



BLET Auxiliary News

Working to bring about safer working conditions for Locomotive Engineers & Trainmen, educate spouses, and enhance the lifestyles of railroad employees and their families.

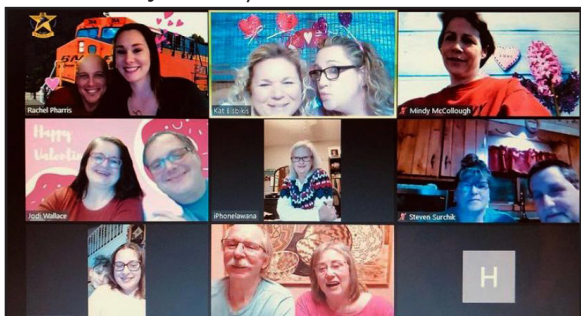
Volume 12, Number 1

Spring 2021

Kathleen Bisbikis, President • Rachel Pharris, 1st Vice President • Lawana Poss, Secretary • Terri Fleming, Treasurer
Jessica Cole, 2nd Vice President/National Legislative Representative • www.bletauxiliary.net



Above: Amarillo Auxiliary No. 99 hosted a St. Patrick's Day-themed Game Night on Zoom, March 6, 2021. Left to right: Aux. 99 President Victoria Delahay, and co-hosts Paul and Emily Schnatz, and Shonda Holder.



Valentine's Day-Themed Game Night, Feb. 20, 2021



St. Patrick's Day-Themed Game Night, March 6, 2021

Newsletter Green Edition

Sign up Now to "Go Green" and get a full-color version of the newsletter via e-mail attachment - saves paper, printing costs, and postage. See Secretary's Report, Page 11, for more details!

1. We donate to local food banks in our area.
2. We give out gift cards for gas and other things needed for members who have to travel for medical treatments.
3. We send meals to members who are in quarantine due to COVID.
4. We promote important legislation, locally and nationally, that affects our railroaders and their families.
5. We provide a Survivors Guide for spouses and family members so they can prepare in case of a tragic event.
6. We raise funds for and award local and national scholarships.
7. We teach the importance of the union movement to the next generation of railroad children.
8. We send e-mails and letters to our representatives asking for support of important railroad legislation.
9. We donate clothing and supplies to nursing homes.
10. We work side-by-side with other organizations when tragedy strikes in an area where we have a local auxiliary.
11. We deliver cookies to rail terminals for our program "Cookies for the Crews."
12. We maintain very active social media accounts.
13. We raise funds for families who experience serious illness.
14. We throw great holiday parties.
15. We love talking about the Auxiliary - just ask us!
16. We will celebrate our 134th Anniversary this October.
17. We bring rail families because nobody understands our schedules and lifestyles better than other railroad families.
18. We embrace and love our unique lifestyles.
19. We organize golf tournaments.
20. We are great at selling raffle tickets!
21. We love Chicago - the birthplace of our organization!
22. We educate our members about their benefits.
23. We participate in information pickets when necessary.
24. We love nothing more than organizing new local auxiliaries.
25. We miss all of our friends and hope to see you this summer!

25 things you may not know about the Auxiliary!

From the President

By KATHLEEN BISBIKIS

"The question isn't who is going to let me; it's who is going to stop me."

Ayn Rand



Greetings everyone!

I never thought I'd be writing my President's report while fighting COVID, but here we are. I had hoped we would make it to the finish line and get our vaccines unscathed by this virus, but unfortunately you can't plan for other people's poor choices. My husband and several others at his terminal were exposed by a fellow railroader who decided not to self-report. That decision has caused multiple families in our area to be affected. Thankfully, I am blessed with a beautiful community of railroad families who check on each other and make sure we are all doing okay. I opened my garage door recently to find a huge basket of cleaning supplies, food, drinks, gloves - you name it. We also had a dinner delivered to us by our local auxiliary.

Now, while my husband, my son, and I are trying to get our health back in order and move past this, I get that glimpse into what I love about being a part of this unique lifestyle and the auxiliary. One of the best things about being a part of this organization is that we always show up when our railroad family needs us. It brings so much joy to my heart to be a part of the giving and the receiving.

COVID-19 has had a detrimental effect on many railroad families. I think you will enjoy reading the articles on pages 13 and 14 about how two other families have been affected.

As we head into spring and summer, we are hopeful that we will see some of you at a yet-to-be-announced BLET regional meeting this summer. Keep an eye on the BLET National website (www.ble-t.org) for updates. We have been creatively remaining active with our members all over the country this last year, but nothing beats spending time with our union friends face-to-face. We are ready to get out and see

everyone, and we hope that, as the COVID vaccine becomes more readily available, so will the chances of seeing all of you. Until that time, we will continue to do our online raffles and we have started off this year with a Blackstone Grill raffle. Tickets can be purchased on our website using PayPal or from a local auxiliary member in your area.

Much has been going on in Washington D.C. and across the nation in the last few months since the presidential election. I hope that everyone has noticed the number of states that are currently fighting for a bill to regulate train crew size and/or a bill to regulate the length of freight trains. If you are in one of those states that have yet to pass this legislation, and the BLET legislative chairman for your state is actively fighting to make this a reality, I encourage you to pick up your phone and call your state representatives, send an e-mail, and write a letter asking for their support. Do everything you can to help make people aware of these crucial safety-related issues. We never want to see just one person on an engine or trains so long that they are a safety hazard. Let's do everything we can to make sure that doesn't happen.

In closing, I'd like to thank all of you who checked on my family. We appreciate the text messages, e-mails, and outpouring of love. This bout with COVID may have slowed me down a little bit, but it definitely won't stop me!

Kathleen "Kat" Bisbikis
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Also...

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ZOOM GAME NIGHTS A BIG HIT!

By Sereena Hogan, Past National President

It all started back in May of 2020. We couldn't get together in person all year, so in order to connect, the National Auxiliary sponsored a Zoom Game Night on May 16. Everyone was invited to participate. I wondered if it would be fun, after all I'm not too good at trivia, so I was pretty sure I would be lost, but I thought it would be fun to at least see some friendly faces on Zoom. And I was right! It was nice to see most of the national officers and some other members from around the country.

On December 23, Jessica Keene and Mariah Burrola, of Pacific Northwest Auxiliary No. 503, hosted a game night featuring bingo and Christmas-themed trivia. This time, prizes were awarded for the winners! My husband Ken and I both joined in the fun for that one.

NorCal 39 Auxiliary scheduled a game night with a Valentine theme on February 20. Kathleen Bisbikis and Heather Barto were our crazy and fun hosts for that one! Prizes were awarded for the best Valentine-themed background, as well as the winners of two categories of trivia questions. And there was even a "booby prize" for the contestant with the lowest scores.

Auxiliary 99 in Amarillo, Texas, hosted a St. Patrick's Day-themed Game Night on March 6. Contestants were asked to find their Leprechaun name on the Auxiliary Facebook page, and dress in their finest St. Patrick's Day attire. It was great fun!

So far, two more game nights have been scheduled: Rose Surchik, President of Twin Ports Auxiliary No. 6388, in the Duluth, Minnesota – Superior, Wisconsin area will host an April Fool's Day game night in April, and Auxiliary 417 in Springfield, MO, is planning a Cinco de Mayo game night in May. Tentatively, Philadelphia Auxiliary NO. 71 will be hosting in June. Details will be posted on the Auxiliary Facebook page!

In the beginning, I was a little skeptical about the whole idea of game night, but from the very first one held in May of last year, it was so much fun that my husband Ken and I don't want to miss a single one now. Seems it's now become an Auxiliary tradition! If you're not Zooming in to join us for these fun times with our Auxiliary sisters and brothers, you're missing out! Not only are we able to connect, see each other online, and share some fun and laughter, some pretty fabulous prizes are awarded at each game night as well – Yeti cups, gift cards, raffle tickets, gift baskets, See's chocolates – good stuff! Keep an eye on the Auxiliary Facebook page for details about upcoming game nights, mark your calendars now, and join in the fun!

NorCal 39 Raises Funds for Local Scholarships

By Kathleen Bisbikis

California has had some strict guidelines due to the pandemic that unfortunately affected NorCal 39's ability to hold gatherings with our members. We originally thought that it would, in turn, affect our ability to raise money for our scholarship fund for 2021. However, when we witnessed the success that the National Auxiliary was having with online fundraisers, we took a card out of their playing deck and held our own online raffle.

NorCal 39 raffled off a handgun that we purchased locally at a gun shop we were familiar with. We then advertised our tickets online and through word-of-mouth to our BLET and auxiliary members, as well as to members of our communities. We were thrilled to make enough money to cover our expenses and replenish our scholarship fund for the 2021-2022 school year. We went "live" on Facebook on December 5, 2020, and pulled the winning ticket, which had been purchased by our California State Legislative Chairman Ryan Snow, who is a huge supporter of the auxiliary, both locally and nationally. Thank you and congratulations Ryan!

We appreciate everyone who participated in this event and we look forward to holding more events like it in the future.

**BE STRONG NOW
BECAUSE THINGS
WILL GET BETTER.
IT MIGHT BE
STORMY NOW,
BUT IT CAN'T RAIN
FOREVER.**

- Unknown

WE WANT YOU TO KNOW THAT THE
AUXILIARY CONTINUES TO THINK OF EACH
AND EVERY ONE OF YOU DURING THESE
UNPRECEDENTED TIMES. WE ARE SENDING OUR
LOVE TO EACH OF YOUR FAMILIES.

The National BLET Auxiliary

Springfield Auxiliary Christmas Party

By Rachel Pharris, President, Auxiliary 417, and
National 1st Vice President/Outreach Coordinator

Auxiliary 417 in Springfield, Missouri, celebrated the holiday season by gathering together at The Barley House at Moon Town Crossing in Springfield on December 17, 2020. The menu for this event featured a taco bar catered by Tortilleria Perches. Activities included door prizes provided by the auxiliary as well as a 50/50 raffle.

Sister Heather Williams served as our emcee for the evening. She also gave attendees an overview of some of the activities and accomplishments of our auxiliary from this past year. Tim Stipp, from the office of Jerry Schlichter, briefly spoke to the group about some of the challenges railroaders have been facing during this pandemic. We appreciate his continued support.

The unions and auxiliaries have been extra cautious about in-person meeting during this pandemic. It was thrilling to gather in person for this event. The venue took extra precautions, enforcing mask wearing, sanitizing touched points throughout the area, as well as providing adequate space between the tables.

We had about 40 people in attendance from the Springfield BLET Auxiliary, SMART-TD, Local 303, and BLET Divisions 237, 83, and 567. Many non-auxiliary members also joined in the festivities. Our hope is that by introducing them to the auxiliary, they will join us at future events and/or join as an official member of our organization.

Generous support from Mr. Jerry Schlichter of Schlichter, Bogard & Denton, LLP, made our Christmas party possible. Many thanks to Mr. Schlichter, and to all who joined us!



Eric Burrell, Local Chairman, SMART-TD Local 303, Springfield, MO, and Heather Williams drew the winner for the 50/50 raffle.



Heather Williams, Tara Parker, Carrie Johnson, Rachel Pharris, Gail Sanchez, Tricia Taylor, and Kelly Short.



The members of the Springfield Auxiliary will host the Second Annual BLET Auxiliary Golf Tournament this summer, on August 14. The 4-Man Scramble tournament will be held at Greene Hills Country Club in Willard, Missouri. Prizes will be awarded to the top three teams.

The auxiliary will provide lunch for all golfers and a silent auction will be held. Proceeds from the tournament and the silent auction to benefit our Scholarship and Care & Assistance funds.

The tournament is open to railroaders, friends, family, and the public. Please join us for this day of fellowship and fun!

LEGISLATIVE UPDATE



By JESSICA
COLE,
NATIONAL
LEGISLATIVE
REPRESENTATIVE

Biden Nominates New FRA Head

Amit Bose is Biden's appointee as Deputy Administrator of the Federal Railroad Administration, and he will serve as Acting Administrator, replacing Trump appointee Ron Batory, a former rail company CEO who has been viewed as pro-carrier and anti-worker during his tenure at the regulatory agency.

A former Chief Counsel at the FRA, Bose has most recently served as Associate Vice President and Program Director at the prominent infrastructure consulting firm HNTB. His previous rail projects include the Build America Bureau, the California High Speed Rail Project, the Northeast Corridor Gateway Program, and Northeast Corridor Future.

"Amit Bose will be a great addition to the Federal Railroad Administration," said Amtrak Board Chair Tony Coscia. "His extensive experience in transportation policy, law, and management will be an asset to the Biden Administration. Mr. Bose understands the importance of investing in infrastructure to support economic recovery and keeping America's railroad system reliable and safe. We look forward to working with Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg, Deputy Transportation Secretary Polly Trottenberg, and Mr. Bose to improve and expand passenger rail service across the country."

Source: Railway Age

Biden Restores Collective Bargaining Rights for Federal Workers

Not even 100 hours into his presidency, President Joe Biden signed an important Executive Order to fulfill a campaign promise to reinstate civil service protections for federal

workers. These protections were stripped by a series of three early Trump administration Executive Orders that made it easier to fire Federal workers, curtail collective bargaining rights, fast track labor-management negotiations, and greatly restrict the use of official time.

Additionally, in the fall of 2020, Trump signed a fourth Executive Order creating Schedule F as a classification for "employees in confidential, policy-determining, policy-making or policy-advocating positions," and calling on agencies to identify and convert eligible employees to the new classification. Employees converted to Schedule F could be fired without cause and lost virtually all of their civil service protections. However, it appears that many agencies acted slowly with regard to reclassifying their employees before the end of Trump's term.

Biden's new Executive Order rescinds the three union-busting Trump orders, as well as the order establishing the Schedule F classification.

"[Biden] is taking critical steps to protect and empower federal employees, who dedicate their careers to serving the American people," the White House said in a written statement. "They keep us healthy, safe and informed, and their work transcends partisan politics They are talented, hard-working, and inspiring Americans, worthy of the utmost dignity and respect. But over the last four years, they've been undermined and demoralized. The president will sign an executive order taking steps to protect and empower federal employees who are so essential to this country."

As part of Biden's order, agencies are directed to "bargain over permissible, non-mandatory subjects of bargaining when contracts are

up for negotiation." The Office of Personnel Management has also been charged with developing recommendations to pay more Federal employees and contractors at least \$15 an hour.

Some labor groups have recommended that contracts hammered out under the Trump rules should be rescinded and returned to the bargaining table under the new rules, but as of January 22, 2021, it is unclear whether that may happen.

President Biden also nominated Federal Labor Relations Authority member Ernest DuBester to serve as the agency's new Chairman.

Source: <https://www.govexec.com/management/2021/01/biden-sign-executive-order-killing-schedule-f-restoring-collective-bargaining-rights/171569>

Buttigieg Confirmed as Biden's Transportation Secretary

On February 2, 2021, Former Mayor of South Bend, Indiana, and Presidential Candidate Pete

Buttigieg was confirmed by the US Senate to be the 19th United States Secretary of Transportation. He is expected to push for a federal mask mandate on all public transportation nationwide as part of an effort to ramp up the United States' response to the COVID Pandemic.

Additionally, Buttigieg will have a crucial role in Biden's ambitious bipartisan infrastructure development plan, which advocates spending \$1.3 trillion over 10 years to build schools, roads, bridges, railroads and pipes, expand broadband access and usher in a "100% clean energy economy." Confirmation hearings are underway as this report is being written and Buttigieg is expected to be confirmed.

Biden Cleans House on National Labor Relations Board
It's been 70 years since any

President exercised his power to do it, but in his first 24 hours in office, Joe Biden forced out two National Labor Relations Board counsels, both pro-management people who rose to prominence in the agency under Trump.

NLRB General Counsel Peter Robb, a Trump appointee, was fired on Inauguration Day after refusing President Biden's request that he resign. Robb was replaced by Alice Stock, whom he had promoted to deputy general counsel in 2019. Prior to joining the NLRB, Stock had been a management side attorney who represented employers in labor practice disputes and collective bargaining settings.

President Biden then requested Stock's immediate resignation by 5 p.m. on Thursday, January 21, 2021. She refused, calling his firing of Robb "dubious" in its legality and arguing that her firing would be "detrimental" to the agency's operations. Stock was then also fired.

Meanwhile, union officials have praised the change as necessary and welcome to mitigate the increasingly pro-management bias on the NLRB. Harry Truman was the last President to exercise the power to fire the top attorney at this agency.

Source: Politico.com

Walsh Named as New Labor Secretary

In keeping with the pro-labor platform he campaigned on, President Joe Biden has nominated Boston Mayor Marty Walsh to be his new Labor Secretary. Walsh had previously been a leader of the Boston Building and Trades Council, which is an umbrella group for unions. With millions of people out of work and facing expiring jobless benefits, American Labor is in crisis, and the closely divided Congress is expected to obstruct many of Biden's labor initiatives. Nevertheless, the Labor Secretary has the power to modify regula-

tions in an effort to create a safer workplace and empower workers. If confirmed, Walsh will take over the reins at a crossroads for the labor constituency. Walsh has received wide support from a number of unions and their leaders, but other unions had backed other candidates for the position.

As this report goes to print, we are awaiting Walsh's confirmation.

Source: Politico.com

Third Quarter 2020 FRA Report Says PTC is 99.6% Implemented

A progress report due October 31, 2020, showed encouraging signs that Positive Train Control was nearing completion on all of the nearly 60,000 miles of federally-mandated track, with the extended deadline of December 31, 2020, looming.

As of September 30, 2020, 223 miles of track subject to the PTC mandate remained to be updated. Special oversight was being given to the New Jersey Transit (NJT), which is viewed as risking non-compliance due to having PTC implementation on only 48% of its 378 miles of mandate-eligible track. The FRA has been meeting with NJT periodically to address the potential problem.

Source: <https://railroads.dot.gov/newsroom/press-releases/federal-railroad-administration-publishes-railroads-third-quarter-2020-0>

BLET Joins 18 Other Unions in Appeal to President Biden *(Taken directly from the BLET's Newsflash)*

INDEPENDENCE, Ohio, January 27 — On January 26, the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, representing Rail and Airline Teamsters, and 18 other unions, sent a letter to President Joe Biden and Democratic U.S. Senate leaders Chuck Schumer and Patty Murray reminding the president that appointing new members to the National Mediation Board (NMB) should be prioritized. The unions endorsed the appointment of Deirdre Hamilton and the reappointment of Linda Puchala to the Board.

To read the entire letter, go to: https://www.blet.org/pr/pdf/1.26.2021_NMB_Letter.pdf

Catastrophic Accident Attributed to Negligence and Bending of Regulations After Full Investigation

Report author's note: Usually I research my news items, often from several sources, and paraphrase and assimilate so that what you read is my own writing, with sources noted. For this particular incident, however, I have no words. I give up. I am simply relaying the article that has already told the story perfectly and find I have no emotional energy to try to do any differently or better.

Additionally, I profoundly try to avoid spinning news or offering my opinion. It's unprofessional and defeats the purpose of a "report" in my eyes. But I will digress on that personal rule this one time. My reports are reviewed and edited by many eyes. Because this case is grotesque, I feel it deserves better than cold hard facts. It is disturbing in the extreme.

There has NEVER been a better illustration of why your union matters and why elections matter. Regulations matter and seeing that they are enforced is the job of the agencies in charge. Agencies in charge, in our case, are controlled by Presidential appointees and our union may influence such bureaucrats but cannot control them.

Our FRA has been led for the past four years by a former railroad CEO who was very pro-carrier and very anti-enforcement. Two of our Brothers paid the ultimate price for the sick calculus of profit over human life. It didn't have to be this way.

Please read the compelling article by Bill Stevens and published on Trains.com:

WASHINGTON — A brake system failure — which included an air flow restriction and the failure of an end-of-train device to respond to an emergency brake command — was the probable cause of the October 2018 runaway and subsequent collision that killed two Union Pacific crewmen on Sherman Hill in

Wyoming, the National Transportation Safety Board said today.

Contributing factors to the crash at Granite Canyon, Wyo., included UP's failure to maintain freight cars in accordance with federal regulations, including performing single railcar air brake tests, the safety board said. Also contributing: Federal Railroad Administration and industry standards that allow an extended gap between an end-of-train device communications failure and a warning to the crew.

"Had Union Pacific followed the rules and conducted air brake tests, any defects would likely have been identified and this accident could have been prevented," Robert Hall, NTSB director of the Office of Railroad, Pipeline, and Hazardous Materials Investigations, said in a statement. "This accident is an example of the industry not complying with federal regulations that are already in place to ensure transportation safety."

Union Pacific told Trains News Wire it "acknowledges the NTSB's findings and has followed previously issued recommendations."

The wreck occurred on a 1.55% descending grade on Sherman Hill west of Cheyenne. Eastbound merchandise train MGRY04 (Green River, Wyo., to Cheyenne) collided with the rear of stationary freight MPCNP03 (Pocatello, Idaho, to North Platte, Neb.), derailing the striking train's three locomotives and 57 cars, along with eight cars on the parked train.

The NTSB investigation revealed that after a service brake application failed to slow the train as it descended, the engineer initiated an emergency brake application at 28 mph. After the emergency brake application, the crew received a "front-to-rear no communication" message indicating the emergency brake request was not received at the end-of-train device, which would have initiated an emergency brake application from the rear of the train.

The runaway continued to accelerate and struck the rear of the standing train at 55 mph, the NTSB said. Killed in the crash were engineer Jason Martinez, 40, and conductor Benjamin Brozovich, 39.

The MGRY's brake system operated normally between Green River and Laramie, Wyo., where it picked up 19 additional cars. The brake pipe airflow was restricted between the ninth and 10th cars in the 105-car consist, the NTSB said, meaning that only the brakes on the first nine cars were trying to hold back the train's 12,417 tons as it headed down the grade.

Because the brake pressure dipped after the train was "bunched" while cresting the grade, it's possible that a kinked air hose restricted air flow and interfered with normal operation of the brakes, the NTSB said, citing similar incidents. UP's end-of-railcar air hose assembly inspections did not identify issues that could cause fouling or air flow restrictions, the NTSB said.

Six of the 10 gondolas picked up in Laramie were overdue for a single-car air brake test that likely would have found defective conditions, the NTSB said. UP crews did perform brake tests at Green River and Laramie, the report notes.

The train's end-of-train device communications failure contributed to the wreck, too, the NTSB said. The devices on the head and rear ends of the train were functioning properly. But a combination of train length, track curvature, and terrain obstructions blocked the radio signal.

Emergency brake commands from the head end cease after 2 minutes if not received by the end of train device, the NTSB said, and there's also a 16-minute, 30-second lag between a communications failure and a warning to a crew.

"Based on the circumstances of this accident, the NTSB concludes that the communication protocol allowing 16 minutes and 30 seconds of

— continued on Page 12

Words from the Chairman

By Jeff Rich, Chairman, Tennessee State Legislative Board

Railroading is in my blood. My great uncle, Rawson Ellison, a Louisville & Nashville Brakeman from 1940-1976, told me once that I couldn't help being a railroad man because I was born with "cinders in my shoes" - an old reference to the coal cinders they used for track ballast back in the day - "railroading pixie dust," if you will. My great granddad was an engineer for the "Old Reliable" and was employed by that road for 50 years. We shared this earth for just a few months before his passing, so he got the blame for the cinders. I took my turn in the family line of railroaders in 1987, hiring out on a shortline, then eleven years later to CSX. I've had an engineer's license now for going on 33 years. I'm proud of my profession and the people I've worked with have become a part of my life. They too are family, and we look after family. So, when the opportunity presented itself, I became a union officer.

Why do we do it? The long hours and inopportune calls from frantic members at odd hours; the endless confrontations with the carriers; the paperwork and effort. Why? Because this Union is a family - dysfunctional at times to be sure, but in the end we'll stand together. We always have, through thick and thin, wartime, depression, and natural disasters, not to mention births, deaths, weddings, and such. It's our family obligation.

Now we find ourselves in a strange place. To paraphrase

Lewis Carroll: "What's down is up and what's up is clearly down." If the 2020 election and the subsequent January 6 insurrection teaches us anything, it's that we've neglected our society for too long. We've overlooked obvious signs of distress, or even ignored the obvious issues right under our very noses. The country and the American society are in need of a reboot and, in my personal opinion, it's organized labor's time to come out again and show the way.

As President Biden has stated over and over again, organized labor built the middle class and history tells us that in a strong middle class there is power. It has power at the polls, power in the marketplace, and power from being in the roll of leadership of a great society. How do we get there though? There is no magic bullet, no app, no legislation that can capture that lightning back to the bottle again. It takes hard work - work to bring our own members back into the family fold. In our case, it's rebuilding the railway labor family.

I said I was from a railroad family. In 1936 that same great grandad, James Franklin Brown, L&N 1910-1960, traveled with his wife Myrtle to San Francisco for the Grand Convention of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Enginemen, for whom he was a delegate from Nashville. I didn't find out till much later that Myrtle's presence at that grand event was more involved than his. You see, she was a high-ranking

member of the Grand Lodge of the Ladies Society of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen & Enginemen. She served in the position of Guide to the national organization and was known quite well by many in the day - so much so that her funerary register is a Who's Who of labor friendly politicians and dignitaries. The example she left us was one of a railway labor community that looked after itself - to encourage attendance when times were good, and bad; to be there for the membership and ready to lend a hand when needed; helping to organize on one hand and gather items for a war effort on the other; to comfort the family in a loss or stand with other families on the picket line. She was a sweet demure lady of the south, but underneath there was that iron resolve that every railroad spouse has - our very own Steel Magnolias. That resolve that she had passed on through my family and I think it should be a lesson for us all. It's the lesson of perseverance.

Remember the old African proverb:

"To go fast, go alone. To go far, go together"

- Anonymous

We must persevere if we are to bring the prodigal son or daughter back into the fold. We have no choice. We must rebuild what was in order to move forward. The struggle by the Auxiliary to keep membership intact and grow the organization is a



prime indicator of the challenge we face. To form a unified labor organization through solidarity and prove through the example of works that benefit the membership and recreate that trust and bond is our goal. Education and awareness of what we're trying to achieve should be the topic of conversation at every table of our railroad family.

All that being said, what will it take for us to get a seat at that table? It's been my experience on every level of my union involvement that one-on-one, face-to-face, with evidence in hand is the best course of action. The hard part is to simply get people to listen rather than talk. People are conditioned by their influencers to: (a) find the trigger for their perceived outrage, and (b) seek out the gotcha moments in your explanations. They simply follow a tried-and-true form of brainwashing and there's really no other word for it.

Once again, this election cycle has taught us a great lesson, especially from the Georgia Senate race. The power starts at the grassroots level, and listening as much as telling - reconnecting with the community of people you belong to, whether it's social or geographic in nature. There's an old commercial that used to air on TV where "she told two people, then they told two people, and so on and so on." I realize this is difficult in the midst of a pandemic, but we can use the same tools our detractors use to educate and encourage others. We can and

should seize the narrative. We should do this, but not in the broad strokes of memes and postings of a social or political content. Instead, we should approach in our own words, with our own ideas, with sincerity and willing to lend an ear to the inevitable rant, because people want desperately to be heard amongst the chaos.

Now here we are in 2021 with a labor friendly President beginning a new era and promising labor a seat at the table. We've weathered one of the worst times in our nation's history. Divisiveness, hatred and bigotry have come out of the shadows. Ignorance and misinformation fuel the passions of those who feel left behind. That's a divide many see as insurmountable. Then again, they've never met a railroad spouse. They've never seen such a force of nature.

I've read this column in past issues of this publication, where Brothers Scott Palmer and Shahraim Allen explained what we do and how it works on the legislative side. I hope I'm providing part of the "why we do it." I guess the only part left to cover is "how." I'll ask my wife, auxiliary member Lisa Rich, that question because she, like my great grandmother and all the other railroad spouses can pull from that great well of knowing to give the right answer and guidance for what needs to be done. Our family is the rock, the immovable object that withstands the storm.

This union is family and it is the rock we must build upon to advance our cause and to create equality and solidarity for a new day.

Think I'm wrong? Ask your spouse.

Established in 1991, the BLET Auxiliary Scholarship Program provides \$1,000 scholarships to qualifying students who wish to pursue higher education. The Auxiliary also offers two \$2,500 scholarships annually in collaboration with Locomotive Engineers and Conductors Mutual Protective Association (LECMPA). The two \$2,500 scholarships are fully funded by LECMPA.

To apply for an Auxiliary Scholarship award, the applicant must be a son, daughter, stepson, or stepdaughter of a BLET Auxiliary member and a Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineer and Trainmen member (living or deceased), with each being a member at least one year. An exception has been made for those children of single parent BLET members with at least one year of membership in the BLET and at least one year of membership as a BLET Auxiliary Associate Member. To qualify for the LECMPA-funded scholarships, the BLET member in the family must also be a member of LECMPA for no less than one year.

In addition, applicants must be accepted for admission by an accredited university, college, trade school, or institute of higher learning. Recipients are chosen on the basis of academic record,

THE NATIONAL B.L.E.T. AUXILIARY/ LECMPA
2021 SCHOLARSHIP
DUE
April 1, 2021
Please contact National Secretary
Lawana Poss with questions
LWPOSS@GMAIL.COM
bletauxiliary.net/scholarships/scholarship-information

leadership, character, and personal achievement. For high school seniors entering an institute of higher learning for the first time, a copy of ACT or SAT scores and a current copy of cumulative grade point average (GPA) must accompany the application. For graduate students or students returning to an institute of higher learning, a copy of last term's (or most current) GPA must accompany the application. Applications submitted without these documents will not be considered.

The LECMPA-funded scholarships will be awarded to the two applicants who score the highest amongst those who meet the qualifications listed above. If an applicant meets the eligibility requirements for the LECMPA-funded scholarships but is not selected for one of the two \$2,500 scholarships, he/she will still be eligible for a \$1,000 scholarship.

The application deadline is April 1. Applications received after that date will not be considered. Applications, instructions, and mailing address for submission may be found on the Auxiliary website at www.bletauxiliary.net.



North American Railway Foundation®

founded by the BR&CF



Many thanks to the North American Railway Foundation (NARF) for sponsoring our newsletter and making it possible to share educational articles and information with our members across the nation, to keep railroad spouses and their families up-to-date on changes affecting benefits, and to educate our members about important legislation that helps promote safety on the nation's railroads.

The North American Railway Foundation, founded by the Brotherhood's Relief and Compensation Fund (BR&CF), was formed on October 22, 1996, as a nonprofit organization (a private operating foundation). Its purpose is to explore, nurture and support railway safety, efficiency, and technology, and to educate about and preserve the history of railroads in the United States and Canada. The goals of the Foundation are achieved by providing direct and active financial support to deserving non-profit institutions and projects, which exemplify the Foundation's purpose.

The Brotherhood's Relief and Compensation Fund, a non-profit corporation established in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, was founded on June 12, 1912, by Luther G. Smith, a locomotive engineer for the Pennsylvania Railroad, to provide job income protection to railroaders throughout the United States and Canada who were "held out of service" due to suspension or dismissal. Brother Smith did not object to the railroads using a method to discipline employees when such discipline was necessary, but he did not see the logic in innocent family members having to suffer when the head of the home made an error in the performance of his duties that resulted in a suspension or dismissal.

North American Railway Foundation

Philip J. Sullivan II, Executive Director

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Mechanicsburg, PA 17050

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Brotherhood's Relief & Compensation Fund

Jesse E. Taylor, International President

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Moving America is the railroad podcast you've been looking for! Hosted by Locomotive Engineers **John Belcher** and **Mike Necessary**. Join us as we discuss railroad industry news, share personal stories, and answer your questions. We'll even have some special guests join us. Come along for the ride and see how railroads and train crews are...Moving America!





Tidbits from National Secretary Lawana Poss

Have you made the decision to “Go Green” with your newsletter subscription? By “going green” you will receive a full color digital copy of the newsletter via e-mail attachment. To “go green,” please call me or send me an e-mail and your future newsletters will be sent to your e-mail address.

SCHOLARSHIP NEWS

If you have children who are college bound, they may be eligible to apply for the BLET Auxiliary Scholarship. BLET Auxiliary Scholarship information and applications can be obtained on our website at www.bletauxiliary.net. Scholarship applications for the 2021-2022 academic school year are due in my office April 1, 2021.

Incomplete and Late applications will not be considered. Please read ALL instructions!! Changes have been made to the application and eligibility.

WELCOME TO OUR NEW MEMBER!

Jessica McEachern has joined as a member of Auxiliary 99, Amarillo, Texas.

CARE AND ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

Established in 1921, the Care and Assistance Program (CAP) is our organization's way of saying thank you to long-time members. These members are usually elderly and their incomes are such that some of life's little pleasures are out of their reach. The CAP provides financial assistance to qualifying members and helps them to maintain a little bit more of the dignity they deserve. Our CAP recipients are grateful for what we do. Please contact me for applications! Please check to see if someone in your Auxiliary may be eligible and encourage them to apply. Members at Large are eligible also!

MEMBERS-AT-LARGE

Dues notices have been mailed to all members-at-large. Please make sure to send your dues to me and make sure that all of your information is correct so that you will continue to receive your newsletter. Dues were due on March 1, 2021. If you have not already done so, please submit your dues as soon as possible. Please make checks payable to BLET Auxiliary, or you may use the PayPal link on our website, www.bletauxiliary.net.

AUXILIARY SECRETARIES

Auxiliary Annual Reports were due on March 1, 2021, along with 2020 dues for your members. If you have not submitted your report and dues, please do so as soon as possible. If you have any questions about the forms, please call or e-mail me. I will be more than happy to assist you in getting these forms properly filled out and processed. If submitting dues by check, please make check

payable to BLET Auxiliary, or you may use the PayPal link on our website at www.bletauxiliary.net.

OUR DEEPEST SYMPATHIES

Our thoughts and prayers to: Tim Price, Ohio State Legislative Chairman, on the loss of his brother.

Brian and Pam Kelley on the loss of Pam's mother, Judy Hulett, on December 31, 2020. Pam is a member-at-large in Missouri and Brian is the former Missouri State Legislative Board Chairman.

CONGRATULATIONS!

Sereena Hogan and Ken Kroeger welcomed their first great grandchild, Alder Sage Serkowski, on January 4. Congratulations to their grandson and his wife, Forest and Stacy Serkowski.

Ray and Cherie Acosta welcomed a grandson, David Ray Hoskins, on January 30. Congratulations to the proud parents and grandparents!

Oscar and Susie Burrola welcomed a grandson, Jett Arthur Compton, on February 1. Congratulations Susie and Oscar, and the proud parents Alissa and Zac!

THOUGHTS AND PRAYERS

Our thoughts and prayers to all BLET members, auxiliary members, and their family members and friends battling COVID.

Dwayne and Debbie Massengale's daughter, Robin, is still hospitalized and fighting COVID. Dwayne is the Chairman of the Georgia State Legislative Board and Debbie is an Auxiliary member-at-large.

Prayers and loving thoughts to Tim Price and his family as he has been diagnosed with a serious illness.

Melinda Byerly, Auxiliary 13 in LaCross, Wisconsin, still battling COVID.

Please contact me or any national officer when there is a death of a member or the death of one of their family members. We want to be able to send our condolences to the family. We would like to also share in the joy!! Please let me know of any exciting happenings!

Thank you for your support and membership!!



Lawana Poss can be reached at 770-497-8898, or Lewp2007@bellsouth.net

“It’s easy to judge.

It’s more difficult to understand.

Understanding requires compassion, patience, and a willingness to believe that good hearts sometimes choose poor methods.

Through judging, we separate. Through understanding, we grow.”

— Doe Zantamata

Legislative Update

Continued from Page 7

time to elapse without alerting the crew of the inability to initiate emergency braking from the [end-of-train device] is excessive," the NTSB said.

After the accident, UP installed 26 radio repeaters to provide continuous communications between the head end and rear of trains operating over Sherman Hill's three tracks.

The NTSB issued new recommendations as a result of the wreck. It urged the FRA to require more frequent communication checks between the head end and end-of-train devices.

It urged the FRA and the Association of American Railroads to revise codes and standards to ensure that emergency brake signal transmission continues until acknowledged by the end of train device or a brake pressure reduction is noted.

It urged railroads to analyze radio frequency propagation along grades to identify gaps where communication between the head end and rear end may be lost, then to close those gaps.

Source: Trains.com

Jessica Cole lives in Baraboo, Wisconsin. She can be reached at jcs1987@gmail.com, or 262-672-9742/



By: Becky Schneider, 3rd Vice President/Asst. National Legislative Rep.

With the inauguration of President Joe Biden (aka Amtrak Joe), and the January 21st confirmation of U.S. Department of Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg, self-proclaimed as the second biggest passenger rail enthusiast in the new administration, it seems that the country may finally be able to realize improvements to Amtrak's passenger rail network and shoring up of our country's crumbling infrastructure along with many other needs.

During Secretary Buttigieg's confirmation hearing, he not only professed his support for passenger rail, he recognized that rail networks "provide essential economic lifelines for the towns they connect — particularly in smaller and rural Amtrak served communities." During his time as Mayor, he talked about his firsthand experience expanding intercity passenger rail and transit to prove he's more than just a policy wonk. He also understands working with state and regional partners, and across the aisle. He has led public-private partnerships as well. In addition, Buttigieg indicated that he wants to bring a more balanced approach to investment, rather than continuing the highway dominated approach to funding infrastructure. He believes creating a trust fund similar to the Highway Trust Fund will allow for more stability in funding longer term projects across the nation.

During his hearing, there were moments of conflict, but Buttigieg received bi-partisan praise for his performance. Senator Ron Tester (D-MT) said this: "You have put on a clinic for how a nominee should . . . act. You haven't avoided the questions. You've been straightforward. And you know what the hell you're talking about . . . That's pretty damn refreshing."

Also on January 21, President Biden named 40 appointees to various transportation agencies to serve as deputies or assistants so they can "hit the ground running" without the further delay of Senate confirmations. More senior roles will be named later.

Secretary Buttigieg is indicative of other Biden appointees throughout the new administration in that they are familiar with, and have worked in, the areas to which they are now assigned. Refreshing indeed.

Source: Rail Passengers Association Hotline, Jan. 22, 2021.

Split Senate

With the two new Senators from Georgia having been sworn in to the 117th Congress, most of you are

aware the Senate is now a 50/50 split of Democrats and Republicans. With the Vice President holding the tie vote, the Majority Leader will be from the Democratic party and thereby will control the Senate's Calendar of Business. Controlling the calendar is one of the most important aspects of holding the Majority Leadership so that bills passed by the House can be allowed to come to the floor to be debated and voted on by the Senate. It also means that Democrats will hold the committee chairmanships.

As happened in late 2001 when a Republican changed his affiliation to Independent, caucusing with the Democrats, the Senate saw a 50/50 split, as well as a change in the Majority Leader. A precedent power sharing agreement was negotiated providing for equal membership on committees along with equal budgets for both parties. It allows for both leaders to advance legislation in the event of a deadlock. Minority Leader McConnell was reticent to accept such an agreement, but late reporting has indicated that he is entering negotiations with Leader Schumer.

Source: NARVRE February 2021

NTSB — High Hazard Flammable Material Tankers

The National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) once again recommended the use of five non-placarded buffer cars between the engine and hazmat cars to reduce the risk of hazardous materials release to train crews regardless of train length and consist. It also recommended the placement of the most vulnerable tank cars in high-hazard flammable trains to be placed into positions in the consist where they are least likely to derail or sustain mechanical damage from the effects of trailing tonnage or collision in an accident.

This Safety Recommendation is not the first time the NTSB has issued it, yet it still goes unheeded. Current regulations require five buffer cars if the first car contains oil, "but through a loophole in the regulations, only one buffer car is required on unit oil trains that

could contain over 100 oil tankers. In derailments, locomotives can be a primary ignition source for spilled oil," according to a BLET Newsflash. In a letter from President Pierce to the FRA dated April 28, 2015, he wrote, "Since engine and train crews occupy the cab of that potential ignition source, there should be as much distance away from the fuel source as possible . . . Five cars may be insufficient, but one car is obviously not enough." The matter was turned over to the Rail Safety Advisory Committee, but the process eventually ground to a halt because of the Carriers' inflexibility.

Regarding the latest re-recommendation, President Pierce said, ". . . a change in the rule would require minor, easily accommodated operational changes and not the need for some expensive technology. Continuing to allow the railroads to self-regulate puts the lives of train crews at risk, and could lead to a wholly unnecessary loss of life."

Source: BLET Newsflash Dec. 18, 2020/RT&S, Bill Wilson, Jan. 5, 2021

Amtrak

As with everything in our economy, Amtrak has been hard hit by the pandemic. Thousands of Amtrak workers were furloughed and train schedules took major hits both commuter and long distance. If even a sliver of silver lining can be found, Amtrak, along with other forms of transportation, may have shown how vital networks are to our communities.

Post Pandemic Recovery

Amtrak CEO Bill Flynn wrote a letter to members of the 117th Congress dated January 22, 2021, outlining Amtrak's top five priorities for recovery from the pandemic:

- Sufficient Funding through COVID relief funding to sustain and restore operations and recall furloughed employees through the remainder of FY 21 and FY 22.
- Intercity Passenger Rail Trust Fund to even the playing field with all other transportation

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COVID and the Railroad Workplace — one family's story

Names have been changed to protect the privacy of those involved in this true account of a husband and wife's experience:

It was a rail wife's nightmare. One night last year, Laura's husband Joe, a rail engineer, sent her a text stating that his conductor from the previous night's run had gone to the doctor with COVID symptoms only a few hours after they'd worked together. In fact, they had been together in close quarters for 17 hours altogether—12 hours on the engine, followed by 5 hours in a company taxicab.

Immediately upon his return home, Laura and Joe began quarantining from everyone, as well as from each other in their own home. This was difficult as Laura is a hands-on business owner, and usually sees and cares for elderly, high-risk parents on a daily basis. Avoiding contact with clients, family, and each other in their home was difficult and very stressful.

As suspected, the conductor tested positive for COVID and was decent enough to call Joe with his test results and to warn him to get tested and to quarantine.

Joe called the company crew caller and nurse daily and sometimes several times a day. The nurse promised to put him into the correct status for quarantine, but the system did not update, day after day. As a result, Joe was continually forced to lay off on call and, over the course of several days, he accumulated enough attendance points that he was looking at being fired for missing work, despite the fact that the nurse had instructed him not to go to work.

Joe and Laura both got tested for COVID as soon as they could, but the test results took several days to come back. Thankfully, both were negative, but they were still instructed to quarantine for a full 10 days. Joe stated that he and his conductor had both worn masks

HELP PREVENT THE SPREAD OF THE **CORONA VIRUS: COVID-19**



Wash Your Hands Often
With Soap And Water



Avoid touching your eyes,
nose, and mouth.



Cover your cough or
sneeze with a tissue



Disinfect frequently touched
objects and surfaces.



Avoid close contact with
people who are sick.



Stay home if you are sick,
except to get medical care.

the entire 17 hours they worked together, and it is suspected that this may be part of the reason Joe escaped being infected.

On the last day of Joe's quarantine, he finally received a call from company management informing him that he had worked with a COVID positive conductor ten days previous. Had the conductor not been forthcoming and proactive in telling Joe of his illness, Joe would have continued to go to work as usual and potentially exposed dozens of other people to COVID.

Additionally, on the last day of quarantine, Joe was finally put in the correct status for being laid off due to COVID quarantine, and his attendance points were returned to zero.

This true story highlights the importance of all of us having each other's backs in the workplace.



*We need women who are so strong they can
be gentle, so educated they can be humble,
so fierce they can be compassionate, so
passionate they can be rational, and so
disciplined they can be free.*

-Kavita Ramdas

Life in a Pandemic - a year we'll never forget!

— another family's story

By Jessica Keene, President, Pacific Northwest Auxiliary, Salem, Oregon

Last March, our country joined the rest of the world in isolation and hardship due to the COVID-19 Pandemic. Our railroader was still working tirelessly through it all. It didn't cause too much havoc at first. Having our four kids home seemed like a treat. My husband was working days at that time. Not having to go anywhere to uphold a commitment was equally nice. It seemed like a little break from our usual busy schedules with the kids' sports, PTA meetings, Individual Educational Program meetings for our special needs child, school board meetings, doctor appointments for my father-in-law who we care for in our home, and auxiliary meetings and activities, to list a few.

But then things changed. We agreed to care for the children of some of our friends who were front-line workers. Due to school closures and lack of access to childcare, their kids needed supervision while their parents worked.

My very social father-in-law didn't understand why we no longer could go out to eat, stroll through the grocery store, or attend social events. And we noticed our children's emotional health starting to decline. We were very busy, but not getting a lot done, and feeling exhausted.

With the death of George Floyd last year, protests and violent riots broke out in our state. Oregon became unsafe, scary, and broken. Every time my husband left for work, we were concerned for his safety. Having difficult conversations with our kids about what they were hearing and seeing on the news became a regular routine in our home. It was stressful and emotionally exhausting.

The toll this added to our already "new normal" had a huge effect on our youngest son. He became an emotional mess, with tears streaming down his face, bawling at the dinner table, losing his temper easily, and dark, disturbing thoughts that plagued his consciousness. Our special needs son entered his teen years, and with that, the hormones kicked in. It became a crazy ride for the whole family and we were struggling to keep it together. There was no escape from the chaos, and life seemed to be running fast but going nowhere.

I was asked to join a committee to discuss reopening of the kids' school. Our focus was to create a plan that would keep our kids, staff, and community safe. We presented our plan for the return to in-person school, and the school board approved it. Then the COVID numbers skyrocketed in Oregon and, in the fall, school was forced to start online instead of in person.

The first week of school, major fires broke out in our state. School began online with an eerie red glow in the sky and thick smoke filling the air. Worried about friends and family, we offered whatever we could as support. Our state was still experiencing riots and protests, and now we were literally on fire. During all of this, our youngest daughter started kindergarten and our oldest attended high school, all on-line and at home. Trying to help the kids with their schoolwork while caring for our friends' kids so they could go to work took up all my time and many things were neglected. Our house was messy and loud, and emotions ran high for all of us. It was definitely taking its toll.

Our 2020 elections added to the stress of everything else going on country-wide. It divided an already fragile and beaten down country, leading to a polarizing election to say the least.

The holidays came and went. We celebrated with just our household. It wasn't horrible - but it also wasn't great. At least we all got a break from home school. Then my husband's day job ended and he started working nights. A houseful of kids home all day with a railroader trying to sleep through it all was not easy. At this point, we were exhausted, still isolated, and no end was in sight. The year 2020 had ended, but the hardships were carried through into the new year. Then the events of January 6 added a whole new level of uncertainty.

During this time, the re-open committee met again for our children's school. This time, teachers felt unsafe to return to face-to-face school due to the COVID case numbers in our state remaining high. I have always been a huge advocate for my kids and what is best for them. However, I found myself in a whole new and unprecedented situation, feeling the need to advocate in direct conflict of my children's best interest by advocating for the safety of our school staff and teachers. Being a union supporter, I found myself voicing concerns for



Matthias, Charlie, Isabella, and Grayson Keene on Sept. 8, 2020 - first day of the 2020-2021 School Year.

the teachers' wellbeing during our committee and school board meetings, as well as in individual conversations. Our small community school of 325 students, kindergarten through 12th grade, was becoming divided. It felt like it was parents against teachers, teachers against school board, and an administrative leader who has since been fired for his actions in helping to cause such a division. With everything else that was going on, seeing our small, usually tight community crumble was devastating.

In February, we came to an agreement with the teachers and a plan for hybrid schooling. Things were looking up and we were excited to return to some normalcy in our lives. However, the first week the children were to be back in school, an ice storm hit and created huge electricity outages across the state. I'm writing this article by candlelight, wrapped in blanket. We have no expected time for our electricity to be restored. The kids are bored, cold, and feeling let down after school has yet again been cancelled.

Our local auxiliary hasn't been able to meet once through all of this and I really miss that. The Auxiliary is such an important aspect of our "normal" railroad life. During unprecedented times like these, we need to be there for each other and our railroad families. Many railroaders have fallen ill, some have lost their lives. I am grateful for the tools that are available to us like Zoom, Facebook, Facetime, calling, and texting each other. These avenues allow us to check in with each other. Sometimes, just a text is enough to remind someone they are not alone in this. I have enjoyed participating in the virtual game nights also. This last year has been hard for everyone, yet we can make it more bearable by supporting each other. I look forward to brighter days ahead.



Greetings from your Editor, Rachel Pharris

"A little more persistence, a little more effort, and what seemed hopeless failure may turn to glorious success."

- Elbert Hubbard

Brothers and sisters,

I hope this newsletter finds you looking forward to warmer weather and the hope to meet in person with your auxiliary members soon.

Within the first few weeks of this new year, the other executive officers and I started planning for the 2021 calendar year, including some great Zoom get-togethers and fundraising ideas. I am hopeful we can meet in person this summer and am keeping my fingers crossed for that.

I know the COVID pandemic has made it challenging for local auxiliaries to get together. I hope you all have started planning for this year in hopes you can have in-person meetings. Recently, I was looking back at past issues of the newsletter for an article and it gave me a great idea. Many of our auxiliaries have formed since the newsletter started, which means we have missed many great articles over the years. I believe it was actually started in the 1990s under the direction of Past International President Ruth Windham. We don't have easy access to all of those old issues; however, you can find each of the four newsletters produced each year, from 2012 to present, on our website at www.bletauxiliary.net/newsletters.

I challenge the members of each auxiliary to go back and look at those past newsletters for ideas. Maybe at your next meeting, you could assign an issue or two to each member. Ask them to review their assigned issues and report back with any ideas they may find. Maybe there is a great fundraising idea, maybe there is a great get-together idea, or maybe a great community service project.

Here are some questions to ask:

- How can we collaborate and support each other to keep our auxiliaries strong?
- How can we serve our communities?
- How can we serve each other?

We don't have to reinvent the wheel to come up with ideas for projects or activities. When we open our eyes to the needs around us, it is amazing the things we can see.

Rachel Pharris can be reached at 1-417-872-9641, rachel-rae@live.com, or by snail mail at 404 South, Willard, Missouri, 65781.

Legislative Update, Continued from Page 12

modes in order to provide reliable, multi-year program funding. All other modes receive tens of billions of dollars in federal subsidies every year. Reliance only on annual appropriations inhibits the ability to pursue large, multi-year capital projects across the nation.

- Access to Railroads for New Service and Adding Trains to allow Amtrak to fulfill its mission and meet the needs of the traveling public. Amtrak is seeking Congressional support and updates to statutes to ensure the network can grow and serve more Americans and increase cooperation by freight railroads to achieve its goals.
- Preference Enforcement of existing law requiring host railroads to provide dispatching preference over their own freight trains, which are the largest source of delay to Amtrak trains.
- New Routes for "corridor" routes which are typically less than 500 miles and represent the fastest-growing segment of Amtrak service. Amtrak is asking Congress to authorize and fund Amtrak's expansion in such corridors by covering most of the initial capital and operating costs of new or expanded routes prior to requiring state partner cost-sharing.

Rail Passenger Association President Jim Matthews stated his organization believes funding from the COVID-19 relief bill will allow restoration of daily service to Amtrak's long distance routes, as well as maintain Amtrak's state-supported and commuter trains, and support of the Northeast Corridor.

Source: Amtrak CEO Bill Flynn January 22, 2021 letter; RPA President Jim Matthews

Mask Up!

On the busy day of January 21, President Biden signed an executive order mandating mask wearing on planes and other modes of transportation as part of a group of several executive orders issued to combat the pandemic. The order brought uniformity for airlines, trains, and other ground transportation who have had to navigate the various local and state rules. Flight attendant's and pilot's unions have called for nationwide rules for months, as well as CEO Kevin Burke of the Airports Council International North America, who welcomed the order and even requested one back in May. Even though Amtrak has required facial coverings on trains since May, a spokesman for Amtrak told The Hill that "a federal directive that passengers are required to comply with would reinforce our current policy."

Source: The Hill, Alex Gangitano, January 21, 2021

COVID-19 Vaccine

Amtrak is the latest company in the U.S. to offer extra payments and benefits to employees who receive the COVID-19 vaccine in their effort

— continued on back cover

We welcome your submissions for our publication. Please send your stories, articles, photos, poems, etc., to:

**Rachel Pharris, Editor
BLET Auxiliary News
rachel-rae@live.com
417-872-9641**

The next issue will be published in June 2021. Please have your submissions to Rachel on or before May 15, 2021.



BLET Auxiliary

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8720 N. Myrtle Drive
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Legislative Update, Continued from Page 15

to achieve 100% vaccination. Those who get the vaccine will receive two hours' regular pay and will be allowed excused absences related to the vaccination, such as inoculation day and the next day, if they experience vaccine side effects. Amtrak joins the likes of McDonald's and Dollar General to encourage vaccination.

Sources: Econotimes February 2, 2021; BLET Newsflash February 3, 2021

In Sympathy

On behalf of the Auxiliary, I would like to extend our sympathies to the family and friends of retired, long-serving Amtrak Vice General Chairman Mac McDowell who lost his battle with cancer on January 21, at the age of 69.

Source: BLET Newsflash January 27, 2021

Railroad Unemployment Benefits

Pertaining to railroad unemployment benefits administered by the Railroad Retirement Board, Labor Member John Bragg advised that Congress "finally granted some relief from sequestration – though not permanent." Under the Continued Assistance to Rail Workers Act of 2020, Congress essentially extended the benefits created by the CARES Act. The temporary sequestration relief starts 10 days from enactment through 30 days following the date the Presidential Declaration of Emergency for COVID terminates. For those unaware, the sequestration required by the Budget Control Act of 2011 did not apply to workers eligible for federal unemployment insurance benefits, but because of the way railroad taxes are paid, railroaders are not eligible and thereby subject to sequestration resulting in a 5.7% reduction in unemployment benefits.

The legislation also provides the following:

- Recovery benefit of \$600 per 2-week employment registration period

from December 26, 2020 to March 14, 2021, down from \$1,200 under the previous COVID relief bill;

- Extended unemployment benefits for employees who have exhausted benefits, payable for claims starting after enactment and on or before March 14, 2021. No extended benefits are currently payable after April 5, 2021;
- Waiver of the 7-day waiting period for unemployment and sickness benefits, which was extended to March 14, 2021.

If you have any questions regarding unemployment or sickness benefits, or need to apply online, please contact the Railroad Retirement Board (RRB.gov).

Source: John Bragg, RRB Labor Member, December 28, 2020

Tax Information

2020 Tax Statements were mailed out January 19, 2021. Requests for duplicate statements can now be submitted. If you have not received your Form RRB-1099-R by the time you receive this newsletter, contact the Board right away or log into your myRRB.gov account to request a duplicate.

Remember: No matter what your state taxing authority tells you, Railroad Retirement Annuity benefits are not subject to state income tax per federal law.

Source: Railroad Retirement Board

Medicare COLAs

To be reintroduced into the new 117th Congress is a bill with language to protect issues important to seniors, including Medicare and a new, re-formulated COLA based on the real spending patterns of seniors living on retirement budgets. As more information becomes available, and after the bill is introduced, we will update you on its progress.

Source: Gary Faley, NARVRE February Newsletter

Becky Schneider lives in El Paso, Texas. She can be reached at beckybat@att.net, or 915-581-1373.
