



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 4

Winter 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

HOLIDAY HAPPENINGS!

It's that time again! Holiday parties, cookies for the crews, and volunteer opportunities. It's so nice to be able to gather together this year to give back to the crews and to celebrate the season! Many of the local auxiliaries made cookies and left them at the yard office for crew members to pick up on their way to or from a run; members of the BLET divisions in Springfield, Missouri, volunteered as bell ringers for the Salvation Army Red Kettle Campaign.



Springfield Auxiliary 417
Cookies for the Crews



Norcal Auxiliary 39 Cookies for the Crews



Bell ringers Jerod Williams, member of BLET Div. 83 and his son Brooks



Bell ringers BLET Div. 83 Member Dustin Johnson and daughters Benny and Delyla



Amarillo Auxiliary 99
Cookies for the Crews

May this holiday season bring the present year to a close on a cheerful note and make way for a fresh and bright New Year - Happy Holidays Everyone!



From the President

By KATHLEEN BISBIKIS

“If you’re not willing to learn, no one can help you. If you’re determined to learn, no one can stop you.”

—Zig Ziglar

Happy Holidays to everyone,

2021 has proven to be a year of challenges. We have dealt with another year of COVID and unfortunately witnessed the loss of too many of our union brothers and sisters due to this pandemic. It feels as if 2021 hit the railroad industry much harder than 2020 did. In addition, some major carriers have implemented points systems, are still trying to cut the crew sizes, and have line-up boards so unpredictable that it's almost impossible for day-to-day planning in an already tricky profession.

Those are the challenges that we face as railroad families... but let's try to remember the positive where we can. Our railroads are fortunate to have good union jobs that pay as much as many jobs that require a college degree. We have benefits that, while they might not be as good as they once were, they are still excellent compared to most large corporations. If we only look for the bad or negative, it becomes harder to see the positive blessings in front of us.

As we move into the new year, I ask that you keep our union brothers and sisters in your thoughts and prayers as they move freight across our nation in unpredictable conditions day and night. I ask that you keep our National Division officers in your thoughts as they negotiate our next contract against empowered and greedy railroads. I ask that you remember

our family members who we lost much too soon, and that you hold the ones they left behind in your hearts as they learn to live without their loved ones. As auxiliary members, I ask that you be on the lookout for those spouses of new hires in your area and beyond who don't understand what they signed up for when marrying a railroader and are often young and confused by it all. Invite them to join the Auxiliary where they can have a "home" and a railroad family to call their own. We need to reach out to these families as they often struggle by themselves, which should never be the case when so many of us across the nation can help.

I am hopeful that 2022 will be the year that things turn around, not just for our nation's health in dealing with the pandemic, but for all of us who have struggled in one way or another over the last two years. Let's start out the new year hopeful of what fresh beginnings can bring.

On behalf of myself, my family, and the BLET Auxiliary National Office team, we wish all of you a very Merry Christmas and a truly Happy New Year!

Kathleen "Kat" Bisbikis
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THE NATIONAL B.L.E.T. AUXILIARY

Growth in Western Oregon

By Jessica Keene

President of Pacific Northwest Auxiliary No. 503

In October, BLET Pacific Northwest Auxiliary No. 503 welcomed five new members into our auxiliary. We are excited to see what these new members bring to the table, helping to make our local auxiliary unstoppable and extraordinary. This year is a year of new beginnings, growth, and continued support to the BLET and SMART families. We cannot wait to see what we can do! Welcome to all new members!

If you would like more information about joining local auxiliary or becoming a member-at-large, reach out to National Vice President/National Outreach

Coordinator Rachel Pharris (417-872-9641 or rachel-rae@live.com), National President Kathleen "Kat" Bisbikis at 209-786-7367 or Biz4413@gmail.com, or any of the other BLET national officers or auxiliary members. There's no reason not to join the family!



North Platte Families Celebrate the Holidays with a Christmas Party in Early December

By Katryna Hughes, Flatrock Auxiliary

North Platte Nebraska's BLET Division 388 and Flatrock Auxiliary No. 8 teamed up to host the 2021 Annual BLET Division 388 Christmas party on December 3, 2021. Last year's celebration was cancelled due to the pandemic, so we were thrilled to have the opportunity to get together this year. It was nice seeing some familiar faces we hadn't seen in quite some time.

We had a fantastic catered meal of prime rib, cheesy potatoes, green beans, and cheesecake to die for! No one left the party hungry, that's for sure! Our Auxiliary takes on the task of decorating and entertainment for the party goers. This year, we played the table game "left right center," with the championship winner taking home a custom cornhole set. We also put together "Naughty/Nice" game boards with naughty and nice prizes, which was a total hit! The 25+ door prizes are definitely something guests stick around for at the end of the night. Although we had fewer attendees this year than in years past due to many contributing factors, we were very thankful to spend time catching up, laughing, and enjoying each other.

On behalf of BLET Division 388 and Flatrock#8 BLET Auxiliary we wish all of you a blessed year ahead!



Photos, clockwise from upper left: Naughty or Nice- Surprise! Lots of laughter from this game!; Matt and Jami Comer, Katryna and Corban Hughes; Guests enjoying a friendly game of left, right, center; Greg Otzel, Member of Div. 833 and Flatrock Auxiliary

Auxiliary 417 Hosts Second Annual Golf Tournament

By Rachel Pharris, Auxiliary 417 President

On August 14, Auxiliary 417, Springfield, Missouri, hosted their second annual golf tournament fundraiser to benefit their local Scholarship and Care & Assistance Program. The tournament was held at Greene Hills Country Club in Willard, Missouri. The format was a four-man scramble. The auxiliary provided lunch for all golfers and served drinks and snacks via golf cart on the course. The first-place team donated their prize money back to the auxiliary.

Our tournament was open to railroaders, friends and family, and the public. Many of our auxiliary members came out to volunteer and serve lunch. Division 237 Local Chairman Bill Brake also came out to volunteer and show his support.



Photos, clockwise from top:

1. First place team, from left to right: Spencer Epperson, Logan Mayfield, Justin James, and Devin Fisher

2. Aux 417 Vice President Heather Williams and Aux. 417 Secretary Kelsey Epperson

3. Braley & Brynlee Pharris



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Busy Year for The Yellow City Bomb Squad Auxiliary

By Victoria Delahay, President
Yellow City Auxiliary No. 99

It's been a very busy year for the families of The Yellow City Bomb Squad Auxiliary No. 99 in Amarillo, Texas. We are thankful for all of the opportunities that came our way. In late summer we participated at the Railroader's Annual Two-Day Golf Classic that was very generously sponsored by CanTex. This two-day event was a great way to connect with old friends and meet so many new faces. We had a table set up with water and snacks for the golfers and also had several auctions that helped benefit our Auxiliary.

Meetings kept us busy throughout the fall and the first weekend in November we were all able to come together at Salt Grass, a local steak house, and have our Christmas party. The evening was spent surrounded with family, friends, wonderful food, a really fun White Elephant Gift Exchange, and of course the season premiere of Yellowstone!

Unfortunately, we had several Covid cases within our railroad community. We all came together to make sure everyone had what they needed. No matter who or what, we are all one family! In late November I was invited to the installation of our newest Auxiliary in San Antonio. It was a wonderful evening to come together and celebrate our newest members.

In December, we came together on the 4th and 18th for our Second Annual "Cookies for the Crews." This is one of our favorite events of the year, where we get to head to the depots and thank the guys and gals and let them know we appreciate them for all that they do.

Also in December, we participated in the "Cookies for the Crews" project. With the very generous donations of all of the members of our auxiliary, on Saturday, December 4, Emily Kohn-Schnatz, Shannon Denney, and I gathered the 250 cookies that were individually packaged and made a stop at the BNSF 10th Street Yard and North Yard. On December 18, we made a delivery to the Junior Yard.

We hope that you all have a wonderful Holiday Season! Cheers to new beginnings and to the New Year!

PHOTOS, TOP to BOTTOM: *Summer Golf Event:* Susan Fuller, Cindy Backus, and Pam Winbolt. *2021 Auxiliary 99 Christmas Party:* Kenney Denney, Katey Denney, Shannon Denney, Paul Schnatz, Susan Fuller, Shonda Holder, Pam Winbolt, Cindy Backus, Shane Backus, Victoria Delahay, Meagan West, Levi West, Christy Snyder, Vance Snyder. *2021 Auxiliary 99 Christmas Party:* Christy Snider, Shannon Denney, Susan Fuller, Shonda Holder, Pam Winbolt, Cindy Backus, Victoria Delahay, Meagan West. *Cookies for the Crews:* Victoria Delahay, Emily Kohn-Schnatz, and Shannon Denney delivered cookies to the BNSF North Yard Office in San Antonio.



LEGISLATIVE UPDATE



By JESSICA
COLE,
NATIONAL
LEGISLATIVE
REPRESENTATIVE

I recently had the opportunity to listen to two Federal Railroad Administration Inspectors describe their duties and answer questions. They spent about 2½ to 3 hours speaking at the recent Wisconsin BLET State Legislative Board Team Building Session. I found their comments extremely educational and helpful, and as a result, I have decided to focus my Winter Report on sharing what I learned, as I believe it will be of bigger benefit than rehashing the current status of my ever-evolving, but perpetual list of regular topics. My usual style Legislative Report will return in Spring 2022 with updates on all the usual subjects.

The FRA Presentations at the WISLB Team Building Session opened with August Lubinski – FRA Operational Practices Field Inspector for Region IV of the FRA. He began his presentation with an update on Positive Train Control (PTC) implementation and praised it for making a smoother than expected transition. He stated that the FRA has tried not to tell the carriers exactly how to implement it, but that at a certain point, the regulatory process needs to catch up.

BLET National Legislative Representative Vince Verna asked

about numerous complaints from engineers that have been ordered to cut out PTC. This is a problem when they are then instructed to depart on their trip when their PTC system has been cut out or fails at the initial terminal or enroute (It is currently NOT permissible to leave a yard if PTC has failed before the train even moves). Inspector Lubinski commented that, by January 2022, this procedure will probably be phased out, and this is part of how the regulatory process is “catching up” on PTC.

Inspector Lubinski stated that PTC is the great equalizer and makes bad engineers mediocre but also makes the great engineers mediocre. He agreed with Representative Verna that PTC can result in “deskilling” of our best engineers and stated that, overall, PTC is a great tool but not a magic bullet.

FRA Hazardous Materials Inspector Brian Ivanchenko then explained his role in keeping the rails as safe as possible. He stated his goal is always ZERO Non-Accidental Releases (NARs) of Hazardous Materials. To that end, he spends 60 to 65 percent of his inspection time in shipping facilities overseeing the handling and securing of all types of Hazardous Material shipped by rail.

Inspector Ivanchenko then spoke at length about oversight of car placement, buffer cars between HAZMAT cars, and placement of Distributed Power Unit (DPU engines). There have been numerous complaints of carriers placing DPUs next to residue

cars, particularly on Union Pacific. Representative Verna commented that Union Pacific has been granted a Special Permit allowing the placement of a DPU locomotive next to a residue car that had contained something flammable, but BLET has strongly objected to FRA regarding the Special Permit. Standard regulations require that residue cars be treated with the same safety protocol as loaded cars.

This led to a very in-depth discussion of special permits issued by the Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration (PHMSA), which is a branch of the Department of Transportation. Union Pacific has used Special Permits issued by PHMSA to skirt the usual regulations and justify placing DPUs next to residue cars. Inspector Ivanchenko reported that, unfortunately, carriers tend to use the permits like Waivers, when that is not their purpose nor their protocol.

A lengthy and exceptionally informative dissection of the rules regarding PHMSA Special Permits ensued, with both inspectors having a lot to say on the subject. The framework for such permits expressly provides that employees MUST be trained on how to use and apply the permit. The carrier cannot tell employees, “We have a permit, so just go do it.” But the flip side is, the FRA has no real teeth to ensure the quality of training given to employees.

Crews must be given access to the Special Permit language in

all cases. Special Permits are generally good for two years but have explicit rules that much be adhered to.

Many of the carriers are moving to I-Pad Paperless orders. Railroads need a Special Permit to move to electronic orders and paperless recordkeeping for crews. The crews must be trained to use the electronic system and the electronic systems must include EMS information and Guideline and Rulebook procedures. Therefore, as an example, the Zebra devices used by Union Pacific do not meet the criteria for use as totally electronic crew order systems.

Violations of these regulations and others may result in fines as high as \$3000 to \$5000 per car, but, as Inspector Lubinski reminded the room, these fines are subject to going to litigation if a carrier is hit with an extremely large fine. When that occurs, the fine often gets watered down until it is mere pennies on each dollar, so Lubinski tends to use some latitude when assigning fines. He would rather hit a carrier with a noticeable, but not enormous, fine so that they will likely just pay it and work toward procedural improvements rather than assign a very large and contentious fine that the carrier will be inclined to fight.

It is also incumbent upon inspectors to do a thorough job of documenting and supporting their findings and recommended fines when they make their reports, but, as in any other sector of the workplace, some inspectors have more follow through than

others. At a minimum, inspectors should take relevant photos of any violation and should include documentation of previous violations by the same carrier.

A lengthy question-and-answer segment then followed, with all manner of grey situations being asked about by the LR's in the room. Many involved actual incidents from personal experience, and a few of the situations described were grey enough that even the FRA inspectors admitted that they would need to review regulations and definitions before stating a final opinion.

To highlight a few clarifications and reminders made during this segment of the meeting:

1. Certain kinds of oil can cars do not have to have buffer cars between them, but Crude cars do.
2. Separate categories of FRA Inspectors are assigned for various aspects of railroad oversight, and you may be referred to an expert in a specific field depending on your question. Some examples are: Track Inspectors, Car Inspectors, PTC Inspectors, Mechanical Inspectors, and Signal Inspectors.
3. What defines a "yard?" If an industry is attached directly to a yard, it is not necessary to do an additional air test to leave the industry yard after leaving the carrier yard.
4. Vegetation **MUST** be cleared from signals. If you cannot see signals, report to dispatch and to the FRA, documenting the location. No exceptions.
5. Obstruction of Cab Window view by PTC cameras is not allowed if deemed "excessive." Such cameras must be

unobtrusive and not restrict view. **DO NOT RELY ON PTC TO STOP THE TRAIN.** It is your job to stop the train at the signal and if you can't see it, you can't stop.

6. Do locomotives have a 24-hour grace period to operate with defects? Answer: Sometimes. It depends on the defect and how it impacts safety. In general, defects impacting speed, visibility, and warning sounds need faster attention.
7. What about Non-Working PTC? Answer: PTC must be fully operational when train originates, but under current rules, the train can continue on to its destination if PTC fails enroute. This is set to change as of January 2022; however, when PTC failure enroute will likely become cause for stopping the train until the issue is resolved.
8. Concerning decertification events, the FRA does not define what events constitute cause for decertification, the Carrier does.

Both inspectors clarified procedures for any employee who has an incident to report. A few standard rules of thumb are:

1. If you feel you may have a violation to report, don't wait to contact the FRA. There is never a good reason to wait, even if you may be incorrect that a violation occurred. Delays in initial reports result in less reliable memories and more difficulty in follow up and verification.
2. Be sure not to embellish your story, even a slight amount, as this makes you lose credibility for the whole story once your embellishment comes to light.
3. Document all pertinent details as soon as possible when a

potentially reportable situation occurs, including things such as time, date, milepost, and car or cars involved, as well as additional witnesses. Include these details when you contact the FRA.

Jessica Cole lives in Baraboo, Wisconsin. She can be reached at jcts1987@gmail.com, or 262-672-9742.



By Becky Schneider,
Asst. National
Legislative
Representative

Infrastructure Week has finally arrived! A joke that began in the previous administration, because every week seemed to be infrastructure week (until it wasn't), has at least partially come to fruition. While the five-year Bipartisan Infrastructure Framework (BIF) passed the Senate on August 10, with strong bi-partisan support (69–31), it wasn't until late on November 5, by a vote of 228-206, that H.R. 3684, the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA), also known as the Invest in America Act, passed the House. The BIF passed with the support of 13 Republicans who cited the overwhelming support for the bill from their constituents, and, in spite of the dissent of six progressive democrats. Those Republicans who supported the measure are now being called traitors and threatened with primary challenges. I only hope Senator Manchin is paying attention to how these folks whose actions were about the good of the country, not the party, are being treated.

Lawmakers are still negotiating over the Build Back Better Act

(BBB), which was supposed to be voted on in tandem with the BIF. At the last minute, that requirement was dropped after some representatives requested a review by the Congressional Budget Office to determine the bill's impact on the budget. The progressive caucus felt their conservative colleagues moved the goal posts by delaying the BBB and risking its ability to pass. The provisions in the BBB are targeted more towards the social safety net and issues such as childcare, paid leave, health care, climate action, house, education and a roadmap to citizenship, all of which are still important pieces in our country's overall infrastructure just may not be as tangible. Just because it's is not a bridge or a road, does not mean it is not important to the overall health of our country and economy.

Amtrak stands to benefit greatly with annual budget appropriations nearly doubling and providing the biggest investment in rail since Amtrak's creation. Some of the provisions in the bill include:

- \$6 billion in grants for the NE Corridor;
- \$16 billion for expansion of the National Network-plans proposed by Amtrak CEO Flynn;
- \$36 billion for federal-state partnerships for intercity passenger rail to connect to the National Network;
- \$5 billion for Consolidated Rail Infrastructure and Safety Improvements (CRISI), up from \$362 million in FY2021;
- \$3 billion for railroad crossing elimination; and
- \$50 million for restoration and enhancement programs.

Funding for CRISI serves a broad spectrum of purposes. Grants for

— continued on Page 12

THE VACCINE MANDATE:



Just the Facts!

— By Jessica Cole

Phones and e-mail accounts are blowing up for officers at both the BLET and the BLET Auxiliary over COVID-19 Vaccine Mandates.

Union Pacific is leading the COVID vaccine mandate way among the major rail carriers in the U.S., announcing that it will require all employees to have started the COVID vaccination process by October 26 or be pulled out of service until such time as they comply. According to National Legislative Representative Vince Verna, a framework is being worked out to allow religious and medical exemptions as outlined in President Biden's plan. Any non-vaccinated employee will be required to have a negative COVID test at least weekly in order to remain in service.

Additionally, employees will be paid a \$300 bonus for getting the vaccine, and employees who have already received the vaccine will also receive the bonus upon providing proof of vaccination status. A half-day of paid leave will be granted so that employees may go to appointments to get the vaccine, according to Vince Verna.

The other carriers are expected to follow suit in order to comply with President Biden's mandate, which requires all employers with more than 100 employees to require those employees to either be vaccinated or to have weekly negative COVID tests to remain in active employment. This mandate also applies to any contractor doing business with the Federal Government.

All across the country, various employers are facing employee walkouts over vaccine

mandates, and lawsuits against individual employers and everyone up the ladder are so numerous as to be impossible to adequately follow and report.

Legal precedent will likely dictate the final outcome in these court cases, and a few historical cases are noteworthy in that regard.

In 1970, Philadelphia city officials were alarmed by an outbreak of Measles, a disease presumed to be nearly wiped out, and, tragically, resulted in the death of five children from this disease. The serious cases all stemmed from a church that rejected "all means of healing other than God's way." The members took no medicines and saw no doctors.

In response to the situation, the city ordered and succeeded in enforcing vaccine mandates for the children in the church. They gained access to congregants' homes and authority to vaccinate children.

According to noted vaccine author and researcher Paul Offit, a religious exemption in Philadelphia's law meant no law had been broken by the parents, but the severity of the situation dictated that no one, not even the ACLU, would challenge this mandate in court.

In 1776, the Supreme Court banned vaccines to control the spread of smallpox, but General George Washington mandated them for new troops entering Philadelphia, and this effort is credited with helping to eventually end the epidemic.

By 1904, the Supreme Court had reversed its stance and, in a 7-to-2 decision, decided

the state of Massachusetts could mandate the vaccine in *Jacobson v. Massachusetts*.

Additionally, since 1776, American soldiers have gotten vaccinated during major conflicts and continue to cooperate with U.S. Military vaccine requirements against some 20 diseases.

Governments have also been legally able to levy fines for noncompliance in vaccine mandates going back to 1901 and the smallpox epidemic.

All states currently require vaccinations for children attending public schools, although the list of covered diseases and the list of possible exemptions varies from state to state. Similarly, there are no laws prohibiting employers from requiring vaccines of any sort.

President Biden's COVID vaccine mandate is being enacted through OSHA under a 1970 federal statute that gives the Secretary of Labor authority to issue an Emergency Temporary Standard (ETS) lasting six months to protect workers from "grave danger from exposure to toxic substances or agents determined to be toxic or potentially harmful."

ETS orders have not been commonly issued and are rarely tried in court. In the 1980s, the court struck down an ETS for asbestos.

The language granting ETS authority offers a couple of potential contention points in legal battles, such as whether COVID-19 presents a "grave danger" and whether the virus rises to the level of a "toxic or potentially harmful" substance or agent.

Further complicating the issues are the numerous court cases springing up across the country involving COVID victims suing the schools and workplaces where they contracted their illness for damages due to negligence in preventing the spread of disease.

Literally, the jury is still out on the endgame on COVID vaccine mandates. Look for an update in our next Newsletter.

Wisconsin State Legislative Board Team Building Session

— By Jessica Cole
National Legislative Representative

The Wisconsin State Legislative Board of the BLET has hosted ever-improving team building sessions for the past several years, with the exception of 2020 when COVID dictated no in-person meetings.

The 2021 meeting was held at the beautiful Wilderness Resort Cabins in Wisconsin Dells, Wisconsin and presented an invigorating chance to learn from a wide variety of speakers. Several State Chairmen from far outside Wisconsin attended, along with National Legislative Representative Vince Verna, and numerous Wisconsin division legislative representatives.

The meeting started off with a visit and a talk by Wisconsin Governor Tony Evers, a staunch supporter of Labor and defender of Voting Rights. Governor Evers expressed his hope that Wisconsin would turn away from some of the attacks on democracy via ridiculous restrictions on voting rights, making particular mention of recent attempts by the GOP to make it harder for handicapped people and nursing home residents to vote. He also expressed confidence that all of the damage done to unions via Act 10 and Right to Work would slowly

be undone, stating that he knew good Republican lawmakers who would support ending Right to Work. It was refreshing to me to hear a Democrat speak kindly of at least some of the GOP, and I think a return to this sort of bipartisan sentiment is exactly what's needed for our state and our country.

BLET National Legislative Representative Vince Verna gave a long and detailed talk about numerous issues, including long train oversight, progress on two-person crew legislation, and the newly announced Union Pacific COVID vaccine mandate and its ramifications, including the fact that the other carriers will soon be following suit. Vince's comments on those matters will be reported in more detail in my Legislative Report and in the Vaccine Mandate article in this newsletter.

I was invited to speak on behalf of the Auxiliary and discussed the progress that the Auxiliary has been able to make on its membership and on installing new local auxiliaries despite the challenges COVID has presented as far as in-person gatherings. I also put in a word for our fundraising efforts, most of which are now online because of COVID, and I encouraged the men to consider joining!

I mentioned the search for the historical Funeral Medallion we've been trying to find, but no one had an idea of who might have one, despite the fact some third-generation railroaders were in the room. The Funeral Medallion is an honorary emblem that was sometimes added to deceased railroaders' headstones generations ago. Please contact the Auxiliary if you have information about where to find an original!

Additionally, I mentioned that the Auxiliary has been concerned by a growing number of reports of rail employees, especially those from Ohio, contracting esophageal cancer. I asked that anyone with news about this to please let us know who is sick and where and when they worked, so we might see if we can find commonalities that would point at a cause. Additionally, I warned everyone to be vigilant about this cancer and to warn their fellow brothers and sisters that it seems to be on the rise.

Lastly, I put in a big push for support for two-person crews, and asked that anyone with a story of a "near miss" incident that was averted by a skilled crew in a situation where technology failed or was not enough to please share that story with me so that I can use it in helping the Auxiliary build and even stronger case for two-person crews. Please send your story or your spouse's story to me at jcts1987@gmail.com or message me on Facebook Messenger.

Throughout the next two days, many of the attendees gave individual presentations on various areas they are working on, and a Cornerstone representative also spoke extensively about programs and policies available to members. On the second day,



Auxiliary National Legislative Rep. Jessica Cole speaking to the Wisconsin State Legislative Board at Team Building Session

two very knowledgeable FRA inspectors spent more than three hours discussing their work and doing their best to clarify issues, questions, odd scenarios, and procedures for the entire group. This was an extremely interesting and valuable presentation. The FRA presentation will comprise the majority of my Legislative Report this quarter, so read more about it there.

This event was run as COVID-conscientiously as it could possibly be. Attendees were required to have proof of COVID vaccination and all wore masks during the formal meetings indoors. This is in line with the Wisconsin State Legislative Board's position on COVID protocols.

In summary, although I was not able to attend all of the presentations, I found those that I sat in on to be exceptionally well done. I was also most grateful and delighted to be able to spend in-person time with some of my rail family again. We truly have some of the smartest, funniest, and most passionate people in America in our ranks!



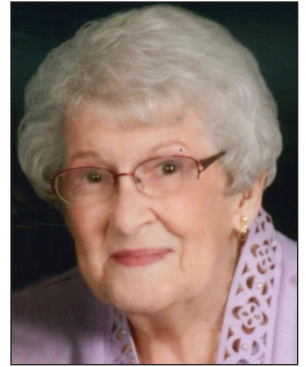
Members and Guests of Wisconsin State Legislative Board met in early October for a Team Building Session.

Remembering Mary Anna - by Becky Schneider

Mary Anna Mullins

October 20, 1929 – September 4, 2021

Long-time Auxiliary Member Mary Anna Mullins passed away on Saturday, September 4, 2021. She was the oldest member of Generosity Auxiliary No. 37 in Little Rock, Arkansas, one of the BLET Auxiliary's oldest continuing Auxiliaries. She is survived by her husband Bill Mullins, former Chaplain for the BLET National Division. The Mullinses enjoyed 72 years of marriage. Mary Anna is also survived by two sons, a daughter, a sister and three grandchildren.



Mary Anna was a very active member of Auxiliary 37 and the Grand International Auxiliary to the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers (GIA to BLE) through the years, along with her and Bill's devotion to the Southwestern Convention Meeting (SWCM). She served one term as President of Generosity Auxiliary and 20 years as Secretary/Treasurer, until her health began to fail in 2019. Her first Auxiliary International Convention was in 1986, where she was elected International Treasurer for the GIA. Because the Treasurer's position is for two terms, alternating with the International Secretary, she held that position until 1996. She served in several positions as well at the 1986 Auxiliary Convention in Cleveland, Ohio, including as delegate and on the Drill Team on Ritual Day with her friend, Onita Wayland. She also served as Chair of the Bylaws committee in 2001 and was elected Chaplain at that same convention, serving during Onita's term as President. She presided over the 2006 National Auxiliary meeting and was witness to a proverbial "changing of the guard" when the delegates voted to change the name of the organization to the BLET Auxiliary and to make the Auxiliary a national organization instead of international, in keeping with the BLET's change from a national to an international organization.

Mary Anna and Onita, along with their husbands, became fast friends, and even with failing health, stayed that way up until the Waylands' passing in January of 2020. They all attended the SWCM every year and Mary Anna even served as an officer of the SWCM Standing Committee. When Onita was International President of the GIA, Mary Anna and Bill would come down from Arkansas under the guise of keeping Tony company during our meetings in Waco. It was fun getting to know them when they would meet us for dinner every evening.

Mary Anna and Onita loved the GIA to BLE and worked hard to keep it strong but were also progressive enough to recognize that in order to continue, it must evolve. In the words of our current National Auxiliary Chaplain Velma Williams who is also a member of Generosity Auxiliary No. 37: "She was loved by our Auxiliary and will be truly missed."

Game Night Back After Summer Break!

By Erica Hill, President, Philadelphia BLET Auxiliary No. 71

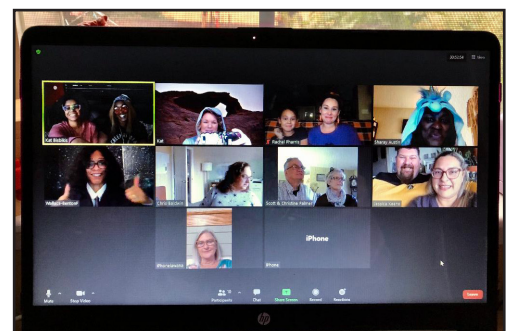
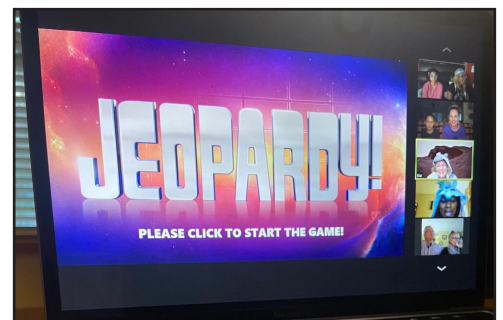
Game night on Zoom, hosted by our Philly auxiliary, was held on October 23 at 7:00 p.m., EST. The theme was Halloween, and contestants were invited to dress up in a Halloween costume or in festive fall colors.

We had a fun time playing Railroad Jeopardy, Trivia, and Bingo, hosted by Sharay Austin and Felicia Benton.

Our Auxiliary 71 Delegate Amanda Arnold and I were also in attendance. There were three game winners.

It was great to be back together sharing laughs!

Be on the lookout for more fun game nights in 2022. They are always announced on The National BLET Auxiliary Facebook Page.



Tidbits from National Secretary Lawana Poss

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 2022-2023 academic school year are due in my office April 1, 2022. Incomplete and late applications will not be considered!**

Please read **ALL** instructions!! Changes have been made to the application and eligibility.

MEMBERS-at-LARGE

Dues notices will be soon be mailed to all members-at-large. Please make sure to send your dues to me and ensure that all of your information is correct so that you will continue to receive your newsletter. **I should receive all dues payments by March 1, 2022. ALL checks should be made payable to BLET Auxiliary or you may use PayPal or VENMO.** The PayPal and VENMO links are located on our website at www.bletauxiliary.net.

AUXILIARY SECRETARIES

I will be mailing the Year-End Reports to you soon. **Please have the Reports back to me BEFORE March 1, 2022.** This is for 2021 Dues. 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. **ALL checks should be made payable to BLET Auxiliary or you may use PayPal or VENMO.** The PayPal and VENMO links are located on our website.

Please send your Year-end report as quickly as possible! Verify your elected Delegate. **If your Auxiliary's dues are delinquent, you will not be eligible to send a delegate to the National Convention in October 2022.**

WELCOME NEW MEMBERS!

Auxiliary 503 new members: Lisa Christensen, Daniel Christensen, Michelle Bonneau, Chris Bonneau, Steve Kreins, Becky Kreins and Cheri Soileau.

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 who are going through hard times. 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!

OUR DEEPEST SYMPATHIES

Our thoughts and prayer to Brian Kelley and family. Brian's father, Paul Kelley, passed away on September 27, 2021.

Our thoughts and prayers to Nevada State Legislative Board Chairman Matt Parker and family. Matt's wife Stephanie passed away on October 25, 2021.

Our thoughts and prayers to Ryan and Verna Snow. Ryan is California State Legislative Board Chairman. Ryan and Verna are long time members of the Auxiliary. Ryan's brother, Paul Parker, passed away recently and Verna's sister, Charlotte Holder, also passed away.

Our thoughts and prayers to the Dolan Family. Twin Ports Auxiliary 6388 Member Ashley Dolan's father-in-law, Robert Dolan, passed away in November.

Our thoughts and prayers to Maryland State Legislative Board Chairman Dave Dinges and family. Dave's father passed away on November 25.

Our thoughts and prayers to all BLET members, Auxiliary members, our family members, and friends battling COVID.

CONGRATULATIONS!

Jodi and Will Wallace welcomed grandbaby number 5! Ella Jo Laurence was born on October 6, 2021. Jodi is the president of Eastern Oregon Auxiliary 362.

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!



Lawana Poss can be reached at 770-497-8898, or lwposs@gmail.com.

"When you complain, you make yourself a victim. Leave the situation, change the situation, or accept it. All else is total madness."

— Eckhart Tolle

Legislative Update

Continued from Page 7

short line track and infrastructure projects, commuter railroads, grade crossing elimination and improvement efforts in addition to safety and educational programs to reduce injuries and deaths at crossings, research and development, and locomotive modernizations that would significantly reduce emissions. The bill also directs the DOT and FRA to develop grant program projects that would eliminate grade crossings frequently blocked by trains, especially longer trains, which would go in tandem with the requisite study by the National Academies.

According to Railway Age, while not all of the bill involves traditional infrastructure spending, there are notable funds designated for such projects. In addition to the above, the bill includes \$110 billion for roads, bridges, and major infrastructure projects; \$39 billion for public transit modernization; \$17 billion for port infrastructure; and \$25 billion for airports.

Also included in the BIF were important rail safety policy provisions, including requiring:

- A National Academies study on the safety of trains longer than 7,500 feet;
- FRA accident reports that include train length, number of cars, and crew size;
- Increased transparency for regulatory waiver requests, including requests for suspension of rules;
- The Federal DOT to create a process for involving all stakeholders in investigations, including rail labor;
- Quarterly reporting on failures

and functions of PTC to include cutouts, malfunctions and enforcements where an accident was actually prevented.

The bill creates car regulations that would effectively block Chinese companies from building freight cars or supplying freight car components for the U.S. market. Lawmakers, DOD, and manufacturers have all raised national security concerns about China's CRRC building transit cars for the US market and feared they would seek to enter the U.S. freight car market as well.

Sources: SMART-TD/Trains Magazine/Jacobin Magazine

Amtrak Expansion

With funding under the BFI, train travel has the potential to grow far beyond what it's been able to since its founding 50 years ago. Just before the pandemic took hold of our country, ridership and revenues had been growing every year for a decade. CEO William Flynn has listed routes where service is minimal or nonexistent and he hopes to see those areas expanded. Cities that could see new or improved service include: Phoenix to Tucson, Cleveland to Columbus to Cincinnati, and Los Angeles to Las Vegas. The Los Angeles to Las Vegas route has a leg up from Brightline West in that land was purchased this summer for a station and plans are on the drawing table for a high speed rail route. Phoenix is currently the largest city in the continental U.S. without passenger rail service. The new service would relieve congestion on I-10 and dramatically reduce carbon emissions.

Some of the 39 potential new routes, while promising, will take

years to happen. More immediate effects of the BFI will be to make existing routes more convenient and to improve the Amtrak experience on board through upgraded rolling stock (see below). Ridership was 6.6 million lower than the same period in 2020, but the Rail Passengers Association believe that new bridges, rebuilt tunnels, upgraded signals, and upgraded rolling stock could help to bring back riders. "Passengers will benefit from the less glamorous upgrades to our aging rail infrastructure that will eliminate delays, add capacity and reduce trip times."

Source: Forbes/nerdwallet.com/RPA

Rolling Stock Upgrades

Amtrak has revealed prototypes of refreshed Superliner coaches, dining cars, and sleeping cars. Based on the changes coming to the Superliner, Amtrak figured out a way to cost-effectively tackle the issue of needed repairs even before the passage of the BFI. The first updated coach cars went into service near the end of June and will continue on all long-distance western routes over the next three years. Bi-level Superliner coaches have had a refresh of the soft surfaces, and sleeping cars will have higher-quality sheets and new toiletries. According to the RPA, because the refresh is soft surfaces only, passengers should still pack their shim-and-duct-tape kit, but it's a welcome and significant improvement, and long overdue. The improvement to the seats in the Sightseer Lounge is somewhat less dramatic, but still welcome, as is the improvement to the table side of the lounge, and in the dining cars.

Source: Rail Passengers Association Hotline

Capping LNG by Rail, Notice of Proposed Rulemaking

In June of 2019, the Pipelines & Hazardous Materials Administration (PHMSA) issued a final rule authorizing the bulk transport of Liquid Natural Gas (LNG) by rail, in compliance with the previous administration's Executive Order 13868. The Rule allowed LNG trains of up to 100 tank cars to be moved by rail, effectively advancing an already dangerous commodity into a rolling bomb more powerful than the one dropped on Hiroshima. Joseph Minott, Executive Director and Chief Counsel of the Clean Air Council said, "There's a very good reason LNG has never been shipped by rail in this country, and that's because it's wildly unsafe." It now seems that the PHMSA and FRA are working to reverse the previous rule "to amend...the regulations to suspend authorization of LNG transportation in rail tank cars...until either completion of separate rulemaking...or June 30, 2024." The Methodology to be used by the task force to assess risk includes: Know the Risk; Predict the Risk; Reduce the Risk; and Prepare for the Risk. The work was originally to be completed by late 2021, but the pandemic caused it to be delayed. The comment period will close December 23, 2021. The new assessment approach seems much more pragmatic than what was previously done.

Source: Railway Age/NJ Indy

Languishing Nomination of STB Nominee – An Undeserving Political Pawn

The nomination of Karen Hedlund, President Biden's nominee to succeed Ann D. Begeman who is term-limited and must leave the Board by December 31,

continues to languish under a hold put on her nomination by Senator Mike Lee (R-UT). Touted by colleagues as the consummate professional and more than qualified to hold this position as a non-partisan member, the Utah congressional delegation is holding her nomination hostage not because she has ever said or done anything to cause anyone heartburn, but because of the perception that she “might” vote against a pet project of Sen. Lee to haul fracked crude because of her acquaintance with Chairman Martin Oberman. The Board has already voted that the project meets the statutory requirements for fast-track approval. Oberman has merely expressed concerns about the financial viability of the project and is seeking additional information. The Utah delegation believes if a vote can be taken before Begeman leaves they will receive approval to move forward. That, however, is not a given, so Hedlund’s nomination may have been held up on nothing more than a W.A.G. The project should either be a go or no-go on its own merits, not because of a “perception.” Ms. Hedlund is the former deputy administrator and chief counsel at the FRA, former chief counsel at the Federal Highway Administration, and VP and National Strategy Adviser at WSP USA, a railroad/infrastructure consulting firm.

Source: Railway Age/Rail Passengers Association/Akronrrclub.wordpress

Medical Network Right to Choose

An arbitrator has rejected the railroad industry’s attempt to utilize a 30-year-old contract clause designed to reduce the healthcare networks available

under the National Healthcare Plan for Railroad Employees. The decision is a major victory for railroad workers covered by the national agreement as their bargained-for right to choose their own medical network. The carrier’s representative had proposed reconfiguring the National plans in such a way that it would force railroad workers into the cheapest area networks without formal bargaining. Twelve unions filed suit to force the carriers to bargain in good faith. The carriers tried to invoke the “minor” dispute provisions, but the Special Board of Adjustment Arbitrator disagreed. The unions issued a statement that their employees deserve an agreement that reflects their efforts in keeping the country moving and profits flowing during the pandemic. They remain ready to negotiate an agreement, and urged the Carriers “to devote as much energy to that task” as they invested in their failed effort to deprive their workers of their choice of medical networks.

Source: BLET Newsflash

Insult to Injury: As if our supply chain problems weren’t bad enough, thieves are targeting containers holding electronics and household good as ports in the U.S. struggle to clear backlogs of cargo leading to additional delays in the supply chain.

Source: Business Insider

Railroad Retirement Board Updates

John Bragg, Labor Member from the RRB, shared with members that even though progress has been made relative to the pandemic, Field Offices are not yet open to the public. He wanted to remind our members that, with the offices closed, calls to the

toll-free numbers have greatly increased, causing increased wait times. They have found that many of the answers being sought can be found on the RRB.gov website. Previously, some of the information being sought was difficult to find. Recently, information has been consolidated regarding the most commonly asked questions, and links to more information are provided on an FAQ page. Mr. Bragg added that, because of the hard work of rail labor, the Board finally has the budget for much-needed IT work; however, because that work is a multi-year project, the results of the improvements won’t be seen by the end user right away.

Source: BLET Newsflash

RRB COLA Increase and Earnings Limits Increase

Railroad Retirement Annuitants will receive a cost of living (COLA) increase for 2022 of 5.9% on Tier I and 1.9% on Tier II. Supplemental annuities are not adjusted for changes in the CPI. The average annuity will increase approximately \$138 per month, to \$3,104, and the average combined benefits for employee and spouse will increase \$194 per month to \$4,501. As has been the case since the Railroad Retirement Reform passed in 2001, widows and widowers will not receive annual COLAs until their annuity amount is exceeded by the amount that would have been paid under the prior law, counting all interim COLAs. Approximately 56% of the widow(ers) are being paid under the 2001 law.

Later this year, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services will announce Medicare Part B premiums for 2022. Individual benefit amounts cannot be calculated until that announcement.

The RRB will mail notices in late December to all annuitants providing a breakdown of the annuity rates payable to them in January, 2022.

In addition to the COLA increase, earnings restrictions have increased as well. For those under full retirement age (depending on your year of birth), exempt earnings will rise to \$19,560, an increase of \$600 over 2021. For those attaining full retirement age in 2022, the increase raises to \$51,960. The earnings deduction is \$1 in benefits for every \$2 of earnings over the exempt amount, or \$1 for \$3 if you reach full retirement age in 2022. For more detailed information on earnings in retirement, please visit the Railroad Retirement website at RRB.gov.

There are two new publications on the RRB website. One covers Railroad Retirement Spouse Benefits and frequently asked questions. The other covers the RRB Appeals Procedure, again answering many frequently asked questions.

Sources: BLET Newsflash/RRB.gov

Prescription Drug Prices

Democratic lawmakers have reached a deal on legislation to lower prescription drug prices to be included in the BBB Act. The agreement is less far-reaching than earlier proposals but still represents progress on the issue. It would allow Medicare to negotiate drug prices in limited instances, prevent drug companies from raising prices faster than inflation, and cap out-of-pocket costs for seniors on Medicare at \$2,000 per year. Arguments from the usual suspects were that more sweeping mea-

— continued on Page 15



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

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Wishing all of our subscribers a Happy New Year!

Greetings from your Editor, Rachel Pharris

*It shouldn't have to happen to
you for it to matter to you.*

-Unknown



Holiday greetings!

I have had the message that I was planning to share in this article on my mind for a while, but something that happened this week laid this on my heart to share. Last week, my husband Brad was at his away-from-home terminal and was having severe abdominal pains. I suggested some meds and rest and I went ahead and went to sleep. Fast forward four hours. I woke up and looked at my cell phone to see if he had gotten called for work. I had numerous missed calls, voice mails, and texts. Brad's pain had progressively gotten worse and he had headed to the emergency room. The closest E.R. to his away-from-home terminal is 30 minutes away.

After tests were run in the ER, it was determined that Brad's gall bladder was the cause of his pain. So, at 3 a.m., I was texting the trainmaster and my husband's conductor trying to get the details on what was going on. I was able to listen on speakerphone to anything the nurses had to say. I began packing some things so I could leave first thing in the morning to head to the hospital, two hours from home. I was able to get my kids to school early and get to the hospital by 9 a.m. We had learned overnight that Brad needed emergency surgery to remove his gall bladder. His surgery would take place at noon that day. Once he was taken into surgery, I hopped in the car and drove the 30 minutes to his away-from-home terminal to grab his bag and lunch box. The crews at the hotel had already packed his things and had them ready for me to pick up.

We are home now, things have settled down, and healing has begun. Reflecting on this experience has me thankful for so many things—a trainmaster and conductor who care enough to go out of their way to make sure my husband was taken care of; a local chairman who is always there; my auxiliary members who have sent food, given rides, and lent a listening ear.

Having the contact information I needed close at hand made a terrible situation go a lot more smoothly. Having the number for the hotel, the local chairman, and the trainmaster made things much easier, as I was limited on getting information from a man under the influence of heavy pain medicine. Along with having the contact information, I strongly encourage you all to have short- and long-term disability insurance. Having this financial coverage is extremely helpful during unexpected situations. Taking away the financial burden allows you to focus on family and healing.

As I'm sure is true for most every auxiliary across the nation, we have several guys out with minor to major health conditions. Please keep them and their families in your prayers this holiday season and always.

Rachel Pharris

BLET Auxiliary National Vice President/

National Outreach Coordinator

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Legislative Update, Continued from Page 13

tures would have harmed innovation in developing new treatments. One of the key compromises was the scope of Medicare's ability to negotiate lower drug prices. They agreed to limit Medicare's ability to negotiate prices on older drugs that no longer have exclusivity.

Limiting increases on drug prices rising faster than inflation would extend to those with private health insurance plans as well. It will also cap insulin co-pays at \$35 per month. This may not be the final draft, but it's definite progress.

Source: The Hill

BLET National Legislative Office

Following the retirement of Brother John Tolman, Brother Vince Verna advanced to Vice President/National Legislative Representative, leaving the job of Director of Legislative and Regulatory Affairs vacant. It was announced November 2 that Brother Eric Gabaldon, former Chairman of the New Mexico State Legislative Board, member of Division 400, Albuquerque, New Mexico, and a third generation railroader, will fill the vacancy. The retirement of Brother Bob Hagan and the resulting vacancy in the position of Director of Political Affairs has been filled by Brother Brendan P. Sullivan, former Chairman of the Florida State Legislative Board, member of Division 769, Sanford, Florida, and a fifth generation railroader. Brother Verna said, "I'm happy to welcome Eric and Brendan to the DC office. We now have a complete team and are working to get everyone up to speed in the office." Best wishes to all as they settle into their new jobs.

Source: BLET Newsflash

May you all have a blessed holiday season and stay safe!

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

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

Rachel Pharris, Editor

BLET Auxiliary News

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The next issue will be published in March 2022. Please have your submissions to Rachel on or before February 15, 2022.



BLET Auxiliary

Sereena Hogan, Publisher, BLET Auxiliary News
8720 N. Myrtle Drive
Tucson, AZ 85704-3340

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