



# 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.

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Sereena Hogan, President • Susie Burrola, 1st Vice President • Helen Brand, Secretary • Terri Fleming, Treasurer  
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## MAL Membership: More than Meets the Eye

By Terri Fleming  
National Treasurer &  
President, El Paso Area  
Auxiliary No. 591



After a recent monthly meeting of my local auxiliary, our legislative representative/treasurer, Becky Schneider, and I were discussing the status of the membership of the National Auxiliary, and we found that we were both in agreement that the member-at-large membership is a treasure that needs to be recognized and addressed. We believe that the BLET National Auxiliary and its members-at-large (MAL) have been working hard together to establish local auxiliaries in areas where they currently do not exist. Admittedly, the process is slower than we would like, given all of the good that can come from having a local auxiliary. That being said, the MAL's ability to contribute is often overlooked or not brought to the forefront.

MALs are in a unique position in that they can decide on an individual basis the amount of involvement they choose. On the one hand, they are members who support the National Auxiliary's work through the payment of annual dues, without having to attend monthly auxiliary meetings. We at the National Auxiliary have worked hard to educate and update all members through the articles and stories published in our newsletter, and announcements and information posted on our website. We realize that some of our MALs may not be getting the information or calls to action that are needed in our support of the BLET. They also do not have the coordinated group of voices at the local level when working with BLET divisions to address local problems on the railroad. Nor do they have "sisters-in-arms" to assist those who are in need of support or comfort.

However, Auxiliary MALs can do much to contribute to our goals without actually being a member of a local auxiliary, as has been evidenced in the past, mostly having to do with rail safety issues. Many of our MALs have worked with the BLET at the local level with city and county governments during the fight against remote control; at the state level on such issues such as pesticide use on right-of-ways; and at the national level on issues such as Amtrak funding, rail safety, and retirement. MALs have also participated in programs such

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## Labor Unions: America's True Working Class

*What the Union Means to Me*  
By Alexis Walker

*The following is an essay written by Alexis Walker, recipient of the \$1000 Division 28 "Bill Hannah Scholarship" for School Year 2017-2018. The scholarship, established in December 2016, in honor of recently retired BLET Western Lines General Chairman Bill Hannah, is funded by BLET Div. 28 in Tucson, Arizona, and administered by Guadalupe Auxiliary No. 28. Scholarship applicants were asked to write an essay on the following topic: "Why does the Union matter and how does it impact you?"*

*Alexis is the daughter of Div. 28 Local Chairman Ken Walker. She is attending the University of Arizona, majoring in Political Science and German Language.*

The BLET Labor Union is a force for workers all over Southern Arizona. The BLET provides for many men and women working on the railroads by ensuring that these individuals receive fair wage and retirement, as well as defending them from wrongful termination and mistreatment. The BLET Division 28 has had a massive impact in my life, from showing me what a true work ethic is to helping my family during times of hardship.

Labor unions are an invaluable asset for the working class of America. Speaking generally, labor unions have a history of protecting workers of color, young workers, and low income workers when management or the federal government sought to strip workers of their rights and protections. The BLET Division 28 alone serves 277 members here in Tucson and works diligently around the clock to defend and assist these individuals in any way they can. On the BLET Division 28 website, not only are the phone numbers of all the officers available, but there is also a "Peer Support" page for members seeking assistance after a vehicle or pedestrian accident. Also on the website, there is a tab for vacation time and an "Agreements" tab ensuring every member has all the tools they need to receive their deserved time off. Additionally, the BLET and the Auxiliary raise money every year for their scholarship fund, which allows students like myself to better afford a college

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## From the President - BY SEREENA HOGAN

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Greetings Everyone!

Great news - after almost three years of negotiations, members of the BLET ratified a new collective bargaining agreement with the National Carriers' Conference Committee on December 1, 2017. The Agreement was reached as a result of the BLET's

participation in the Coordinated Bargaining Group, with five other Unions. Many thanks to all the BLET local officers, general committee officers, and members who spoke out in support of the proposed contract preceding the vote. And a huge thank-you to National President Dennis Pierce and the other BLET national officers who traveled around the country to hold town hall meetings in an effort to educate members about the details of the pending agreement.

Congratulations to Bill Hannah on his retirement, effective October 1, 2017. Bill served as Local Chairman of the UP Western Lines for 16 years. Congratulations also to Brian Carr, who has stepped into the position left vacant by Bill. You have some big shoes to fill, Brian, and we wish you all the best!

As you can see by the article on the opposite page, Twin Ports Auxiliary No. 6388 is going strong and doing some great work in partnership with the BLET divisions in the Duluth-Superior area, and in their community. This auxiliary really exemplifies what a local auxiliary is meant to be - a source of information for railroad families in their area, of support for these families and each other, and a vehicle for bringing families together for education, as well as fun and fellowship. While perusing the Twin Ports Auxiliary Facebook page recently, I saw several posts from railroaders in their area thanking them for the cards and gifts they had received from the auxiliary during times of illness and loss.

Twin Ports Auxiliary President, Rose Candela-Surchik, has been elected as the delegate to represent them at the National Convention next year. When I first met Rose at the International Western Convention in Minneapolis in the summer of 2014, she told me that she felt the families "up on the range" were somewhat isolated and she felt they could really benefit from an auxiliary in their area. And then she went to work to make that happen. Thank you Rose!

Our National Treasurer Terri Fleming, with a little help from National Past President Becky Schneider, authored a fine article on how much we value and appreciate our members-at-large. If you are a member-at-large and are not receiving e-mail alerts from our Legislative Rep Kathleen Bisbikis when there is a pressing issue that needs attention, please send your e-mail address to her at [biz4413@gmail.com](mailto:biz4413@gmail.com) and ask to be added to her list for legislative alerts and other important information.

I hope you enjoy reading the essay by Alexis Walker on the front cover. We had several wonderful essays submitted by children of Tucson area BLET Division 28 members this year, and I was asked by the Auxiliary 28 Scholarship Committee to publish the one submitted by the top scholarship recipient, Alexis. It's always great to hear from our young people about their experiences growing up in a union family.

On Page 5, you will find the last in the four-part series, entitled "Looking Back at Our History as we Celebrate 130 Years." I found it interesting that Wayne Bednersh, the keeper of the Spoon Planet website of silver collector spoons, took the time to research our organization when he acquired the Grand International Auxiliary 20th Anniversary spoon, featuring a portrait of our founder and first President Letitia Murdock embossed on the handle of the spoon. Thank you Mr. Bednersh for allowing us to print excerpts from your article.

With the holiday season upon us, the article by First Vice President Susie Burrola on page 10 reminds us that this time of year can bring on anxiety, sadness, loneliness, or depression for some. These feelings can be triggered by fatigue, financial stress, family problems, unrealistic expectations, or an inability to cope with the demands of the season. It's a good reminder to all of us to keep our expectations for the holiday season realistic and to pace yourself and set reasonable goals for yourself and your family. To find out more about this topic, visit the website entitled "Holiday Depression, Anxiety, and Stress," at [https://www.medicinenet.com/holiday\\_depression\\_and\\_stress/article.htm](https://www.medicinenet.com/holiday_depression_and_stress/article.htm).

Wishing each and every one of our readers a very Happy Holiday Season and a new year filled with all that brings you peace and joy!

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# Twin Ports Auxiliary No. 6388 Stays Busy Throughout the Year

By Lyila Stroup

BLET Twin Ports Auxiliary No. 6388, chartered August 30, 2015, and based out of Superior, Wisconsin, and Duluth, Minnesota, is striving to reach railroad families in new and unique ways. In addition to reaching out, and sometimes providing financial assistance to, our members and the railroaders in our area during recovery from an illness or accident, the auxiliary also organizes and sponsors monthly family events and community projects. This fall, we hosted a family gymnastics event, a picnic in the park, and delivered 200 pairs of donated socks to residents of an assisted living facility.

The auxiliary also provides educational opportunities on topics such as railroad retirement and Operation Lifesaver. Some members have even become certified as Operation Lifesaver volunteers, to provide education to community members about the dangers around the tracks.

Fundraising for our projects and events is a big focus. We have several members who are reps for different companies, including Arbonne, LuLaRoe, Lipsense, and Park Lane jewelry, who donate part of their profits to the auxiliary. For our



**Two hundred pairs of socks donated by members of Twin Ports Auxiliary were delivered to residents of an assisted living facility.**



**Family Day in August 2017 at a Twin Ports Gymnastics.**



**Alexavier Jensen (left), with his mom Ashley Jensen, and Silvia Stroup (right) with her dad, Dan Stroup.**

Christmas party this year, we will conduct a 50/50 raffle as well as a raffle for a wheelbarrow filled with bottles of liquor.

In the summer of 2016, we gained two new “honorary members,” Alexavier Jensen (son of Alexis Jensen), and Silvia Stroup (daughter of Lyilah Stroup). Both of these little angels were born in the summer of 2016.

Sadly, one of our biggest supporters recently passed away. Clyde Larson, Director of Field Operations for the FELA law firm of Hunegs, LeNeave, and Kvas, who sponsored our organizing meeting and dinner in August 2015, became a member of our auxiliary, and attended almost every meeting and event, died suddenly after a short illness, on Wednesday, November 8, 2017, at the age of 62. He will be deeply missed by all of us.

All of us in Auxiliary 6388 extend our best wishes to our auxiliary and union brothers and sisters across the nation this holiday season!

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# Tidbits from National Secretary Helen Brand

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The holiday season is here and we are close to the end of another year. My wish for all our members is that each of you have a joyous Christmas and a prosperous New Year.

## WELCOME

We have a new Auxiliary in the works, Music City Auxiliary No. 431, in the Nashville, Tennessee, area. They are sponsored by BLET Division 129. Welcome!

## 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 they are not able to obtain some of the basics for everyday living. The CAP provides financial assistance to qualifying members and helps them to maintain a little bit more of the dignity they deserve. Our recipients are very grateful for the help.

## AUXILIARY SECRETARIES

December is the month that your auxiliary packets are mailed to each local auxiliary secretary. The annual report is in the packets and will need to be completed and signed by the secretary and president of each auxiliary and then sent to me, along with the membership dues and fees for Calendar Year 2017. The report and dues are due on March 1, 2018. It is very important that this due date is adhered to in 2018 in order to keep your auxiliary "in good standing." As outlined in our bylaws, only auxiliaries in good standing (up to date with all dues and fees) and having a minimum of eight active members, will be eligible to send a delegate to the Fourth National BLET Convention, to be held September 30 - October 5, 2018, in Las Vegas, Nevada.

If you have any questions about the annual report forms, please call or e-mail me. I will be happy to assist you in getting the forms properly filled out and processed.

Membership cards have not arrived yet. I will mail them when I get them.

## MEMBERS-AT-LARGE

The dues notices for members-at-large will be mailed out in January of 2018. If paying by check, please

make check payable to BLET Auxiliary. We also accept payment using PayPal on our website at [www.bletauxiliary.net](http://www.bletauxiliary.net).

## CONDOLENCES

Our heartfelt sympathies go out to...

Our BLET National President Dennis Pierce and his family for their losses this year. President Pierce's mother Arlene Pierce passed away on May 15, 2017, and his father, B. Maurice Pierce, passed away October 20, 2017.

The members of Twin Ports Auxiliary 6388 and the family of Clyde Larson, who passed away on November 8, 2017 at the age of 62. Clyde was the Director of Field Operations for the FELA law firm of Hunegs, LeNeave, and Kvas, and an associate member of Auxiliary 6388.

Steven "Scott" Surchik and Rose Candela Surchik, of Twin Ports Auxiliary 6388. Scott's father, Steve Surchik, Jr., passed away on December 1, 2017.

Arkansas State Legislative Board Chairman Terry Todd and his wife Jane Gray Todd, whose daughter, Lindsey Todd Powell, passed away on December 5, 2017, at the age of 36.

Our thoughts and prayers are with these families.

## CONGRATULATIONS

Congratulations to Nor-Cal Auxiliary 39 Member LeAnn Raynal, who gave birth to a baby boy on November 11, 2017, Thomas Alexander Raynal, 7 pounds 1 ounce!

*Merry Christmas*

*May your holidays  
be happy days,  
filled with love  
and laughter*

*And may each day  
bring joy your way  
in the year  
that follows after!*



*Helen Brand can be reached by phone at 913-256-2741, by mail at 38768 Crescent Hill Road, Osawatomie, Kansas, 66064, or by e-mail at [hvbrand51@gmail.com](mailto:hvbrand51@gmail.com).*

If I can answer any questions for you, give me a call or send me an e-mail and I will get back to you as soon as I can!!

*— Helen*

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## MAL Membership: More than Meets the Eye - continued from front cover

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as Operation Lifesaver, becoming presenters who help to educate both children and adults in their communities about rail crossing safety. We are grateful to all of our MALs for their support and their contributions.

If you are a member-at-large, or any member of the BLET Auxiliary, please feel free to submit an article to our quarterly publication. We believe that everyone has a gift and yours

may be writing and sharing your stories with others. You do not need to be an officer, or a member of an active local Auxiliary, to contribute to the newsletter. If you feel that you may have another gift or idea to share with us, please contact any national officer and let us know.

We do believe that establishing a local auxiliary is the best way to support BLET local

divisions, but until a local auxiliary can be established in your area, there is no reason an interested spouse cannot be involved at the local level, as well as the national level. The Auxiliary plays a vital and important role in support of our spouses and we don't see a reason why every railroad spouse is not a local auxiliary member or a member-at-large, helping us continue our work to fulfill our mission of support to the BLET.

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## *Looking Back at Our History as we Celebrate 130 Years*

*The following is the final article in the four-part series chronicling some of the history of the BLET Auxiliary. This article, reprinted with permission, is from a website entitled Spoon Planet, a virtual silver spoon museum, displaying the largest repository of antique silver, souvenir, and collectible spoon information on the web. The site is maintained by Wayne Bednersh and can be found at <http://spoonplanet.com/exhibits.html>.*

### **GRAND INTERNATIONAL AUXILIARY - By Wayne Bednersh**

When I first acquired this spoon, I had no idea who Mrs. W.A. Murdock was or why she was pictured on a souvenir spoon. The symbol in the bowl looked equally obtuse and the only thing that made this spoon look interesting to me was the middle of the stem which indicated the spoon was for a 20th anniversary of something. However, I was soon involved in hours of deep research which led me down some previously unexplored byways of history. I hope that you enjoy reading about it as much as I did from doing the research.

At the very tip of the finial, we have some four-leaf clovers which are to represent luck. Then there is a 3/4 right-facing portrait of Mrs. Murdock in a downward pointing horseshoe. The horseshoe surrounding her head is also a symbol for luck and the downward shape is for luck to pour onto the person shown. Also, around the horseshoe, you can see the horseshoe nails pictured. Surrounding the swastika is a chicken (or turkey) wishbone as a symbol of good fortune. (The wishbone tradition dates to the ancient Etruscans who believed that fowl could foretell the future. The custom was adopted by the Romans and it is still with us today)

Below it says "founder G.I.A." and below that "B. of L.E." I was quickly able to determine that this stood for the Grand International Auxiliary for the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers. Below [that] is a background of more four-leaf clovers and a swastika. The swastika was first used in the neolithic era weaving and is a common element for luck found in the cultures of Asia, Europe, and the USA, including American Indians. This spoon was made in 1907 and it significantly predates the use of the swastika by Hitler and the Nazis during World War II. This spoon has nothing to do with the Nazi atrocities. The four-leaf clover is also a symbol for luck. Most clovers have only three leaves and less than one in 100 is a four-leaf.

The stem indicates that the G.I.A. was formed in 1887 and was celebrating its 20th anniversary in 1907. After considerable research, I was able to discover that the G.I.A. celebrated their anniversary at the famous Palmer House in Chicago on October 21 and October 22, 1907.

During my research, I found several examples in the history of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers where Mrs. Murdock was given souvenir spoons for various occasions. So we know

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# LEGISLATIVE UPDATE

BY KATHLEEN BISBIKIS, NATIONAL 2ND VICE PRESIDENT/ NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE REPRESENTATIVE

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## Amtrak launches Two New Marketing Campaigns Aimed at Rebuilding and Growth

As restrictions on air travel grow more stringent with three of the “big four” U.S. airlines implementing a new class of fares known as “Basic Economy,” which allows these airlines to offer much less frills but charge close to the same amount as offered in previous years, Amtrak says look at us!

In September, Amtrak launched an ad campaign urging travelers to “Break the travel Quo.” This campaign is an attempt to remind travelers of the passenger rail option and the bonuses that come with it. Amtrak offers up to four bags of luggage for free, something unheard of on air travel, as well as free Wi-Fi, spacious seating areas, and the freedom to use electronic devices at all times without having to switch into airplane mode.

“We’re excited about this campaign because it showcases what we know our customers love about rail travel: comfort, convenience, and a premium experience,” said President and Co-CEO Richard Anderson.

In a second campaign, Amtrak says it’s “Ready to Build.” Amtrak takes it to the public in this campaign, listing the five areas of critically needed investment along the Northeast corridor:

- Hudson Tunnel project be-

tween New York and New Jersey. The project entails construction of a new tunnel serving Penn Station in New York City.

- Portal North Bridge project in New Jersey. The project would replace the century-old Portal Bridge with a new high-level, fixed-span bridge that will speed up trip times, improve rail-service reliability and eliminate the need to open for maritime traffic.
- Major stations development in Chicago and the Northeast. These projects would leverage public-private partnerships and under-used land and air rights to transform decades-old stations into more modern transportation hubs.
- Susquehanna River Bridge project in Maryland. That project would replace an existing two-track bridge with two new high-level bridges with a total of four tracks to allow for higher train speeds and eliminate the need to open for maritime traffic.
- Baltimore and Potomac (B&P) Tunnel project in Maryland. The project would replace a Civil War-era, 30 mph bottleneck with a four-tube tunnel that would allow for more reliable and frequent service.

Amtrak and its state and federal partners have begun planning and regulatory reviews for the multiyear projects. Once fund-

ing is identified and obtained, Amtrak and its partners are ready to finalize the design and begin construction, officials said.

## Congressional Leaders Question Safety of Long Trains

In a letter dated November 7, 2017, Congressional leaders from the U.S. House of Representatives, Peter DeFazio and Michael Capuano, have asked for the federal government’s Government Accountability Office to review the safety and impact of long trains currently being run by Class I railroads.

The Congressmen specify in their letter that, “Recent press reports indicate that some railroads are now operating trains with close to 200 or more cars that are more than two miles long.” The letter goes on to say, “We have concerns that longer trains can create unusually long delays at grade crossings and may pose safety risks to train crews and the public.” They also addressed a concern for the potential lack of radio communication between train crew members due to the excessive length of the train, and the safety hazard this could pose for crew members as well as the public.

## Rail Safety Week Update

Operation Lifesaver teamed up with other organizations across the country to bring rail

safety to the forefront during the first-ever U.S. Rail Safety Week, September 24-30, 2017. The week-long activities kicked off with “Operation Clear the Track.” Law enforcement across 48 states, involving over 200 police and sheriffs located in each state’s high incident grade crossings, enforced grade crossing laws, issuing citation and warnings to motorists. In addition, law enforcement handed out 240,000 railroad safety cards.

“It’s critical that citizens in every corner of the country fully understand the dangers and consequences of trespassing on railroad property,” Amtrak Police Chief Neil Trugman said. “By mobilizing our forces, we hope to raise awareness, save lives and prevent injuries along the railroad rights-of-way from coast to coast.”

In a show of solidarity to promote rail safety, several other transit agencies also joined Operation Lifesaver during the week. Caltrain held events in Burlingame, Palo Alto and Santa Clara Valley, California, where tables were set up during the morning commute with rail safety information being passed out to travelers. In Pennsylvania, Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA) conducted a week-long education and social media campaign. Portland’s TriMet reminded travelers to pay attention to those things around you.

"We love our technology. But sometimes those tweets, likes, and updates can be distracting. Whether caught up in your phone, hunkered down under an umbrella, or just feeling impatient, safety takes just a few seconds. As part of the first-ever U.S. Rail Safety Week, launched by Operation Lifesaver, TriMet reminds you to pause those distractions, follow signals, and take a moment to be alert and aware when walking, biking, and driving across train tracks," the agency said in a statement.

Utah Transit Authority (UTA) planned activities for the entire week, taking it to the community with a "Red Out for Rail Safety" at varsity football games in North Temple and Central Pointe areas.

You can visit the Operation Lifesaver website at [www.oli.org/RSSWeek](http://www.oli.org/RSSWeek) to learn more about this year's activities and see how you can get involved in 2018.

### **DOT Publishes Final Rule Expanding Drug and Alcohol Testing**

On November 13, 2017, the Department of Transportation (DOT) issued its final rule on Part 40 drug and alcohol testing. It states the following changes for employees who would be subject to testing:

"You will also be tested for four semi-synthetic opioids (i.e., hydrocodone, oxycodone, hydromorphone, oxymorphone). Some common names for these semi-synthetic opioids include

OxyContin®, Percodan®, Percocet®, Vicodin®, Lortab®, Norco®, Dilaudid®, Exalgo®. In addition, you will no longer be tested for MDEA."

"The opioid crisis is a threat to public safety when it involves safety-sensitive employees involved in the operation of any kind of vehicle or transport," said Secretary Elaine L. Chao. "The ability to test for a broader range of opioids will advance transportation safety significantly and provide another deterrent to opioid abuse, which will better protect the public and ultimately save lives."

### **Railroad Retirement Benefit Increase in 2018**

(Source: rrb.gov)

Cost-of-living increases are calculated in both the tier I and tier II benefits included in a railroad retirement annuity. Tier I benefits, like social security benefits, will increase by 2.0 percent, which is the percentage of the Consumer Price Index (CPI) rise. Tier II benefits will go up by 0.7 percent, which is 32.5 percent of the CPI increase. Vested dual benefit payments and supplemental annuities also paid by the Railroad Retirement Board (RRB) are not adjusted for the CPI change.

In January 2018, the average regular railroad retirement employee annuity will increase \$42 a month to \$2,711 and the average of combined benefits for an employee and spouse will increase \$60 a month to \$3,937. For those aged widow(er)s eligible for an increase, the average annuity

will increase \$24 a month to \$1,353. However, widow(er)s whose annuities are being paid under the Railroad Retirement and Survivors' Improvement Act of 2001 will not receive annual cost-of-living adjustments until their annuity amount is exceeded by the amount that would have been paid under prior law, counting all interim cost-of-living increases otherwise payable. Some 50 percent of the widow(er)s on the RRB's rolls are being paid under the 2001 law.

For additional information please visit: <https://www.rrb.gov/NewsRoom/NewsReleases/RetirementBenefitstoIncreasein2018>

### **High Speed Rail Connecting Tennessee and Georgia**

Georgia and Tennessee have thrown in their hats, joining California and Texas in the dream of high-speed passenger rail in the U.S. The Federal Railroad Administration recently released a "record of decision and a tier 1 environmental impact statement." These documents address the possible economic impact as well as the possible path the rail line would take, making transportation much faster for those traveling along the I-75 corridor from the Atlanta Georgia Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport to downtown Chattanooga Tennessee.

If successful, the line would run 128 miles and take its passengers from Atlanta to Chattanooga in just 88 minutes.



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*"Where there is discord, may we bring harmony. Where there is error, may we bring truth. Where there is doubt, may we bring faith. And where there is despair, may we bring hope."*

— St. Francis of Assisi

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# Railroad Retirement Frequently Asked Questions

*Submitted by Mark Thomson, Assistant to the Labor Member, U.S. Railroad Retirement Board*

The Railroad Retirement Board (RRB) is the federal agency responsible for administering the retirement and survivor benefit programs for railroad workers and their families under the Railroad Retirement Act. This article will answer a number of frequently asked questions regarding eligibility requirements for spouses and divorced spouses of railroad employees for payments from the RRB. In addition to the payments discussed, benefits may also be payable to survivors of railroad employees. If you wish information on those benefits, please contact the RRB at 1-877-772-5772.

## What Is a Railroad Retirement Annuity?

Monthly retirement, disability, and survivor benefits paid by the RRB are known as annuities. Annuities are made up of one or more components called tiers. Tier I is based on a combination of railroad retirement credits and any social security credits that the railroad employee may have acquired. Tier I is computed using social security formulas, but with railroad retirement age and service requirements. Tier II is based on the employee's railroad retirement credits only and is computed under a separate formula.

The Tier I component of a spouse annuity and a divorced spouse annuity, before any applicable reductions, is 50 percent of the railroad employee's unreduced Tier I amount. The amount of the Tier II component of a spouse annuity, before any reductions, is 45 percent of the employee's unreduced Tier II amount. A divorced spouse annuity is comprised of a Tier I component only.

## What Are the General Eligibility Requirements?

**SPOUSE:** The employee must be drawing an annuity and be at least age 60 or age 62, depending upon the amount of railroad service he has earned, before the spouse can receive a railroad retirement benefit. The spouse must meet minimum age requirements, unless the spouse has in care

a qualifying child of the employee. If the employee and spouse have not been married for at least one year, the spouse must be the natural parent of the employee's child. The marriage does not have to take place before retiring or leaving railroad work in order for a spouse annuity to be payable.

**DIVORCED SPOUSE:** The employee must be at least age 62 before a divorced spouse can receive a railroad retirement benefit. If the employee is not receiving an annuity, the parties must have been divorced at least two years. The divorced spouse must meet minimum age requirements and be unmarried. Unless the employee is deceased, a divorced spouse is not eligible for an annuity based on caring for a qualifying child of the employee. Consistent with the marriage requirements for a spouse annuity, the marriage period does not have to coincide with a period when the employee was working in the railroad industry.

## What Are the Current Age Requirements?

**SPOUSE:** The age requirements for a spouse annuity depend on the employee's age and years of railroad service.

- If a retired employee with 30 years of service (360 service months) is age 60, the employee's spouse is also eligible for an annuity the first full month the spouse is age 60. No age reduction will be applied to the spouse benefit.
- If the employee retired on a disability with at least 360 months of creditable service and the employee has attained age 60, the spouse's annuity can begin the first full month he or she is age 60. No age reduction will be applied to the spouse benefit.
- If a railroad employee retired with 120-359 months of creditable railroad service, and the employee is at least age 62, the spouse can begin their annuity the first full month he or she is age 62. If the spouse

retires before attaining full retirement age (FRA), which is age 66 or 67 depending upon the year of birth, the Tier I and Tier II components of the spouse's annuity will have an age reduction.

- If a railroad employee retired with 60-119 months of creditable railroad service, and the employee is at least age 62, the spouse can begin their annuity the first full month he or she is age 62. If the spouse retires before attaining full retirement age (FRA), which is age 66 or 67 depending upon the year of birth, the Tier I and Tier II components of the spouse's annuity will have an age reduction. Also Tier I is only payable if the employee has a social security insured status (at least 40 quarters of coverage based on combined railroad and social security earnings).
- If a spouse is caring for a qualifying child of the retired employee, the spouse is eligible for an annuity at any age. To qualify a spouse for an annuity, the employee's child must be unmarried, and either under age 18, or under a disability which began before the child attained age 22.

**DIVORCED SPOUSE:** The age requirement for a divorced spouse annuity does NOT depend on the employee's age and years of railroad service. In order for a divorced spouse to receive an annuity, both the employee and the divorced spouse must be at least age 62. If the divorced spouse retires before attaining FRA, her annuity will have an age reduction.

## What Kind of Documents Are Needed to File for an Annuity?

An application must be filed with the RRB. Certain proofs are required, such as proof of an employee's age and any military service, proof of marriage, and proof of the applicant's age. A divorced spouse is also required to provide proof of divorce. If the divorced spouse remarried after



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marriage to the employee ended, the divorced spouse will be required to provide proof of any subsequent marriage, as well as proof of the termination of that marriage. Banking information is also needed for the direct deposit of benefit payments. Additional documents may be needed based on individual circumstances. Additional information can be obtained from the local RRB field office by calling 1-877-772-5772.

### **Are Annuities Subject to Offset for the Receipt of Other Benefits?**

Yes, regardless of whose earnings the social security benefit is based, there is an offset for receipt of social security benefits. However, the Tier II component of a spouse annuity is not subject to such offset.

A divorced spouse annuity and the Tier I component of a spouse annuity may also be reduced for receipt of any Federal, State, or Local pension separately payable to the spouse or divorced spouse based on the earnings of the spouse or divorced spouse. The reduction generally does not apply if the employment on which the public service pension is based was covered under the Social Security Act throughout the last 60 months of public employment. For those subject to a public service pension reduction, the reduction applied to the Tier I component is equal to 2/3 of the amount of the public service pension.

These are a few of the most common offsets but it is not an exhaustive list. These offsets can wipe out a divorced spouse annuity and the Tier I component otherwise payable to a spouse but, as noted above, they do not affect the Tier II component potentially payable to a spouse.

### **Can the Same-Sex Spouse/Former Spouse of a Railroad Employee File for a Railroad Retirement Annuity?**

On June 26, 2013, the Supreme Court found Section 3 of the Defense of Marriage Act, which prevented the Federal government from recognizing marriages of same-sex couples, to be unconstitutional. As a result the RRB began accepting applications

for benefits from those eligible spouses in same-sex marriages who were validly licensed under State law. On June 26, 2015, the Supreme Court further found that the Constitution required all states to license same-sex marriages and to recognize lawfully licensed same-sex marriages performed in other States.

### **When Does an Annuity Stop?**

**SPOUSE:** A spouse's annuity will stop if the employee's annuity terminates, if the marriage ends in divorce, or if the spouse dies. In addition, if the spouse's annuity is based on having a child of the employee in care, the annuity will stop when the youngest child is no longer under age 18, or disabled, or in the spouse's care, or unmarried. If a spouse annuity ends because the employee's annuity terminated due to the employee's death, the spouse may be entitled to survivor benefits paid by either the RRB or the Social Security Administration, depending upon which agency has jurisdiction of survivor benefits. If the spouse annuity ends because the marriage ends in divorce, a divorced spouse annuity might be payable.

**DIVORCED SPOUSE:** A divorced spouse annuity ends on the first day of the month preceding the month in which an offset for another benefit reduces the divorced spouse annuity to zero, the divorced spouse or the employee dies, or the divorced wife remarries.

### **Does the Employee Receive Less if the Spouse or Divorced Spouse Receives an Annuity?**

Entitlement to a spouse annuity or a divorced spouse annuity has no impact on the annuity payable to the employee. (However, read below regarding property awards to legally separated or divorced spouses).

What Payments Can a State Court Award in a Legal Separation or Divorce Proceeding?

A state court cannot award a spouse or former spouse the right to receive a spouse annuity or a divorced spouse annuity from the Railroad Retirement Board. However, a court does have the authority to order the

Railroad Retirement Board to award to the legally separated spouse or the divorced spouse a portion of the employee's monthly annuity. The employee's full annuity is not subject to property division, as the law provides that the Tier I component, typically the largest component, is not subject to division. Unlike entitlement to a spouse or divorced spouse annuity, if someone is awarded a share of the employee's annuity as property, that amount comes directly from the monthly annuity that would otherwise be payable to the employee.

Court ordered property awards are commonly referred to as partition payments. So long as the employee has 10 years of railroad service, or 5 years after 1995, and both the employee and legally separated or former spouse are age 62, partition payments are payable. Such payments can continue after the employee's death, even if no other benefits are payable by the Railroad Retirement Board, unless the court order provides otherwise. Such payments are not payable after the legally separated spouse or former spouse dies. The legal separation papers or divorce papers must be filed with the Railroad Retirement Board.

### **Who Do I Call for More Information?**

The material presented here is issued for the purpose of general information. Certain limitations, exceptions, and special cases are not covered. For additional information and assistance, please contact your local RRB field office at 1-877-772-5772. You can also find the address of the RRB office serving your area by calling this toll-free number, or by visiting our website at [www.rrb.gov](http://www.rrb.gov).

Most RRB offices are open to the public on weekdays from 9:00 a.m. to 3:30 p.m., except on Wednesdays when offices are open from 9:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. RRB offices are closed on federal holidays

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## ***From Your Editor, Susie Burrola: Holidays Can be an Emotional Struggle for Some***

The holidays bring so much happiness, love, and peace for many, but for some it can be a time of loneliness, sadness, and depression.

I see posts by spouses on railroad social media groups about the struggles and loneliness of being a railroader's wife. We all know this life takes a toll on the railroaders themselves and on their families. Being a railroad spouse for 24 years, I can relate. This is one reason why the Auxiliary is so important; it helps build relationships with other railroad families, and those relationships can help fill the emptiness that family and friends sometimes don't understand.

In the Autumn 2016 issue of this publication, we shared information about post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) on the railroad. When individuals choose to take their lives on the tracks, this affects our train crews, and they too become victims in such a situation. That, in turn, affects their families as well. If your spouse or someone you know has been the victim of this type of tragedy, please refer them to the article, which can be found on our website at [www.bletauxiliary.net](http://www.bletauxiliary.net).

I would also like to share information about suicide. Suicide rates are increasing at an alarming rate. According the John Hopkins Institute, children of suicidal parents are more likely to comment suicide. "Over 40,000 people die by suicide each year in the United States. It is the 10th leading cause of death overall. Suicide is complicated and tragic, but it is often preventable. Knowing the warning signs for suicide and how to get help can help save lives" (National Institute of Mental Health [NIMH]).

Family and friends are often the first to recognize the warning signs of suicide and can take steps to help an at-risk individual find treatment with someone who specializes in diagnosing and treating mental health conditions. Some of the signs and symptoms that someone may be thinking about suicide can be found in the sidebar on this page. If these warning signs apply to you or someone you know, get help as soon as possible. One resource is the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, 1-800-273-TALK (8255). The Lifeline is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The NIMH website lists five action steps for helping someone in emotional pain and other helpful information regarding suicide prevention ([see https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/suicide-prevention/index.shtml](https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/suicide-prevention/index.shtml)).

Our local auxiliaries help build a sense of family. We are there for one another throughout the different seasons of life. Believe me, I have had my share of heartaches over the past couple of years, and it has been a blessing to have the support of others who understand our crazy lifestyle. When we are frustrated or sad or even angry, sometimes all it takes is someone is willing to listen to us vent. As LeeAnn Chiara, member of NorCal Auxiliary, so aptly stated in her article entitled "Supporting One Another During Difficult Times. . .," in the Summer 2015 issue: "It's such a relief to have a support group to which we can turn when we are confused or overwhelmed."

As this year draws to an end, and you find yourself reflecting on events from years past, and setting New Year's resolutions, please take time to be mindful of one another and enjoy each others' company. Awareness is the greatest gift that we can share. Have a blessed holiday season!

## **Suicide Signs and Symptoms**

The behaviors listed below may be signs that someone is thinking about suicide.

- Talking about wanting to die or wanting to kill themselves
- Talking about feeling empty, hopeless, or having no reason to live
- Making a plan or looking for a way to kill themselves, such as searching online, stockpiling pills, or buying a gun
- Talking about great guilt or shame
- Talking about feeling trapped or feeling that there are no solutions
- Feeling unbearable pain (emotional pain or physical pain)
- Talking about being a burden to others
- Using alcohol or drugs more often
- Acting anxious or agitated
- Withdrawing from family and friends
- Changing eating and/or sleeping habits
- Showing rage or talking about seeking revenge
- Taking great risks that could lead to death, such as driving extremely fast
- Talking or thinking about death often
- Displaying extreme mood swings, suddenly changing from very sad to very calm or happy
- Giving away important possessions
- Saying goodbye to friends and family
- Putting affairs in order, making a will

## GRAND INTERNATIONAL AUXILIARY

Continued from Page 5 . . .

she was a spoon collector. But I could not find any reference to this particular spoon in the chronologies that I was able to access.

The bowl has an embossed picture of a crescent with a star inside. On the left are the letters "GIA." In the middle of the star is a large "E" with the letter "B" on the upper line of the "E," and the letter "L" on the lower line of the "E." We of course now know that this stands for the "Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers." Below the design the word "Chicago" is engraved in the bowl and we know that is the location for the ceremony.

Today we associate the crescent and star with the world of Islam. But that again has not always been the case. This symbol is very ancient and can be traced to the early Greek civilization. It is commonly found throughout Europe as well as the Arab world. The Islamic Arabs seem to have adopted it sometime after the mid 1400s from Turkey. It was not an original symbol for Islam and was not originally used on the flags of Islamic countries. However, today it is frequently found on the flag of most Islamic nations.

The symbol is also found in many variations within fraternal organizations in the USA and Europe. It was particularly used extensively in the railroad community and even today many railroad locomotive names and railroad routes are called "star" (with variations) and "crescent" (with variations). There are also letters at each point of the star. Becky Schneider, past president of the BLET Auxiliary, contacted me to fill in the missing part of my research. The five letters in the star, F,L,C,H,P stand for Faith, Love, Charity, Harmony, and Protection.

Apparently there was a secret ritual (which was very common among fraternal organizations during this era) and these were part of the "grand honors" for the officers.

The back of the handle features a continuation of the pattern from the front with four-leaf clovers and berries and a swastika.

— continued on back cover

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

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## Labor Unions: America's True Working Class

Continued from Front Cover

education. All of this, combined with their charitable donations and legal protection of their members, makes BLET Division 28 vital to Trainmen here in Tucson.

The BLET labor union has been a major influence in my life, personally. This labor union helped my father during his own struggles with management as well as with Peer Support after his accident. Every year, my family attends all the annual

parties that the BLET puts on. At these events, I am able to visit with the other families and close friends, many of whom have watched me and my sisters grow up. The labor union connected my family with two wonderful people who would later become my sister's godparents, as well as emotional anchors for me in high school. Thanks to the BLET, I have had the amazing opportunity to visit the Phoenix City Hall during rallies and other similar events, where I was able to meet our congressmen and discuss labor issues. Finally, the labor union allowed me to meet Ms. Linda Hatfield, with whom I interned at PALF, AFL-CIO [Pima Area Labor Federation] for two years. That unique experience helped me discover one of my two majors at the University of Arizona.

BLET Division 28 helps the true working class members of Tucson, Arizona, every day. They ensure all members have every resource and opportunity they need to thrive in the railroad business. BLET makes donations to their members and to the community through luncheons, the Auxiliary, and several charity foundations.

The union works to represent individuals if and when they face charges from the company and also provides mental health services for those traumatized by vehicle and pedestrian accidents. The labor union is vital to protect fair wages, agreements with management, and individuals during legal cases against them. BLET also works to connect members' families so that everyone has a support group. My parents met my sister's godparents and some of their closest friends through the BLET. I was provided with the tools to discover an avenue of study at the university through the labor union, as well as an indispensable internship that I cherish to this day. The BLET Division 28 is essential, not only for its members but for their families and communities as well. BLET is important for all working class people and their families because it strives to ensure a decent standard of living and tolerable, safe working conditions.



**Alexis Walker, recipient of the Bill Hannah Scholarship Award, Tucson, AZ**



## BLET Auxiliary

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## GRAND INTERNATIONAL AUXILIARY

**Continued from Page 11 . . .**

In addition, there is a little dragonfly in the design, which was a symbol of luck if it lands on you. Some species of berries were also considered to be good luck and were included in the design.

The back says "J.S.T. sterling pat applied for." After considerable research, I was able to track down the patent on this spoon: On Sept. 9, 1907, (application #38897), Eustace Crees and Charles S. Court of Providence, Rhode Island (assignors of J.S. Townsend of Chicago, Illinois) filed for a patent featuring this spoon. On November 26,

1907 patent #392073 was awarded. (note: the patent procedure was a lot faster in those days)

Crees and Court had a long-term relationship. Several years later they worked for Watson and Newell and designed several flatware patterns, including the famous "Lily" by Watson, "Olympia by Watson" and the Fruit Series by Watson (popular spoon collector items).

I had been unsuccessful in tracking down the "J.S.T" mark on the back of the spoon. However, with this new knowledge I quickly located the maker: J. S. TOWNSEND, Wholesale and Retail Watchmaker and Jeweler, 1554 Wabash Ave., Chicago.

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*Wishing all of our readers a very Happy Holiday Season and all the best for the New Year!*

