and my classmates motivate me—we encourage one another—if they can do this, so can I.”

Through many years of restaurant work, Dawud developed useful skills, but he could never move up. Now he is getting the industry certification to do so and welcomes the responsibility. “Here I’m getting a Food Manager Certification, which is good for five years, that’s serious!” Dawud affirms that it’s not just more culinary skills he’s acquiring but learning overall life skills and reshaping his priorities that are making a difference. It takes openness and hard work, but he is ‘learning how to be successful…. I’m changing who I used to be, to who I want to become.”

Now Dawud is part of a team. He and his classmates prepare meals for those in shelters and low-income housing, a part of LCVA’s food assistance program that distributes 12,000 meals annually. They are also creating healthy food for inhabitants of the Residential Program Center in Arlington, VA, the homeless shelter where Dawud lives. “It feels so good to be able to do this, to help those who really need it.” There are people with many problems, who have lost so much, and a good meal at the end of the day means a lot to them.

Dawud hopes to one day get into management in the food industry. He dreams of educating children on the importance of healthy eating and opening up a restaurant of his own. After so many years, he’s back on track, “This is me. This is what I love to do!”

Christian Outreach

“Preach the gospel at all times. If necessary, use words.”
—St. Francis of Assisi

Maud was the daughter of Samuel Charlesworth—a distinguished Anglican cleric. The Charlesworth family had been in service to the church since the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. Maud grew up in London, in an East Limehouse parish where Reverend Charlesworth ministered to the local middle-class population. Their poorer neighbors never attended this church, but Maria Charlesworth, Maud’s mother, took pity on the slum children—most of who were too shabby to be seen in a regular school. She organized a “ragged school” so that these poorest children could receive some education and she offered the poor women of the parish religious teachings while serving them tea and snacks.

Near the Charlesworths’ church was the Christian Mission. Their focus was to serve the poorest Londoners. They reached out to them by holding lively street meetings with spirited sermons, prayers and songs. These outdoor services were a target for local toughs who not only made fun of them but also were a threatening presence. Reverend Charlesworth came to the aid of the Christian Mission, inviting them to use his church’s courtyard to conduct their meetings in peace and safety. Maud and her mother often attended the Christian Mission services and Maud was especially drawn to the Mission’s enthusiastic way of reaching out directly and personally to God. It wasn’t much later that the Christian Mission changed its name to The Salvation Army, with the motto “Blood and Fire” for the blood of Christ and the fire of the Holy Spirit.
The Volunteers of America Colorado’s Retired Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP) “Socks for Vets” program has evolved into a wonderful collaboration with community partners—Soldiers Angels, Sock It To Em Sock Campaign, and RSVP Project Warmth volunteers. Every month, the program has a packing day where the team packs socks, toiletries when available, knitted hats, gloves, afghans, and other donated items to pass out to veterans and their families at the monthly Soldiers Angels Mobile Food Bank. Before COVID, the volunteers were also passing out these items at the Volunteers of America Colorado Bill Daniels Veterans Service Center during their community lunches for homeless veterans. Over 12,000 pairs of socks have been provided to homeless veterans and those in need of this basic necessity to date. Dan Berg has been a lead volunteer for this Program, and when COVID-19 began to hit so many, he saw another need, masks. The man who had never sewn anything in his life bought a sewing machine, taught himself how to use it, and began making masks for veterans. The number now totals over 1,000 masks Dan has made himself!! Great job to everyone who has helped collaborate on this project!

The Bakuru’s Success Story
Brunetti Lofts Transformational Housing Program played a vital role in assisting the Bakurus, a refugee family, in purchasing their very own home. The Bakuru family came to America from Nigeria. Mr. Bakuru, a husband and father of three children, said, “We were in constant fear for our lives.” Their village wasn’t safe, there were bombings almost daily, and the government killed family members. The Bakurus fled to a refugee camp. “By the grace of God, we escaped with our lives,” said Mr. Bakuru.

Once the five family members arrived safely in the United States, they were placed in transitional housing at Warren Village in Denver. Eventually, the Bakuru family qualified to move to Brunetti Lofts. While living at Brunetti, they received financial literacy classes and other one-on-one support from the Volunteers of America Colorado family service manager. The guidance they received at Brunetti enabled them to achieve their financial savings goals.

The Bakurus were so determined to become homeowners that they saved enough money to close on the purchase of their very own home within less than a year! “We are so very grateful for the opportunity given to us by Volunteers of America. We have not been in the United States of America very long, only a couple of years, and here we are fulfilling part of the American dream by becoming homeowners!” said Mr. Bakuru.
Volunteers of America, Dakotas

A unique gift from Blue Collar Tactical is transforming the way Volunteers of America, Dakotas serves veterans in need. The Sioux Falls business recently donated a trailer that our Veterans Services programs will use to bring supplies to veterans experiencing homelessness.

The gift idea started when Danielle Konechne and her team at Fisher Sisters Real Estate planned a drive and worked with various local partners who collected cleaning and home supplies for Volunteers of America, Dakotas Veterans Services. The supply drive was a success, but it was clear there was more to be done after more conversations. Paul Miller, Volunteers of America, Dakotas Director of Veterans Services, brought forward the idea of a trailer and explained how a trailer would allow them to bring needed supplies to veterans on the street who are reluctant to come into the Veterans Services Center and ask for help. By bringing supplies to veterans in need, Volunteers of America, Dakotas staff could begin to build relationships with the veterans and encourage them to come to the center for more help.

With the idea in mind, Paul and Danielle began putting the pieces, and people, together to bring it to life. Through their efforts and various connections, they were introduced to David Hughes, owner of Blue Collar Tactical, who jumped on the opportunity to bring this service to the homeless veterans in Sioux Falls. Mike Hoffman, Owner of Prairie Wind Trailers, would discount the cost of a trailer, and from there, the project became a reality. David has been serving our country for 18 years in the U.S. Army and has a passion for helping veterans. In addition to Blue Collar Tactical, David also runs Project FUBM (Freedom, Unity, Brotherhood, Military), a nonprofit to reach out to veterans who are in need of services. The project and partnership with Volunteers of America, Dakotas, will help even more veterans get the help they need.

David hopes to sustain supplies for outreach in the future and continue impacting the lives of veterans in need.
As one of the most densely populated states in the nation, New Jersey has also been significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The state as a whole has experienced a high number of COVID-19 cases from its northern most counties all the way to its southern most counties. Sadly, New Jersey also has one of the highest numbers of COVID-19 cases in its prisons and jails in the country. These facilities house large numbers of individuals with chronic diseases and complex medical issues, putting them at greater risk of contracting and spreading novel coronavirus. Unfortunately, this has resulted in many inmates and corrections staff testing positive for the virus and even losing their lives due to the virus.

In an effort to help stop the spread of the virus in both county jails and state prisons, New Jersey began to identify low-risk inmates in those facilities that could be released early. The hope was that these facilities would see a reduction in overcrowding, which would further help curtail the spread of the disease and, most importantly, reduce the number of deaths among inmates and staff. As an agency who has always provided essential services to this arguably most “difficult to serve” population, Volunteers of America Delaware Valley (VOADV) knew they could be an essential resource for these inmates – ensuring no one was left to face their sudden reentry back into society alone.

VOADV’s Safe Return program continues to be one of the only resources available to inmates, including those who were released during the pandemic. This innovative reentry program offers a wide range of essential services for individuals returning to society within three years of exiting the criminal justice system. The program’s overall goal is to provide inmates with the necessary structure, support and opportunities critical for successful reintegration into their communities.

Currently, VOADV has Safe Return programs based in Atlantic, Burlington, Camden, Cape May, Cumberland, Gloucester and Salem counties, as well as in the city of Trenton. Working collaboratively with state and local correctional facilities, county jails, local law enforcement and other community agencies, Safe Return engages with inmates and then provides them with the personalized guidance they need to transition back into society—from something as basic as hot meals or safe transportation from the jail or prison to emergency shelter beds for those individuals with nowhere else to go and access to a wide network of social services.

“Our goal is to assist these individuals, especially those who have recently exited the jail under parole and are in desperate need of help. From working with the police each day to locate these individuals to deploying outreach to local ‘hotspots’—my staff and I are driven to reach as many
of these individuals as we can, despite numerous challenges and obstacles, to make sure we get them the safety and shelter they need,” explains Dasha Brown, Program Director for Atlantic City’s Safe Return program.

However, VOADV’s efforts to assist those returning to society from the criminal justice system does not stop at Safe Return. During the pandemic, VOADV also worked closely with the New Jersey State Parole Board to provide housing and care for individuals exiting jail or prison system who may have tested positive and/or are recovering from COVID-19. The appropriate housing or recovery location is carefully identified by staff on a case-by-case basis, with special attention placed on the environment best suited for the individual—whether they need to quarantine, recuperate or if they have been displaced entirely due to the pandemic.

“This has been a carefully coordinated effort with Parole and many local contractors and community partners,” explained Kim Love, Director of Specialized Offender Services and the Community Resource Center (CRC) in Camden at VOADV. “Our goal is to find safe locations that are willing and able to receive these individuals, and then safely transition them from correctional facilities, hospitals or halfway homes to places they can receive services and care.”

Through this joint effort with the Parole Board, Kim and her staff have identified quality housing and care providers in both Newark and Jersey City, in addition to beds they have already secured in Camden. In addition to stable housing and care, VOADV is also supplying these individuals with nutritious food and drink, clothing, laundry machines, phones to contact family and friends and access to a number of essential social services.

“We are lucky to be in a position where we can work so closely with Parole and the Department of Corrections to get these individuals the shelter and services they would not have otherwise,” continued Kim. “I am very fortunate to have such a committed team of professionals who understand how important their work is and give it their all each day, both in service to these individuals and in protecting our communities.”

An Unexpected Division

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times…” —Charles Dickens

In 1894, their eighth year in the United States, Maud and Ballington were visited by General Booth. He had come to inspect the American Salvation Army. He was impressed by the welcoming ceremonies and the enthusiastic crowds as he visited posts from New York to Chicago.

However, he was displeased in many other ways. He felt that Ballington and Maud had become too American. The display of the American flag and the American eagle offended him. There was a conflict over the money collected in America. General Booth wanted to make use of these funds outside the United States, but Ballington explained that to do this would be a breach of trust against the promises made when these funds had been collected. His protests to his father were in vain. In a final disagreement, General Booth ordered Ballington and Maud to leave America immediately and return to England. They did not go, but decided to stay in their adopted country.

“We are lucky to be in a position where we can work so closely with Parole and the Department of Corrections to get these individuals the shelter and services they would not have otherwise.”
Volunteers of America Florida

Meet Michael Hatcher

Michael is a 63-year-old Navy veteran. He served in the Navy for four years, between 1978-1982. Michael is from Alabama but moved to Florida after his military service to start a beautiful nursery in Homestead. This was when Michael’s love for The Miami Dolphins started. The team helped him connect to his new home. Michael mentioned, “I was always a huge fan of Dan Marino. I was impressed by his performance on and off the field. Not only is he a great athlete, but also an outstanding community member.”

Unfortunately, starting in 2015, Michael was affected by several serious medical issues. He was diagnosed with end staged renal failure and was hospitalized for several months. Shortly after Michael recovered from kidney failure, he was diagnosed with a heart issue, which caused him to be hospitalized again. Then in 2018, Michael sustained a foot injury that led to a partial amputation. After many intense medical issues and severe financial strain related to months of hospitalization, he had no choice but to liquidate his nursery. Sadly, the funds from the liquidation simply were not enough to sustain Michael. Therefore, Michael ended up homeless.

Michael was homeless for about a year and a half. Thankfully once he connected with the VA and the Miami Homeless Trust, he was referred to Volunteers of America of Florida (VOAF). In May 2019, Michael moved into Volunteers of America of Florida’s Transitional Housing Program for Veterans in Miami. Since then, Michael has had a safe and stable place to live and heal. Michael said, “VOAF has provided me a secure transitional living experience. I have received counseling, encouragement, and motivation from staff and fellow participants. I have also enjoyed many recreation and social opportunities. I believe that my time here will lead to a stable, productive life.”

Michael came to Volunteers of America of Florida with almost nothing. Thankfully, the Miami Dolphin’s “Dolphin Meals” have greatly helped Michael and the many other Veterans in VOAFL’s Miami Program get through the pandemic safely. Michael continues to work hard with the team at Volunteers of America of Florida to plan his next steps and find him a permanent home.

A New Beginning

“We will go wherever we are needed and do whatever work comes to hand.”
—Ballington Booth

Now Maud and Ballington were without the Salvation Army, which had been their center of existence. Maud’s father, Reverend Charlesworth reconciled with his daughter and her family. When they were without a home and without income, he came to the rescue and sent them some funds to tide them over. But they had not lost their purpose and dedication to an evangelistic and philanthropic way of life.

On March 8, 1896, they drew up a constitution for a new organization, the Volunteers of America. Their mission was to “reach and uplift all people and bring them to the immediate knowledge and active service of God.” Thanks to a suggestion by Maud, the constitution included an article recognizing the equality of men and women in the Volunteers of America.
Volunteers of America Greater Baton Rouge

Wings of Mercy

For the last four months, Volunteers of America Greater Baton Rouge has continued to offer aid to displaced staff and clients who once resided in our Lake Charles area but were forced to evacuate during Hurricane Laura. Staying true to the mission of going where we are needed and doing whatever comes to hand is still our guiding principle in these uncertain times. Unfortunately, this isn’t our first rodeo with hurricanes, and we always learn from each one.

One of our transitional housing programs for adults with persistent mental illness located in Lake Charles was forced to relocate to the Baton Rouge area due to the lack of available, affordable housing after the storm. Leaving with a suitcase and a few personal belongings, 13 scared residents evacuated to Baton Rouge to take up residence in a wing of a rehabilitation hospital that would become their new home. The group voted and renamed their new home “Wings of Mercy.”

The staff working within this program also experienced damage of their homes after the hurricanes, but they have taken shifts driving the 2.5 hours to Baton Rouge and taking turns living at the facility. They are truly going above and beyond the typical workday expectations, and when asked, they conclude that they consider this part of their Christian mission. Therapists from our Reilly Counseling Center visit with the residents weekly, ensuring they stay healthy and well while residing in a new part of the state.

Elizabeth is one of the residents living at Wings of Mercy and credits Volunteers of America for saving her life. She said, “I have told the staff before I wasn’t sure there was a God, especially with everything that happened to me in the past few months even before the hurricane hit, but I KNOW now that he is ALIVE and present in Volunteers of America. I am grateful for all that they have done for me and thankful they have reminded me of my faith!”

The group has enjoyed weekly prayer and worship services from our Chaplain, Bessie Senate, and our CEO David Kneipp. Bessie visits each Friday and often tells us she is most impressed with how much this group cares for each other and takes care of each other. Bessie recounted, “Tragedy has caused an opportunity for spiritual and community bonding with this small group of people, and they exemplify a true bond.”

While the residents look forward to getting home and back to some normalcy, they enjoy outings in the Baton Rouge area with day trips to local or historic sites or restaurants. Multiple businesses and individuals adopted the Wings of Mercy group as part of the Hope Under the Tree giving program through which they received lots of Christmas gifts and new winter clothes. While it’s not home, it is not a bad way to spend the time waiting for their hometown to rebuild and become better and stronger.
Mr. Dudley and Ms. Oglesby

Mr. Dudley and Ms. Oglesby never imagined they would be homeless later in life, sleeping in shelters instead of comfortably in homes of their own.

For millions of American seniors living on the cusp of poverty, aging with dignity and not alone is a privilege they may not be afforded. The risk of homelessness and isolation is a real and urgent concern.

In 2016, after a period of incarceration, Mr. Dudley found himself in need of a permanent place to call home. His worsening health and past involvement with the justice system was making it difficult to find a job. Without any source of income besides his small social security check, his housing options were limited.

For Ms. Oglesby, who had always worked, life was comfortable in Queens, where she had an apartment of her own. Upon retiring from her job of 22 years, she moved to Virginia to live with her youngest daughter. They had a falling out, and Ms. Oglesby, with no financial safety net or other family to count on, returned to New York City, the place she knew best, and moved into a women's homeless shelter.

Both Ms. Oglesby and Mr. Dudley searched diligently for permanent housing. Eventually, each received the call they'd hoped for: they'd been granted studio apartments at Richard F. Salyer Residence, one of Volunteers of America-Greater New York's supportive housing residences in the Washington Heights area of Manhattan.

"It's great here. If you need clothes, food, they give them to you. Whatever you need," Mr. Dudley said, though he humbly admits he doesn't like to take advantage of these resources if he doesn't have to. "I try not to lean on them because there's a lot of other people worse off than me."

Ms. Oglesby recalls the moment she received the news that she'd been accepted into Salyer House. "I screamed on the phone," she said. "I think I broke the man's eardrum! I feel blessed and lucky. It's another chance at having my own place."

For individuals like Mr. Dudley and Ms. Oglesby, a safe, stable home where they can become part of a caring, supportive community and enjoy their remaining years should be a given. Dignified housing should be a human right.

Volunteers of America-Greater New York (VOA-GNY) is working to provide this basic necessity and fill the urgent demand for affordable housing by building new developments like East Clarke Place Senior Residence. This new residential program in the Bronx will welcome its first tenants in January 2021, providing a safe, lovely, and permanent home to 122 older adults. Thirty-seven units will be set aside for chronically homeless individuals and the other 84 for seniors with low or very low incomes.

For the 84 units, 26,000 individuals submitted applications. The need is clear, and VOA-GNY is committed to addressing it. Next to be built is Andrew's Avenue Senior Residence, similar to East Clarke Place. It will become home to another 100+ older adults with limited incomes in the Bronx, which is a place to safely spend their final years.
Mr. Brown

Ed Brown worked for the NYC Department of Parks and Recreation for twenty years until knee surgery forced him to leave. The long search for a job that was less physically demanding caused him to go through his savings. A proud man, Mr. Brown refused to move in with his family. Instead, he became homeless.

Once admitted to the NYC shelter system, he was assigned to Camp LaGuardia, Volunteers of America-Greater New York’s transitional shelter for 1,001 men in Chester, NY. He recalls boarding the bus in Manhattan, carrying all his belongings in two plastic bags—“a homeless person’s suitcase”—and arriving in Chester in the wee hours of the morning.

From the start, Mr. Brown felt the staff at Camp LaGuardia believed him capable of getting his life back on track. He took advantage of every opportunity offered to him at the shelter and twice was voted president of the client advisory board. But when staff, impressed with his work ethic and reliability, encouraged him to apply for a job with Volunteers of America-Greater New York (VOA-GNY), he hesitated because he worried he would be a disappointment.

Eventually, however, Mr. Brown felt confident enough to accept a Client Case Worker position at VOA-GNY. Within a few months, he had saved enough money to move into the community and an apartment of his own. That was in 2001. Since then, Mr. Brown has worked in several roles at VOA-GNY programs and has been promoted more than once. Today he is Front Desk Supervisor at Commonwealth Veterans Residence in the Bronx and is just one year away from retirement.

Mr. Brown says that the VOA-GNY theme song should be “Lean on Me.” He tells the clients he interacts with that it doesn’t matter to VOA-GNY where you’ve been, but only where you’re headed.

A Sense of Service

“It’s not the cut of a man’s coat, nor the manner of his dress. It’s service that measures success.”

—George Washington Carver

It was important to Maud to have a meaningful project of her own. The “slum sisters” had been her major concern for many years, but that had come to an end, as she had no intention of trespassing on this traditional Salvation Army undertaking. She remembered her sense of satisfaction when she had spoken with great success to the prisoner of San Quentin. Prison work was a minor part of the Salvation Army’s agenda so she would not be poaching on their territory. But was this to be her important project? She prayed for God to give her a sign.

The answer to her prayer came with a letter, which arrived in early May 1896. It came from a prisoner at Sing Sing who had met her when she worked in the New York City slums. His concern was not for himself but for his wife and her well-being while he was in prison. Most interestingly, on the letter’s envelope was a message from Sing Sing’s warden, Omar V. Sage. He had been told of Maud’s influence and inspiration on prisoners by the warden of San Quentin, and he asked if she would speak to his prisoners. This was the sign she had been waiting for. The need was great.
In 2016, my husband and I decided we were ready to expand our family of three and started really praying and thinking about fostering a child. We went through the proper training and classes and were referred to VOA Illinois through someone at our church. At the time, our friend was fostering a little boy and spoke highly about the work the foster care team was accomplishing. We decided to go for it!

Shortly after we met with the foster care team, we received a call from our case manager asking if we were willing to foster not one but two babies. A set of 9-month-old twin girls had recently been placed in their care, and they thought we would be the perfect foster parents. At the time, it was a scary request. We started this journey thinking we’d foster one child. We also had a toddler daughter at home and weren’t sure how she’d react to two new siblings. After a lot of prayer and conversation, we knew we couldn’t accept only one of the girls. God would guide us, and at the end of the day, it was one extra meal, one more set of shoes, and one more baby to love. When I look back on this decision, I always think of the day the girls arrived at our house, one on each hip of the case manager, and I knew then these girls had never had a night away from each other in their lives. I never wanted them to have to experience that separation.

After a few months, we started getting into a routine with our three girls. Remember our friend who was also fostering a child? He is the brother to the twins. Not only was our family growing, but our Church family was growing and getting closer and more connected thanks to these three precious children.

I’ll never forget the morning in 2017 when our case manager called us and asked that we meet at the VOA Illinois office with her team and the girl’s biological mother because the girl’s mother had something she wanted to talk to us about. I had no idea what to expect going into this meeting, and the outcome is something I never allowed myself to imagine. During this meeting, the girl’s biological mother asked if my husband and I would be willing to adopt the girls into our forever family. She was willing to give up her rights because she saw just how much we loved the girls and how they fit perfectly with us. It takes a strong woman to walk into that meeting and do what she did. I will forever be grateful for this gift.

My husband and I didn’t have to think about it. Of course, we would officially adopt the girls! They were already such a huge part of our lives that we couldn’t imagine a day without them, and now we wouldn’t have to. Thanks to our case manager, we were able to move quickly with the adoption paperwork, and by the time the holidays rolled around that year, we were officially a family of five.

Today, the girls are quickly growing up and finding their unique personalities. This November, they’re turning five, and I can’t believe it. I’m so grateful that we trusted our gut and started fostering the twins as babies because they gave us our forever family.

“They were already such a huge part of our lives that we couldn’t imagine a day without them, and now we wouldn’t have to. Thanks to our case manager, we were able to move quickly with the adoption paperwork.”
Little Mother and Her Boys

“For just one man, all my work would be worthwhile.” — Maud Booth

To Maud, the prisoners had become her boys and to them she was “Little Mother.” On her second visit to Sing Sing, they organized the Volunteer Prison League (VPL). The first 60 members agreed to pray, to read the Day Book (a collection of scripture verses for each day of the year), to refrain from using bad language, to follow the prison rules, and to cheer and encourage other prisoners and when possible to make them members of the league. The prisoners chose “Look Up and Hope” as their name and as their motto. Plans were made for the preparation of a group of residences to house former prisoners. Each residence would be known as “Hope Hall.”

In the first seven years of the Volunteer Prison League, 14,000 men joined. By 1912, more than 60,000 men were VPL members in 28 state prisons, and 7,500 had graduated from the four Hope Halls. These prison endeavors expanded as rapidly as possible with only the need for funding holding them back. The success of the VPL was a point of pride. VPL members regarded Volunteers of America’s staff as their “first friend.” Sixty to 75 percent of the VPL prisoners succeeded in going straight and keeping out of prison. This is in extraordinary contrast to prison data in general. Usually, 60 to 75 percent of prisoners were repeat offenders and ended up back behind bars.

When the Volunteers instituted programs enabling former prisoners to find jobs and housing, this was the start of a greater and more far-reaching mission. In the future, help and comfort would be offered by the Volunteers, not only to prisoners, but to a wider group of people with needs—homeless, destitute addicts, the disabled, abused women and children and families devastated by floods and fires.

Volunteers of America Los Angeles

MLB & The Mission Continues to Renovate VOALA All-Star

As part of the 2020 All-Star Legacy initiative, the Courtyard at the Volunteers of America Los Angeles Ballington Plaza Apartments was renovated in partnership with The Mission Continues, a nonprofit organization that empowers veterans facing the challenge of adjusting to life at home to find new missions.

This project joins several others that were part of a commitment by Major League Baseball (MLB) and the Dodgers to impact the community of Greater Los Angeles in connection to the previously scheduled 2020 MLB All-Star Game.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2020 Midsummer Classic in Los Angeles was canceled, but has been rescheduled for 2022—at which time an additional group of All-Star Legacy projects will be announced.
We are living in the age of crisis. An opioid epidemic. A global pandemic. Systemic racism. Each event will forever spark meaning and historical remembrance in our national conscience. Taken together, the first half of 2020 has been marked by the collision of three separate crises. No one can claim to be untouched by the pain we have witnessed over the past six months that has taken a lasting emotional toll on our psyche.

We have all the makings of an imminent mental health crisis.

In Massachusetts, research shows one out of four individuals have experienced a mental health illness and/or substance use disorder. And that was before coronavirus.

In the field of behavioral health, we treat the invisible scars of trauma. As an organization treating mental health and substance use disorders, Volunteers of America of Massachusetts understands that mitigating risk has taken on new meaning. Since the onset of coronavirus, our highest priority was ensuring the safety of our clients and staff while simultaneously addressing how COVID-19 fears could spike deadly opioid relapses.

Our frontline workers have continuously staffed 24/7 residential treatment programs during these unprecedented times, when social isolation—an enemy of traditional addiction recovery—was mandated. Doing whatever it takes to keep vulnerable clients safe, frontline workers modified treatment plans to include special attention to the small things to help clients feeling fear, anger, and paranoia. From games to song to dance, to whatever it took, staff helped clients focus on their goals when that was needed and provide distractions when that was necessary.

Then, a video lasting 8:46 minutes transformed a movement into a national call to action. The names Ahmaud, Breonna, and George Floyd became part of our dialogue, victims at the center of injustice and deep-rooted social inequity. Protesters’ demands for social change inspire us—along with worries for their safety. A potential second wave of COVID-19 is expected to return this year. These tensions feed trauma.

Clients in early recovery walk a continuous tightrope, balancing hope, anxiety, and self-discovery. The heightened level of anxiety and stress permeates from client to client. The greatest staff intervention is compassion. It is exhausting—and inspiring work.

Without this work, many of these clients face the potential of having to heal in the criminal justice system which is not equipped to manage this crisis.

We need to remember that the staff—our unsung heroes—also deserve compassion and need our support. One frontline worker remarked that she felt like an “essential invisible worker.” Whereas frontline health care workers during these past few months have been deservedly embraced as heroes, our staff’s frontlines are not intensive care units but residential programs. Our unsung heroes toil in obscurity while saving lives daily.

The coming storm of substance use disorders and mental health illness only means greater demands on dedicated staff who will become the next client’s case manager, recovery specialist, and counselor. That next client may be your brother, your mother, or you.

The past six months have served as a wake-up call that our behavioral health workers have been overstretched and underpaid. Supporting the mental wellbeing and resilience of frontline behavioral health care workers while they care for others is our moral imperative. We must begin by ensuring our practices and policies actively promote diversity, equity, and inclusion. We must also use our own treatment regimens as a sort of mental health jujitsu by turning around a trauma informed care of practice onto our frontline workers and ensure we are careful to consider how they experience safety, empowerment, and collaboration as part of the workplace.

We began this year in the continued throes of an opioid epidemic worsened by a global pandemic that reached our shores. We have been since shaken as a nation by the depths of overdue justice. More than ever, it seems, history is at our doorstep. This is a fight we must not turn away from. Our tools are love, compassion, and open hearts.

Through it all, our workers dedicate themselves to support our most vulnerable, often at an enormous emotional and psychological cost. We know these frontline workers are essential. We must come together to ensure through policies, resources, and practices they do not feel invisible.
Kyle Jackson, an Army Veteran, bravely served his country and then moved to Detroit, Michigan after his military service. He lived in a modest apartment, and never had any issues providing for himself.

This past spring, when COVID-19 hit his community, there were several cases in his building. Due to medical conditions that left Kyle susceptible to the deadly virus, he could not remain in his home. With nowhere else to go, he faced a reality he never thought was possible. Kyle became homeless.

That is when Kyle found Volunteers of America Michigan (VOAMI). He was immediately housed in a hotel and VOAMI delivered meals daily to ensure he wouldn't have to spend money out of his own pocket.

Over his stay at the hotel, Kyle bonded with fellow veterans who were also receiving assistance from VOAMI. He talks about finding true humanity in other veterans like himself, all trying to cope with some type of loss.

In August, Kyle moved into his new apartment.

“All the major essentials and necessities that go into moving into a new home were provided by the VOA — at no cost to me. It was as if all my years of service to my country in the United States military meant more to VOAMI than to some other organizations that are built to actually serve veterans on a daily basis. Their dedication to helping and assisting veterans to find permanent housing, no matter how long it takes, or the obstacles in the way.”

My name is Brittany. I have struggled with substance abuse for most of my life and through all four of my pregnancies. I was later told that I was battling substance abuse disorder—a disease I’d been living with for most of my life after experiencing trauma at a very young age.

Seeking drugs was my way of battling the depression. After years of addiction and struggling to keep custody of my children, I was ready for a change. Volunteers of America’s Freedom House was that change I needed.

I surrendered everything and the next thing I knew, two months later I had enrolled in school and had custody of three of my four children. Once I was in Freedom House, things began to fall into place for me. I owe my life to this program.

Who would have thought that something as simple as making a bed every day could be so life-changing? But that’s what I learned at Freedom House. That establishing routines and building self-confidence are important parts of recovery.

Today, I am Freedom House’s first graduate. I’m enrolled in a local community college and have started a job with the City of Manchester. As I celebrated my graduation with my family and loved ones, I know that I’m now on a path for a brighter future.

My mom tells me she’s very proud of me. This is the first time in a very long time that anyone has told me that they’re proud of me and now I see myself doing something to help other people like me. I’ll get there one day.
Volunteers of America Minnesota and Wisconsin

Partners Join Forces to Get Foster Kids Rolling

Each year, Volunteers of America Minnesota and Wisconsin joins with JT’s Bikes for Kids and Legacy Restoration LLC to put on our elf hats, check our lists twice, and do some holiday shopping to buy bikes for children in foster care. This year, we raised nearly $10,000 and purchased bikes and helmets for nearly 50 children who are served by our foster care program. After a difficult year, delivery day was extra special for two sisters.

Abigail was expecting only her sister, Sarah, would be getting a bike for Christmas. A new bike was all Sarah could talk about for months. When VOA Case Manager Sue arrived with the delivery, Sarah and their mom, Hannah, greeted her outside. Sarah was ecstatic to finally get the bike she had been dreaming of, but Hannah and Sue also coaxed Abigail out of the house.

Abigail saw Sarah riding her bike but was puzzled when she noticed a second bike on the sidewalk. Then Sue yelled, “Merry Christmas, Abigail!” and Abigail began to jump up and down. She was overwhelmed with tears of joy.

“Really!? Really!?” Abigail excitedly repeated as she ran to the bike. This was Abigail’s first brand new bike of her very own. She loves it so much that she slept with the bike in her room next to her bed the first night.

Tim Taylor founded JT’s Bikes for Kids, along with his wife Trina and their two adult children. The campaign is a memorial to Tim’s father John Taylor (JT), who died in 2008 from complications of Alzheimer’s disease.

JT’s Bikes for Kids has become a fun way to get the holiday season rolling—offering joy to children who are often dealing with loss and sorrow.

Sue reflected, “I love being able to do things like this. This is why we do what we do.”
I felt like a whole person again," says J.T., when he moved into Volunteers of America’s transitional housing program as a newly emancipated foster youth. J.T. entered the program after living in the park and couch-surfing for two months. "Some people had parents or people to stay with, but I didn’t have anybody."

J.T. understands how important it is to have people in your life to help you along the way. "Every one of history’s greatest achievers had help," he says. Because J.T. grew up in the foster care system, having someone in his life who he could rely on, like a parent or mentor, was something he thought would never happen for him—until he met Kent.

Kent—a VOA board member, professional photographer, and videographer—met J.T. early last year. When Kent toured J.T.’s apartment, he was overwhelmed by painting after painting, each one more interesting than the last. Kent immediately recognized J.T.’s talent and began to help J.T. realize his potential for a successful career as a professional artist.

Kent and J.T. have since become fast friends. Spending a lot of time together, the two friends talk about the kinds of things that a young man would talk about with a father: relationships, college, art, life. Kent helped J.T. learn how to navigate the business of being an artist, something J.T. didn’t know much about. "Someone as good as J.T. needs to have a fighting chance to follow his dreams," says Kent, stressing the importance of mentoring former foster youth like J.T. "He doesn’t see how valuable he is. My goal is to get him to realize and believe in his own potential."

Assisted by Kent’s friendship and guidance, J.T. is making valuable connections in the local art community; in this past year alone, J.T. has shown his work in multiple high-profile art exhibits and festivals, painted live in front of audiences, and participated in multiple mural commissions. Kent has also inspired J.T. to return to school and helped him land a job teaching art to adults with developmental disabilities.

Today, J.T.’s future is much brighter. He now has more of the confidence and skills needed to pursue a career as a professional artist. And he has big plans for his future—plans that seemed impossible before he entered VOA’s housing program for emancipated foster youth.

"It means a lot that he cares about me and where I’m going," J.T. said about Kent’s friendship. "I think that in my life, I’ve seen so many people come and go. So it means a lot that Kent is willing to stick around and be there for me when I need him the most."
Look Up and Hope

In a letter Maud left behind to be read at her funeral by her son, Charles, she spoke to those things that had always been in her heart:

“Let the mission of the Volunteers of America be always to fulfill those words, ‘The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath appointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; He hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives and the recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those that are bound.’”

Thank you, Maud, for setting the selfless example that still permeates the fabric of today’s Volunteers of America programs and services and, above all, for being a model for all women, then and now.

Volunteers of America Western Nebraska
Potter Dix Early Learning Facility

Our Philosophy
We believe that all children are unique individuals who have strengths and are naturally curious. Children need to be provided with a safe, organized, child directed learning environment that emphasizes mutual respect, fun, discovery, literacy and also addresses sensory needs. We believe that parents are the most important part of a child’s life and we will work with parents to benefit the child.

Our Mission
As a dedicated and supported staff, it is our mission to:
• Provide appropriate services to ALL children.
• Continue to grow professionally in order to better serve children and families.
• Foster self-esteem while celebrating children’s successes.
• Establish a fun and safe environment.
• Encourage children to make discoveries and realize their potential.
• Support and build a trusting relationship with parents, children, and other professionals.

Goals and Objectives To help Children:
• Develop effective communication skills.
• Develop the ability to choose and follow through on personally meaningful experiences.
• Develop large and small muscles through play-based activities.
• Demonstrate an awareness of daily routine.
• Develop a level of independence in self care skills.
• Develop problem-solving strategies.
• Develop child appreciation as they explore the developmental age appropriate environment around them.

Visit voane.org to learn more about our other children’s centers.
With all that’s facing law enforcement these days, it’s sometimes hard to think of something worth smiling about.

Camp POSTCARD (Police Officers Striving To Create And Reinforce Dreams) celebrated its 25th birthday in 2018 and is ready for the next 25. Run by Volunteers of America Northern New England, in partnership with the Maine Sheriffs’ Association, Camp POSTCARD serves 180 fifth- and sixth-grade boys and girls from across Maine for a week of summer fun, learning, and growing. And it’s free!

Indeed, because of Camp POSTCARD, many kids who otherwise would not be able to go to summer camp are able to have the camp experience. Due to the success in Maine, Camp POSTCARDs have been started at several other Volunteers of America affiliates.

All the counselors are law enforcement and first responders. There are sheriffs, deputies, police officers, firefighters, corrections officers, game wardens, EMTs, and nurses. They all take a week of their vacation and volunteer to teach the kids how to swim, fish, paddle a canoe, climb a rock wall, perform first aid, and even make a healthy snack. They also try to help the kids learn to make good choices in life that will help them become more confident and more aware of what it means to be a good and caring friend to others.

The children at Camp POSTCARD are from a range of backgrounds. Some kids are having difficulty in school. Some may have just lost a parent or a sibling. Some need a little extra one-on-one time with adult role models. Some are being rewarded for achievement. Others are there because there will be no other opportunity for them to attend summer camp.

What they all have in common is they are kids, and it’s encouraging to watch them make friends, learn to sort out differences and embrace each other’s struggles and successes.

What law enforcement and first responders get in return is the chance to make a difference and be seen as people kids can trust and can turn to if they’re ever in need. Spending a week with the campers with everyone in T-shirts and shorts lets them see the leaders as people first and law enforcement second.

It’s important for them all to understand that there’s a human being inside the uniform. And it’s important for us to remember why they are in those uniforms: to help.
Cortez never knew his mother. “Only stories and limited pictures tell me about the two years we had together before she was brutally murdered in a drive-by shooting.”

After the tragic loss of his mother, Cortez and his siblings were raised by his grandmother. Thankfully, the family found their way to Volunteers of America North Louisiana’s LightHouse program.

For over 30 years, the LightHouse program has been a beacon of hope to children and families in North Louisiana by providing academics and cultural enrichment opportunities to those in need. The LightHouse is free of charge and the doors are open to students ranging from kindergarten to high school. Cortez first began attending the LightHouse in middle school.

“It was definitely not what I expected. I was looking for all kinds of fun!” Cortez said. “I didn’t realize it was an academic program, too.”

At the LightHouse, staff and community volunteers not only helped Cortez academically, but also personally as he navigated important life decisions.

Cortez earned his Doctorate of Pharmacy degree from the University of Louisiana at Monroe and he is currently a Chemotherapy Pharmacist at the Feist-Weiller Cancer Center. Cortez recently married his wife, Raven, in September 2020.

Cortez credits the LightHouse for never leaving his side. “When I think about the LightHouse now, what had the most impact on me were the people who wanted to help me. I gained a sense of motivation to know I can change the world.”

Today, he is encouraging the future generation of world changers. We are proud to say Cortez is a member of our Board of Directors where he now gives freely of his time and talents to children and families in our LightHouse program. Cortez is why we do what we do.

As we celebrate 125 years of helping America’s most vulnerable a special story comes to mind. It is about a single mother, Courtney, and her two precious children: Emily and Will.

Courtney did not think they would ever be living in their car, but due to the pandemic and domestic violence at home, that is precisely where they found themselves. Courtney worked hard to maintain employment through the pandemic, but she needed help securing a safe place for her family and a chance to change their story.

Sometimes sheer effort and willingness alone are not enough. Sometimes a helping hand needs to be offered, and that’s what Courtney found at Volunteers of America Northern Rockies. With the help of our team, Courtney was able to find, negotiate and pay the deposit on a home to rent that changed the story of her family.

With tears in her eyes, Courtney said, “I could never have done this without Volunteers of America, thanks so much.” Four-year-old Emily was very impressed with their new home too, and with the innocence of a child she exclaimed, “Look, mom, we even got a house for the birds.”

Stories like this are not unique, but each of them are special in that they make a world of difference to neighbors like Courtney, Emily and Will. It is humbling to think that for 125 years Volunteers of America has been faithful to come alongside those in need and impact generations. This is our ministry of service.
Volunteers of America and its long-term care community Valley Manor Care Center in Montrose, Colo., focused on a unique community outreach project to support mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic. Titled, “Heart to Heart, Art of Reflection Exhibit,” the project consisted of asking a variety of community organizations and the general public to take a three-inch wooden heart, supplied by the care center, and paint, draw or decorate it in any fashion to best express their current, personal feelings around their experiences with the pandemic. The completed hearts were attached to a chain-link fence outside of the care center, so anyone driving or walking by could observe the various heart messages and artistic interpretations.

“I loved the outreach aspect of this project and thought it could also help us promote National Resident’s Rights Month, which occurs annually in October,” said Erin Berge, Regional Marketing Coordinator at Volunteer of America National Services. “Residents’ Rights Month is designated to honor residents living in all long-term care facilities. It is an opportunity to focus on and celebrate awareness of dignity, respect, and each resident’s rights. And art is a great vehicle to provide greater visibility to these things.”

Debra Hayre, Valley Manor Care Center’s Admissions and Marketing Manager, identified several groups and organizations to present the idea to and deliver the blank, wooden hearts.

“I explained to each group to use this heart as a chance to say how you are feeling or illustrate your current state of mind,” Hayre said. “The pandemic has created a variety of emotions in us. I was deeply touched by the many positive comments I received when picking up the completed hearts. For example, the Delta Police Department staff said the exercise was one of the most meaningful things they had done for their mental health. As a team, it brought them closer together while decorating their hearts.”

The returned hearts were weatherproofed with spray sealant and attached with zip ties to the chain link fence on the care center’s north side. The project will remain on the fence until the end of the pandemic as a reminder of the many acceptable ways to feel when we are challenged with drastic change.

“Art can preserve a place in time and, in this case, will represent a variety of different individual’s perceptions and identities,” Berge said. “It illustrates how we, as a collective whole, are experiencing and interacting during this particular time. We hope many will have found it helpful and therapeutic.”

Hayre said, “We wish to give a big thank you to all who participated from the bottom of our hearts!”
Tanya, a U.S. Army Veteran, vividly remembers the chilly day in May 2019 with her daughter, Makayla. Tanya was a proud mom as Makayla became a high school graduate that morning. But they were homeless. A day that should’ve been one of the happiest in Tanya’s life was clouded with worry. “I had no idea where we would sleep that night.”

It wasn’t the first time Tanya faced homelessness. While attending college years before, she was surprised to learn her parents had cut off financial support and asked her to leave home over a disagreement. Luckily, she was able to live with friends temporarily before joining the Army. The Army gave her strength, hope, and a feeling that she belonged.

“I’ll be honest, joining the Army was never part of my plan, but it turned out to be one of the best things I ever did,” Tanya says. After her military service, one misfortune led to another—a car stolen, a lost job, an eviction notice. And, eventually, that chilly day in May when Tanya and her daughter spent graduation day without a home.

The next day, they were hungry and borrowed $30 to get something to eat. Then, Tanya and Makayla carried their clothes in garbage bags while trying to get a ride to a family shelter. From this shelter, she connected with a Volunteers of America veterans program. “I met with VOA on a Wednesday. I met with a landlord who showed me an apartment on Friday, and I had my keys to move in on Monday,” Tanya remembers. “I moved in with nothing. Volunteers of America not only supplemented my rent for the first three months, but they also helped me furnish my entire apartment.”

Once stabilized in safe housing, Tanya found a job at Amazon. “I am excited about where life is taking me. But, most importantly, I know I have support when it may not go as planned. Through much of my life, I felt like I had to go at it alone, that I didn’t belong and I didn’t have anyone. But through all of this, I learned I don’t have to do it alone.”

Volunteers of America Oklahoma

Renee

Renee worked as a housekeeper while caring for her elderly mother. Life was already challenging financially but became disastrous when her mother passed, and the family sold the home. Renee became homeless, and she experienced severe depression and anxiety.

Volunteers of America Oklahoma helped her move into an apartment. With housing services, Renee is stable and working again as a housekeeper. She is saving money to purchase a car to expand her housekeeping services. With her little dog Chiquita, Renee is achieving her goals of self-sufficiency.

Kay

A few short years ago, Kay had just laid to rest her faithful partner of 60 years, and she was devastated, lonely and isolated. Kay’s children encouraged her to get out and meet new people, but the thought of doing that was crippling. A friend suggested volunteering with the Retired Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP), and with a dose of courage, she made the call to the office.

The RSVP staff were warm and welcoming and found her a place not only to belong but thrive. Today, Kay volunteers for five organizations in Muskogee, filling her time five days of the week. Kay could not imagine the person she has become without the RSVP program. Giving her time to help other people brings such joy to her life that she never expected.

For Kay, her life had come full circle. She started her early adult life at the Cain’s Ballroom, and even though the ballroom was just an hour from Muskogee, she had not been back since. Tears filled her eyes, thinking about her husband and the life they had built together, and the strength she exhibited in creating her own life after her husband’s death. Her family joined her at the awards ceremony held at Cain’s to honor a woman who has given her life in service of others.
Marvin

Four years ago, Marvin, a disabled veteran, lived in a dilapidated camping trailer on land outside Muskogee. It had neither heat nor a bathroom. He drove an old truck to find food and a shower. Marvin’s disability check often ran out long before the end of the month. He was malnourished, and his health declined. The Muskogee Payee Services coordinator met Marvin when Social Security referred him for services. Soon, the coordinator helped him move into an affordable apartment before the cold of winter arrived, increased his veteran benefits/income with the Veterans Administration, and helped him to get medical care for lung disease and PTSD.

Today, when Marvin visits the VOAOK-Muskogee offices, he credits the Payee Services program for stable health and housing. Effective financial management services have helped him accumulate a small savings. He has been to Florida to visit his grandkids and has purchased a car that he adores. While health issues continue to challenge him, Marvin knows that financial management services will ensure he is no longer homeless.

Craig

Craig is an Air Force veteran serving from 1984-99. Born and raised in New Jersey, Craig moved to Oklahoma to care for his mother in failing health. He has been in Tulsa for 11 years. He worked several jobs but was laid off. Without a paycheck, Craig was homeless and living in his car for three months. His life was difficult, and he was ready to give up. Declining health forced him into the emergency room for treatment. Craig needed support to get a good-paying job with benefits to secure stable housing and medical care. Craig visited a community partner and was referred to Volunteers of America Oklahoma (VOAOK) for assistance. VOAOK fixed his car and helped him move into an apartment. VOAOK enabled him to get a temporary job at a warehouse. When Amazon announced it would be hiring in its distribution center, the VOAOK Business Outreach Liaison worked with Amazon to get Craig’s resume and interview set. In October, Craig started a new job with benefits. Craig said, “I have my first real bed in 5 years. I’m not sure I would still be here if not for the caring people at VOAOK that have helped me to a better place.”
Volunteers of America Oregon

Celebrating Leaders

We are excited to congratulate VOA Oregon Board Member John Hairston on his recent promotion to administrator and CEO of Bonneville Power Administration (BPA). The BPA is a nonprofit federal power marketing agency that markets wholesale electricity from 31 federal hydroelectric projects, one nonfederal nuclear power plant and several nonfederal power plants. For the past 29 years, John has been a leader at BPA in agency compliance, continuity of operations and information technology at BPA.

“I am truly honored and humbled by the opportunity to lead such a talented, dedicated workforce,” said Hairston. “The work we do at BPA contributes positively to all facets of our society—it improves the quality of life for the people of the Northwest. As public servants we are giving ourselves to something greater, and I take tremendous pride in that. It’s one of the reasons I’ve made this my career.”

We are grateful to have John as a Board Member at VOA Oregon. In his six years on the board, John has served as a member of our Finance Committee and as Board Treasurer. He has been thoughtfully dedicated to the work at VOA Oregon. “He is an exceptional board member and has brought tremendous leadership to VOA Oregon,” shares John Ng, CFO at VOA Oregon.

Volunteers of America Pennsylvania

Ruth’s Place

Although she still cries every day, Susan Major is finally at peace. She lost her three sons—Erik, 16, Devon, 12 and Ezekiel, 7—and was rendered homeless after a senseless act of violence. Susan’s children were killed in an arson at her home in October 2017. In the ensuing months, she moved from one place to the next seeking shelter from friends who were kind enough to extend their couches. “I was devastated. I was in the lowest place of my life,” Major said. “Just devastated and feeling defeated.”

Like most of us, Susan never envisioned herself living in a shelter, but one year later, homeless and exhausted, she and her emotional support dog, Simba, found themselves on the doorstep of Ruth’s Place. At first, the shelter’s policies disallowed animals for health reasons. But, understanding the importance of Simba in Susan’s life, the shelter’s employees rallied to change those policies with success. Shortly after, with Simba by her side, Susan had a home and the support she needed to move on with life.

“Ruth’s Place is so important because it can happen to anyone,” Susan said. “Any of us can be homeless at any time. It’s so important that we have that safe place and home.”

Today, Susan lives comfortably in her Nanticoke home with Simba. A former nurse, she has aspirations of moving to Arizona and returning to her profession as a forensic nurse.
Volunteers of America Southeast

Imagine back, if you can, to the spring of 1977. A young, 27-year-old man was about to graduate after six years of post-graduate seminary work and would soon be receiving his Doctorate of Psychology and Counseling. At that moment in time, he found himself struggling to find where God wanted him to go. Wallace Davis had been a pastor since he was nineteen years old and was uncertain about whether to go into the pastorate full time, set up a family counseling practice, or continue to explore possibilities to teach at a medical school.

One day, after finishing his oral exams, Wallace was walking and talking with God on the Volunteers of America homeless services campus in New Orleans, where he had worked for the previous two years. That beautiful spring day, God spoke and said, “You would enjoy doing the same kind of work as you have been doing in the past with VOA.” Wallace realized this could be his future, but he didn’t give it much thought at that time!

At about the same time, Wallace was also feeling God leading him to Mobile, Alabama, and he moved there with no job. Subsequently, a local church in Mobile talked to him about coming as their associate pastor, but Wallace was resistant to the idea. God worked on his heart. One day while driving the streets of the Oakdale Baptist Church community, he stopped and responded to the Lord, “God, if this is what you want me to do, I will serve you here and do my very best.” And it was as if God responded to him and said, “In three years, I will show you the path I have for you.”

Wallace had a wonderful eight-year ministry at Oakdale Baptist Church and, during this time, successfully led several churches to merge and form four strong churches and ministries. God was at work! And the Oakdale years would later prove to be building blocks of significant relationships that enabled the work of Volunteers of America.

While all this was happening, Alabama was in turmoil over its treatment of persons with intellectual disabilities. As a result of the Wyatt vs. Stickney case, the state was under pressure to find homes for people with intellectual disabilities to live in the community. Alabama officials were talking with the Volunteers of America regional office in Baton Rouge about helping to meet this need.

Colonel Clint Chevalier, VOA’s Regional Director, was introduced to Wallace Davis by one of his colleagues. Colonel Chevalier asked Wallace to serve as the first Community Board Advisory President, just three years after hearing God’s words about his future and beginning his pastorate in Mobile. Thus began the work of VOA in Mobile. Shortly thereafter, Wallace became the first Executive (Continued on next page)
Director and he is now celebrating more than 40 years of service in this one position.

From the beginning, Wallace had the vision to create quality, safe places for persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities to call home, while receiving excellent care. In 1980, Volunteers of America opened its first three group homes in Mobile, Alabama.

In 1985, with direction from the national office, Volunteers of America of South Alabama, Inc. was created. And in 1997, Volunteers of America Southeast was created to include the rapid expansion of services to Georgia and Mississippi. Over these last 40 years, VOA Southeast has grown far beyond its initial roots in services for people with intellectual disabilities.

Today VOA Southeast offers a variety of programs and services to people in need, including: a large, affordable housing portfolio; services for people who are homeless, chronically mentally ill, physically disabled, for veterans and those with addictions; disaster relief and recovery services; afterschool, summer, and truancy programs for children and their families; and services providing food, clothing, and other essential needs for thousands each year.

Through it all, VOA Southeast keeps God at the forefront of the work. “I am most thankful for our dedicated staff who find serving others rewarding. Not only do they serve individuals in direct care, but each year, thousands of needs are met in the community. Whether it’s a can of green beans to a hungry family or a warm jacket to a child who would be cold without it, we strive to meet basic needs to keep our community thriving. It’s doing God’s work,” said Davis. “I am also grateful to our boards of directors who have stood beside us in all that we do, have empowered staff, and held us accountable. Their support has made the difference.”

We remember the mission to “reach and uplift all people and bring them to an active knowledge and service of God.” VOA founders, Maud and Ballington Booth, had a motto to go wherever needed and do whatever came to hand. VOA Southeast has done just that and will continue to do whatever is needed to impact the lives of those in need in our communities.

Over these many years, God has provided and entrusted VOA Southeast with well over $1 billion for service to those in need. He has provided assets in excess of $150 million and today, VOA Southeast has over 60 corporations delivering services. Tens of thousands of people have been blessed and are being blessed daily. Praise God! The future is bright because God is directing His staff to be good stewards.

“Whether it’s a can of green beans to a hungry family or a warm jacket to a child who would be cold without it, we strive to meet basic needs to keep our community thriving. It’s doing God’s work.”
Mentoring has brought me great joy knowing I was able to have a positive impact on a young life.

My name is Sasha. I work with a program called Mentoring Children of Promise. It’s a program that was set up to help children who have at least one incarcerated parent. I recently learned that the need for mentors is great. Louisiana has the nation’s highest incarceration rate.

I have been mentoring Jasriel since she was six, when she came to the program. She had no father and her mother was incarcerated. Her elderly grandmother was raising Jasriel and three siblings. Shy and struggling in school, Jasriel needed extra attention. As a Tulane University freshman, I began spending time with Jasriel each week.

I helped her with schoolwork, gave her support and took her to the zoo and museums—things that her grandmother had little time to do with her. I got her a library card and encouraged her to read.

Today, Jasriel is 14, a sweet teen who does well in school. I have remained a guiding force in her life and she has blossomed into a vibrant young lady. It has brought me great joy knowing I was able to have a positive impact on a young life.

Children have endless amounts of love, and I have experienced this firsthand through many calls, cards and paintings Jasriel has made for me. I have a strong relationship with Jasriel and plan for our friendship to last long after I’ve left the program. Hopefully, we’ll stay in touch throughout our lives.

Wayne Miller

Treatment is for a season, but God and recovery are for a lifetime.

My name is Wayne Miller and I’m an admissions counselor for Odyssey House, a Volunteers of America residential and outpatient treatment program for addicts. If you’d told me many years ago that I’d be here, I would never have believed it. You see my life started out quite differently.

I was a three-time world champion gymnast. I was known for “The Miller”—a full in, double full out with one twist in the first somersault and two twists in the second somersault. Gymnasts today still practice this move. I went on to become a very successful sales and marketing executive. I was also a husband and a father until, after a downward spiral of events stemming from my addiction, I lost everything.

I turned to Volunteers of America’s Duvernay Residence, where I still live. My main goal is to stay sober and rebuild my life. The staff has helped me realize that there’s hope and they’ve helped me bounce back a step at a time.

My responsibilities at Odyssey House include community outreach to people suffering from addiction and hardship. I’m active in church and committed to giving back to others. I know what it’s like to feel that everything is hopeless and I want to inspire others so they can recover.

Staying clean and sober and getting my life back on track are not my only goals. I started a local Education Outreach Coalition to strengthen communication among parents, teachers, and students.

I’ve learned that you can’t worry about the past or the future, you can only take care of now and the rest will take care of itself. Treatment is for a season, but God and recovery are for a lifetime.
We are ecstatic to announce Volunteers of America Eastern Washington and Northern Idaho will be celebrating our 125-year anniversary this year. Our affiliate was one of the first to be started when the national group founded in 1896.

Celebrations for such an amazing milestone will kick-off with the following events that will be in the heart of the city and visible to those visiting our beautiful city!

- 3/1 - 3/31 Lighting of the Steam Plant stacks
- 3/8 Proclamation by the Mayor of Spokane
- 3/15 - 3/18 Riverfront Pavilion Lightening
- 3/15 - 3/19 Logo on the Clocktower in Riverfront Park

Festivities will continue throughout the year alongside our annual events. We are showcasing our work with a targeted media campaign and encouraging residents to volunteer 125 times throughout the year on behalf of VOA in one of our 13 programs. Be sure to visit voaspokane.org on ways to participate in our milestone year!

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Volunteers of America Southwest

**Anthony’s Story**

You and Volunteers of America Southwest (VOASW) helped Anthony regain a home and his purpose!

Our Case Manager Justin recently visited homeless individuals at a local shelter when he saw a familiar face—a veteran named Anthony he had helped years ago. He was saddened to see him there because Anthony had been a success story. He had secured housing and was employed.

Justin learned that Anthony had recently suffered a series of financial setbacks along with worsening medical issues that prevented him from working. His life had quickly unraveled, and he found himself homeless once again.

Justin was upset to see Anthony without a home. He was also profoundly concerned because Anthony seemed much changed from the positive, upbeat, and outgoing individual he had helped years ago. The man in front of him appeared to be in great despair and without hope.

Without delay, Justin sprang into action to help Anthony.

Working directly with the VA, he learned that since Anthony was an Honorable Discharge, he was eligible for the HUD-VASH Program, which provides permanent supportive housing for eligible homeless veterans.

Today, Anthony is thriving in his new home, and Justin reports that his sunny, upbeat and lively disposition has returned. “He’s the Anthony I remember, and the light is back in eyes,” Justin said.

Anthony’s story is just one of the many miracles you helped create through your support of VOASW.
Volunteers of America Texas

Park Meadows Apartments resident, Maurine, has seen a lot in her lifetime.

“I was ten years old when the Depression came, and I was 20 when we had the war,” she said. And at 99 years old, she’s surviving during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Maurine knows a thing or two about hard times. She lost her only child, a son, just ten years ago. Although she can hardly see and is nearly deaf, her faith is strong, “Just trust in the Lord to take care of you day by day, that’s all I do!”

Even during the pandemic, she finds ways to keep busy, whether it’s visiting with her niece who buys and brings her groceries or watching TV to cheer on her favorite team, the Texas Rangers. “That Joey Gallo is my favorite!”

Maurine has lived at the VOA Texas senior housing site for nearly three decades.

“I have everything I need, a bed to sleep in, a roof over my head, and food to eat. God said he’d supply all my needs; he didn’t say anything about my wants!”

We couldn’t be more inspired by her positive perspective.

Volunteers of America Upstate New York

Responding to a Global Health Crisis

It is often the most challenging of times when Volunteers of America’s services are needed the most. This has certainly been true throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

“COVID-19 put people who were already vulnerable and in difficult situations at an even higher level of risk. Imagine being a homeless family—how do you shelter in place or safely self-isolate when you have no place to live? Or how does a frail senior in poor health safely get groceries? That’s where we come in,” said Lynn Sullivan, President & CEO of Volunteers of America Upstate New York (VOAUPNY).

Since the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020, VOAUPNY’s staff has worked tirelessly to ensure that people in need have access to safe housing, food, and critical support services. With the assistance of generous supporters, VOAUPNY was able to accomplish the following throughout the course of 2020:

• Since the beginning of the pandemic, we have ensured that more than 800 people have had safe housing every night. All of our shelters and housing programs remained open and fully operational.

(Continued on next page)
• We arranged for our program participants who struggle with mental, physical, and behavioral health to access the specialized services they need. Due to COVID-19, in-person appointments for counseling and treatment were canceled, so VOA provided people with tablets and WiFi, ensuring they could access services remotely.

• Our Emergency Family Shelter in Rochester continued to operate, providing more than 200 homeless families with nutritious meals, support, and private rooms where they could safely self-isolate.

• We ensured that impoverished families and individuals were able to stay in their homes by providing rental assistance. Since March, we have sent out more than 80 checks each month to pay rent and utilities for those in need.

• We provided groceries for more than 3,172 people who use our food pantry.

• Our Children’s Center has been providing both on-site and virtual learning options for children to make sure education is easily accessible while parents/guardians navigate childcare during the pandemic.

• Our team ensured that seniors were able to safely self-isolate in their homes, and we arranged to have essential resources delivered to them. On Mother’s Day, we delivered more than 150 flowers and gift bags as part of our I Remember Mama celebration to senior women throughout Monroe County who were isolated to brighten their day and let them know they were not forgotten.

• And we continued to provide much-needed housing and support services for homeless veterans, helping them overcome physical and mental health challenges that were amplified due to the pandemic.

“I am so proud of the dedication and commitment of our staff, who have worked non-stop helping those in need,” said Ms. Sullivan. “And I’m so amazed and grateful for the outpouring of support that we have received from the community. People stepped up to provide masks, hand sanitizer, gloves, food—and all of it has shown the power of our community coming together to help those who need it most.”
Volunteers of America Utah

ACT is Life Changing

Imagine living with a serious mental illness like schizophrenia or bipolar disorder. It can be overwhelming to manage the basics of daily life and manage medical needs and treatment goals. People often experience cycles of hospital stays, incarceration, and homelessness. To respond to these needs, the Assertive Community Treatment (ACT) model was developed.

ACT is an evidence-based model that has proven to be very effective in changing the lives of people with the most severe psychiatric symptoms. Volunteers of America, Utah has two ACT teams consisting of a licensed mental health therapist (leader), psychiatrist, registered nurse (RN), APRN, vocational specialist, substance use/mental health counselor, peer specialist, and a case manager. The ACT Teams serve 125 clients and operate as a “hospital without walls.”

Team members go to clients’ homes, workplaces, and other community settings to provide these vital services 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The team provides transportation, coordinates appointments, and advocates for clients. “This multi-disciplinary team approach, coupled with permanent supportive housing, allows the most vulnerable people in our community the safety and stability needed to live a happy and healthy life. The ACT program reduces hospitalizations, helps clients maintain housing, provides access to benefits, and engages them socially,” says Jaime Klemz, ACT Director.

Our client “Sally” is now making her own meals, taking her medications, and smiling more. She even joined an impromptu resident dance party one day. The ACT team truly goes wherever they are needed and does whatever comes to hand.

“The ACT program reduces hospitalizations, helps clients maintain housing, provides access to benefits, and engages them socially.”
Michael’s Story

“If I didn't wake up, she's one of the few people who would notice that I was gone.”

While he talks, Michael shifts his hands, rubs them together, sitting across from Dawnelle, our East County Housing Navigator at Sky Valley Community Resource Center.

Those hands used to build things, hammer felt, shingles, and flashing, until his fall in 1995. Thirty-eight feet down a two-story apartment building, after his harness got caught on his ladder. Then, the temporary wounds: fractured skull, a punctured lung, broken arms, and legs. Then, the injuries that became life-long and their attendants: chronic pain, anxiety, depression, panic attacks. Oxycodone. Methadone.

The call about his grandkids came six years ago. Michael’s adult son was going to prison, and Idaho’s Child Welfare worker gave him a choice: You can either pick up your three grandkids in Boise in the next 24 hours, or they’re going into foster care. So, Michael got in his car.

Michael picked up his grandchildren when the boys were six and one, and the girl was four. He needed help, and he knew it, so he became a regular at VOA’s Sky Valley campus. He enrolled one grandson in free preschool through Sky Valley ECEAP and all three in sports through the Sultan Boys & Girls Club, and they went to our Sultan Food Bank when they needed it. Five years of shuttling kids, checking on their homework, making sure they had enough food and clothes—five years of purpose.

Then, another call, this one a few days before last Thanksgiving. His son was out of prison and taking his kids back, moving to West Seattle. His son doesn’t give Michael visitation rights and isn’t legally obligated to do so. After five years, Michael hasn’t seen the kids—now six, nine, and eleven—for over six months.

“I fight suicide every day.”

Dawnelle noticed Michael in the parking lot one day last winter and invited him in. They meet every week now and find a way to talk even through the COVID-19 pandemic. She’s helped with rent and utilities. She sees him. Not just the broken parts, but the whole person. She sees Michael, the builder.

“If it weren’t for their kindness, I wouldn’t have been able to do it. These guys have helped me out a lot, helped me think positive.”

Volunteers of America Care Crisis Response Services offers 24-hour emotional support to individuals in crisis and/or considering suicide. Our crisis services are available by phone and instant messaging. Call 1-800-584-3578 or visit www.imhurting.org.
Volunteers of America Puerto Rico

Volunteers of America has been serving in Puerto Rico since 2008, opening Casa Alborada, a community correctional facility in conjunction with the Federal Bureau of Prisons. As a pioneer in correctional services for the last 125 years, Volunteers of America provides services to help offenders successfully transition from prison to a productive life in the community. We help rehabilitate adult offenders and steer youth to set new, positive directions for their lives. But that’s not all we are doing in Puerto Rico.

When Hurricanes Irma and Maria hit the small island, Volunteers of America launched Project Esperanza, bringing aid to help the people of Puerto Rico recover from the devastation. Volunteers of America staff members from around the country traveled in shifts to the island to stay for approximately one week to organize and distribute water and other supplies donated by generous supporters. “Volunteers of America is committed to seeing Puerto Rico thrive,” said CEO and National President Mike King, “And we are proud to play even a small part in helping the Puerto Rican people get back to their lives before the devastation caused by Hurricane Maria.”

Dedicated to Puerto Rico’s growth, Volunteers of America National Services (VOANS) recently purchased three senior housing apartment buildings, thereby preserving 235 affordable homes with services. These communities will join our Victor Hernandez apartments, and together the four sites provide housing for almost 300 residents. In addition, there is a senior center that provides horticulture education activities for the community in Yabuccoa. The new properties are located in the communities of Fajardo, Carolina and Guaynabo, which surround the capital City of San Juan. Each of these properties and Victor Hernandez is supported by a full-time service coordinator to ensure that residents not only have a safe, secure roof over their heads, but also have ready access to preventative health and other social services.

Puerto Rico is rebuilding but remains in great need. Since the hurricanes, many young Puerto Ricans have moved to the mainland of the United States, leaving the multigenerational support system in disarray. Seniors now find themselves without the support needed to live independently. As the island evolves following the devastation that occurred over the last few years, VOANS continues to pursue additional affordable housing and service investments in Puerto Rico to strengthen communities most in need.
Thanks to our compassionate network of support, each year Volunteers of America provides life-saving services to people who need it most.

- **Covid-19 Relief.** Throughout the crisis, 650,000 people received emergency support like food, health care, and emergency financial assistance.

- **Ending Veteran Homelessness.** Shelter, housing and employment assistance for 25,000 Veterans and their families provided dignity and a pathway to a better life.

- **Educating Children.** Over 5,000 children and their families received childhood education services, like the comprehensive Early Head Start program.

- **Mental Health.** 100,000 men and women struggling with mental health issues received counseling and treatment, including reliable, accessible virtual care.

- **Care for Seniors.** Over 7,000 seniors preserved their independence while feeling cared for in service-enriched affordable housing.

- **Hope through Housing.** Over 2 million meals and services for formerly homeless people in re-housing programs built self-sufficiency and independent lives.

- **Freedom from Addiction.** 1,500 people received healing and hope through substance use disorder programs and treatment.