



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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Autumn-Winter 2022

Kathleen Bisbikis, President • Rachel Pharris, 1st Vice President • Jodi Wallace, Secretary

Chris Carvalho Baldwin, Treasurer • Natalie Miller, 2nd Vice President/National Legislative Representative • www.bletauxiliary.net

Auxiliary National Convention, October 10 - 13, 2022, Las Vegas, Nevada





From the President

BY KATHLEEN BISBIKIS

"The heart that gives thanks is a happy one, for we cannot feel thankful and unhappy at the same time."

Douglas Wood

We are proud to share with you our final newsletter of 2022. It's been a year of struggle and fighting for railroad workers and their families. The Auxiliary is proud that we stood with our union brothers and sisters and shared in their fight. As family members, we also feel the wrath of the carrier's demands and unwillingness to negotiate.

As you probably noticed on our cover, we recently held our 4th Quadrennial Convention in Las Vegas, Nevada. In conjunction with our convention, we also are celebrating our 135th anniversary as an organization—a milestone we were so excited to share with our delegates and members at the convention. In the vendor hall, we shared items and photographs from our 135-year history for everyone to view. It offered a glimpse of where we came from to where we are now.

In a whirl of emotion, it is with great gratitude to our convention delegates that I was re-elected to serve as your National President for another four years. This a position that I take very seriously, and I will continue in my quest to do everything I possibly can to improve on and build what we started in the past four years.

I am excited to work with the team of newly-elected officers to serve the membership over the next four years. Please take a moment to review pages 4 and 5 for an introduction to your new leadership team. They are all very excited to get to work to positively impact our organization with fresh new ideas to further our vision.

Sadly, however, we said goodbye to some dedicated officers who served this organization for a combined total of years that would easily exceed 100. Terri Fleming, Lawana Poss, Becky Schneider, Jessica Cole, Rose Surchik, and Velma Williams, your service to the membership and the National Auxiliary is unparalleled. Some of you have chosen retirement, and it's well deserved; we all hope the next chapter in your lives is everything you desire. If I were to describe this team in one word, it would be LOYALTY. They were forever loyal to the betterment of the organization and everything it stands for, devoted to each other, and never afraid to try something new if it meant helping the Auxiliary, or telling me when a bad idea was a bad idea. We have made some fantastic memories, had some great laughs, and made leaps and bounds for the membership, all while staying faithful to each other and our members. It has been nothing short of an honor working with all of you. Sisters, I am forever grateful.

As we end 2022, the National BLET Auxiliary officers wish you all a happy holiday season and a bright and hopeful New Year, and remind you to find joy where you can, count your blessings, and stay grateful in all you do.

Kathleen "Kat" Bisbikis
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From the National Officers of the BLET Auxiliary to all of our members and newsletter readers: May the peace and joy of the holidays be with you today and throughout the New Year.

Reflections of a First-Time Delegate

By Katryna Hughes, President, Flatrock Auxiliary No. 8

I am honored to be serving my third term as President of Flatrock Auxiliary No. 8 in North Platte, Nebraska, and I was very excited to also be elected to serve as our auxiliary's delegate at the 4th Quadrennial Convention of the BLET Auxiliary in October of this year. Our Past President Gina Kuenning, who remains one of our most active local members, attended the 3rd National Convention in 2018 as our delegate.

The convention was much more than I ever expected. Let's just say, my type-A, always seemingly-has-it-together composure, and tough-as-nails nature was quickly debunked, turning to unfeigned tears and emotion. If you can imagine the ugliest crier out there, yep, that's me - a sight to see for my fellow sisters and brothers for a first-time face-to-face introduction.

Our local auxiliary has suffered in recent years, as have many others across the country. Lack of membership, participation, and finances have proved to be trying, leaving me and others to question the future of our organization. I am forever grateful for the eye-opening experience and the bigger picture of what our union and auxiliary is all about. Learning the values and fundamentals on which the Auxiliary was founded, and the bravery and sacrifice of those who went before us, was awe-inspiring. And witnessing first-hand the hard work and dedication of the men and women who fight for our families every day, especially in these unprecedented times, has revived my sense of purpose and given me a new outlook. I returned to Nebraska feeling rejuvenated, inspired, and reminded of our true purpose as an organization.

I am eternally grateful to have had the opportunity to meet such astonishing humans with passion and drive, all working toward one common goal, the best for YOU! Networking of this kind brings contacts/relationships, camaraderie, education, knowledge, friendships from across the nation, and most importantly, a feeling of solidarity and heartfelt understanding. Contrary to what has been shared online by some media sources and other individuals, these quadrennial conventions bring all of us together as one. Discussions, debates, and voting for our/your future — it was a lot of work, but it was also worthwhile and fulfilling. I was there advocating for my railroad family back home and for our entire auxiliary family. I was there with a voice, and my voice was heard. I was honored to take my newfound knowledge and information back to our local UP property, our community, and to every railroad family across the nation.

I encourage each one of you reading this now to attend the next National BLET/BLET Auxiliary Convention. If not as a delegate, go as support for your local representatives and to truly see what these conventions are all about. Experience first-hand the dedication and the work these men and women put forth on your behalf. You are part of the bigger picture, and we are stronger together!



2023

**BLET AUXILIARY &
LECMPA SCHOLARSHIPS
APPLICATIONS**

Applications will be accepted from
January 1, 2023 - April 1, 2023
For more info visit our website:
www.bletauxiliary.net

From National Secretary Jodi Wallace:

Scholarship season for the 2023-2024 school year is fast approaching. If you have children who are college or trade school bound, they may be eligible to apply for a BLET Auxiliary Scholarship. Students who have a parent who is also a member of LECMPA may be eligible for one of the two Auxiliary/LECMPA scholarships. Detailed scholarship information and applications can be found on our website at www.bletauxiliary.net. If you have any questions, please contact me at jwallace.bletaux@yahoo.com. Scholarships will be accepted starting on January 1, 2023, and need to be completed and postmarked by April 1, 2023.

From Terri Fleming, BLET Auxiliary National Treasurer . . .

Wow, I can't believe that my eight-year term as the BLET Auxiliary National Treasurer has come to an end and it is time for me to step aside and let someone else hold the position. I have developed many friends throughout these last eight years, and I hope that those friendships will continue. Thank you to everyone who has helped me along the way, and I extend a special thank-you to Becky Schneider, Kathleen Bisbiskis, Rachel Pharris, and Lawana Poss. These national officers are all hard-working women, dedicated to our cause.

The BLET Auxiliary has some great programs and benefits for all its members. I hope that the organization can continue to grow and flourish in the years to come. It is so nice to have people who understand the railroad industry come together and support each other. The rail life is not an easy life for any spouse, but with the help and understanding of others it can be easier. Please remember to support each other. Sometimes all it takes is just to be there.

Again, thank you everyone! I wish you great success in the future. I will continue to be a member and stand with you all!

Meet Your Newly Elected National Officers!



Kathleen Bisbikis, National President

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Jodi Wallace, National Secretary

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Chris Baldwin, National Treasurer

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Natalie Miller, National 2nd Vice President/ National Legislative Representative

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Congratulations to all of our newly elected BLET National Auxiliary Officers elected at the Fourth Quadrennial Convention of the BLET Auxiliary in Las Vegas, Nevada, October 10-13, 2022.

To find out more about each of these dynamic women who have stepped forward to represent the members of the BLET Auxiliary on a national level, please read their complete bios on the newly designed Auxiliary website at bletauxiliary.net. Many thanks to William Wallace for graciously serving as our webmaster since 2014!

LEGISLATIVE UPDATE

Greetings from your newly elected 2nd Vice President/National Legislative Representative. My name is Natalie Miller



and I am honored to represent our Auxiliary on the local and national levels, and to be an advocate for our BLET Brothers and Sisters across the nation for the next four years. The Legislative Update has always been the first thing I read in every newsletter as I like to keep up-to-date on current national and state legislative news regarding railroad unions and union labor in general.

I welcome all of you reading this to take up arms with me in the battles ahead. I hope you will join with me and your other sisters in the Auxiliary to voice your opinion for the importance of two-person crew legislation on the FRA website and to your state representatives.

If there is pending legislation that affects railroaders and/or their families in your state or community, please message me information so I can get it out to all our members. I look forward to serving you as your National Legislative Representative for the 2023 – 2026 term, providing the tools and education you need, and fighting side-by-side with my auxiliary sisters and brothers on behalf of our BLET brothers and sisters. Together, we will win this war waged on Union Labor!

BLET Votes to Ratify Tentative Agreement

The long-anticipated results of the BLET and SMART TD vote on the proposed contract agreement were revealed early Monday morning, November 21, 2022. SMART TD membership split their decision with their train and engine service members rejecting the contract with a narrow majority of 50.87%, and the Yardmasters voting to ratify with a much more comfortable majority of 62.48%.

While the train and service members of the SMART-TD voted against the contract, the BLET rank and file voted to ratify the contract with over two-thirds of their eligible members casting their votes before the midnight deadline on November 20, 2022. After the record number of eligible ballots were cast and counted, the contract was ratified with 53.5% voting in favor of the contract and 46.5% against.

Now that a fourth rail union has rejected the contract, a status quo agreement is in effect through midnight December 8. If a settlement is not reached by then, at 12:01 a.m. on December 9, SMART-TD would be allowed to strike or rail carriers would be allowed to lock workers out. However, under the provisions in the Railway Labor Act of 1926, Congress could intervene to prevent a strike or lockout, and force an agreement that would closely resemble the PEB recommendations.

If any of the four rail unions that have rejected the contract do strike, the BLET and the other eight rail unions that ratified their contracts will stand in solidarity with their rail union brothers and sisters and honor their picket lines. It is the hope that a settlement will be reached without Congressional intervention, strike, or lockout, but if a strike is ordered, then the BLET will not cross the line.



By JESSICA COLE, NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE REPRESENTATIVE

A Farewell Note:

This report marks my last as National 2nd Vice President and Legislative Representative for the BLET Auxiliary. There's a saying that you never work a day in your life if you love what you are doing, because it's basically all just play at that point. This is largely how I feel about my time as your LR. I have learned a great deal, had a lot of

fun with my research and travels, and have IMMENSELY enjoyed the incredible knowledge and infallible wit of the people I've listened to.

I leave this position only because the other time and travel commitments in my professional life outside the BLET are overwhelming, and I cannot devote the necessary amount of time to also travel on behalf of the Auxiliary. I will continue to attend BLET meetings and hope to occasionally write articles for the Auxiliary Newsletter.

The railroad is a universe all its own, and it's been a privilege to have the door thrown open wide for me to learn about it these last four years.

A Strike, A Contract Dispute, and the Railway Labor Act

It's no surprise that BLET members voted 99.5 % in favor of a strike when new contract negotiations with the companies stalled in June after many months of diligent work by the BLET.

Each contract covers four years, which means railroad workers have not had a pay raise for 3½ years. In the meantime, carriers have furloughed some 29% of the workforce, yet they now complain about worker shortages. The introduction of Precision Scheduled Railroading and odious attendance policies such as BNSF's Hi-Viz, along with frequent use of FRA waivers to push remaining workers harder and harder, have led the railroads to be some of the least attractive employers in America.

Despite these facts, and despite the fact that carriers are making record profits in the billions of dollars even as they provide worse and worse service to shippers, the BLET has been unable to secure agreement to a reasonable pay raise for the remaining employees. Additionally, the companies' offers are contingent on accepting a lower quality health insurance plan in comparison to the previous con-

tract. Perhaps most offensive, the railroads also want "crew consist" to be eligible for negotiation, per contract. In short, the companies want the BLET to be willing to sell out the conductor's position and job as part of new contracts.

Engineers largely feel the Conductor makes their dangerous jobs far safer than they would be otherwise. They also object to the double sidedness of a company making record profits but wanting to give pay raises equal to less than the increase in the cost of living while also substantially decreasing benefits such as health care.

What does the vote to strike do? The Railway Labor Act of 1926 effectively prohibits strikes at the United States President's discretion, and it's a fair assumption that President Biden will never allow a strike to take place due to the political pressure it would create from a nation crippled by the complete breakdown of the supply chain that a rail strike would bring.

However, the Railway Labor Act does lay out an exact framework for rectifying Major Disputes, and this framework must be adhered to by both sides. (Note: There has understandably been a lot of questioning and complaining about the process from frustrated people, but the Act remains in effect and is the only legal process available unless and until it is amended through the legislative process.)

When arbitration fails, as is the case in the current dispute, the President then appoints a three-person Presidential Emergency Board (PEB) to consider all of the facts and arguments from both sides. The PEB is comprised of neutral members and, at the end of a 30-day "cooling off period," in which it hears and considers arguments from both sides, the PEB makes a recommendation.

Following the PEB's recommendation, another 30-day waiting

period ensues, and both sides are encouraged to come to an agreement based on the PEB's findings. However, it is not mandatory that either side agrees with the PEB. Failure to agree leads to both sides having the freedom to act according to its own economic interests. For workers, this would mean potentially proceeding with a strike, and for management, equally strong countermeasures such as workplace lockouts could be employed.

However, if the PEB's recommendation fails, Congress has the power to take swift action to impose its own settlement independent of the Railway Labor Act, under Article 1, Section 8 of the U.S. Constitution.

Two-Man Crew Breathes New Life Through Proposed FRA Rule

Former President Trump's FRA Administrator Ron Batory effectively squashed efforts to mandate two-person train crews in a 2019 decision, citing the carriers' good safety record without such regulation and enhanced safety technology such as Positive Train Control (PTC).

The BLET and SMART-TD have vehemently disagreed with this decision and have tirelessly lobbied for state and national legislation to mandate two-person crews for enhanced safety. Our arguments include greatly increased train lengths and weights, regular failure of PTC, regular orders to continue on with a run after PTC has failed, and regular instances where communication and air supply to rear-most cars is lost on long trains simply because of the length. Furthermore, the routine shipment of HazMat by freight trains makes every potential derailment a significant risk, not just to train crews, but also to first responders and to surrounding communities.

The new FRA Administrator, Amit Bose, has brought a new culture to safety oversight, and a newly published Notice of Proposed Rule Making requires two men on a crew in most, but not all, situations. Furthermore, the proposed rule gives the FRA some latitude in waiving the proposed new rule in certain

situations if the railroads follow an explicit risk assessment protocol in applying for a waiver exception.

The proposed new rule making would standardize train crew size between states whose laws differ and across PTC systems, which were implemented differently in different areas of the country by different railroads, contributing to the unreliability of the technology that was supposed to make us all infallibly safer.

Additionally, an FRA rule on crew size, while most welcome by rail employees, does not have the same teeth and weight as a national law. The next President may appoint a new FRA Administrator, and even if the current proposed rule has been enacted, it can easily be changed to be softer, or even abandoned altogether. Nonetheless, unions are hailing this proposed rule change as worthy of full and enthusiastic support.

The deadline for written comments on the proposed rule, originally set for September 26, has been extended to December 2. Commenting is easy and may be done by any individual. Please take five minutes to comment on the importance of this rule and strongly encourage your friends and family to do the same! Go to www.regulations.gov, enter 87 FR 45564, and click on "comment."

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**

As you know, the delegates and national officers of the Auxiliary will be attending our National Convention concurrently with the BLET's national convention at Bally's in Las Vegas, Nevada. Our convention is scheduled for October 10-13, just three days shy of the Auxiliary's 135th birthday on October 16. We've come a long way since

1887, but unbelievably are still dealing with some of the same issues. In 1861, Samuel Smiles wrote a memoir of British engineer George Stephenson, who derided the "profit-over-people" policies of some railroad managers. He asserted that "paying unqualified men \$25 per month [approximately \$400 in today's dollars] is suicidal to their best interests," suggesting that an additional \$10 per month [\$160] "for all switchmen might be 'a good investment' if it saved one worker a year from death or suffering." The pay may have been different, but the sentiment is the same – the need to pay an essential employee what they are worth.

Source: BLET Auxiliary; encyclopedia.com

Amtrak Gulf Coast Case

The STB has denied a Motion to Compel filed by Amtrak relating to its application to compel CSX, NS, and the Alabama Port Authority (APA) to respond to additional interrogatories. Since most of the information Amtrak was seeking was received through subsequent conferences, the Board denied the motion to compel the remaining unresolved issues. The Board also denied the request of CSX, NS, and APA for a technical conference and for extensions of time. Any future requests for extensions due to key personnel being unavailable must be supported by verified statements with the reason for same.

As reported by Trains.Com, Amtrak's most recent filing with the STB indicates that additional analysis shows the new service will cause "no unreasonable impairment" to the host railroads or Port Authority and that their arguments have failed. The filing goes on to argue that "it is clear that Gulf Coast service can be restored without the extraordinary capital investments that CSX, NS, and the ACA have demanded, and that any impacts from Amtrak service can be mitigated with routine operational changes and cooperative service planning."

In arguing that the railroads have failed to make their case for unreasonable impairment,

Amtrak cites results of their Rail Traffic Controller modeling which indicates nearly equal or worse impairment developing as freight traffic increases since NS and CSX say no infrastructure improvements are needed for freight traffic. Amtrak asserts that since the "evidentiary burden is on the host railroads to demonstrate unreasonable impairment," and because they have not met their burden, Amtrak is entitled to a ruling in its favor regardless of any material the railroads submitted in their latest filing.

The STB announced that hearings will continue November 17 and 18 but will be limited to new evidence and to present closing arguments. A voting conference will be held December 7. The hearing and voting conference are available on the Board's YouTube page but will not include public participation. Meanwhile, joint filings requesting another 30 days, beginning November 2 and running through December 1, cited considerable progress in their discussions and their desire to continue. Prior mediation concluded October 25, and the Board does not appear convinced this newest round of mediation would be successful.

This case remains important, not just for the restoration of the portion of the Sunset Ltd. wiped out by Hurricane Katrina in 2005, but as in indicator of future expansion of Amtrak routes throughout the country. *Source: STB Website; Trains.Com*

Amtrak Crew Safety

During the July meeting of the FRA's Passenger Safety Working Group, the Rail Passengers Association (RPA), working with labor leaders, raised the issue of passenger and crew safety once aboard trains during "unruly passenger" incidents. The working group and RPA are working to bring attention to, and involve Congress in, creating the legal authorities to address the problem, and to draft regulatory language to help the FRA address this safety concern – which they are currently powerless to do. Ways to handle unruly passenger incidents

— *continued on Page 12*

Baltimore Regional Meeting - August 1-5, 2022

By Kathleen Bisbikis, National President

More than 200 Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen and their families gathered for the Baltimore Regional Meeting.

Opening ceremonies were called to order on August 2 by BLET National President Dennis R. Pierce. Guest speakers included: Jimmy Donovan, Director of the Department of Political and Legislative Affairs, International Brotherhood of Teamsters; Amit Bose, Administrator of the Federal Railroad Administration; John Bragg, Labor Member, Railroad Retirement Board; and Kat Bisbikis, National President, BLET Auxiliary.

In his address, President Pierce touched upon numerous issues, including the FRA's recent proposed rulemaking regarding two-person train crews; CSX's acquisition of the Pan Am Railways; the Canadian National-Kansas City Southern merger; BNSF Railway's terminated lease of the Montana Rail Link; and the upcoming BLET's Fifth National Convention. President Pierce also announced that the 2023 BLET regional meetings are scheduled for Milwaukee (the week of June 26) and Myrtle Beach (the week of August 14). President Pierce also announced the pending retirement of two members of the BLET Advisory Board who were in attendance — Brother Lee Pruitt and Brother Steve Bruno.

The morning session concluded with a video presentation highlighting the union's recent efforts to bring attention to the dangers and difficulties that railroad workers face. Auxiliary members were pleased to see some familiar faces in the video as our members and leaders having been working hard alongside union leadership to bring attention to current struggles with the carriers.

Attendees adjourned for a brief rally and photo session outdoors in front of the BLET's mobile billboard truck to send a message to carriers across the country showing union members and families are not backing down.

The National BLET Auxiliary Executive Council members held our annual meeting in conjunction with the regional meeting, to take care of the business of the Auxiliary and finalize arrangements for the upcoming 4th Quadrennial Convention in Las Vegas. An undertone of sadness overshadowed our meeting, as we knew that this would be our last Executive Council meeting and regional meeting with our current officer team.

We were fortunate to have some of our members help us at our vendor table, where we were selling raffle tickets and mulligans as well as recruiting new members and sharing information about our proud 135-year history.

We look forward to seeing everyone next summer!



Denver Regional Meeting - June 13-17, 2022

**By Emily Schnatz,
Auxiliary No. 99, Amarillo, Texas**

On June 14, 2022, Victoria Delahay, president of my local auxiliary in Amarillo, Texas, and I headed to Denver, Colorado, for the BLET Regional Meeting. After having attended the BLET Regional Meeting in Nashville last year, where I made many new friends, it was fun to catch up and I found that my comfort level was better this time because I already knew names and faces I'd met in Nashville, and I also know Denver.

The Hi-Viz attendance policy, safety, and two-person crews were the main topics at the opening ceremonies, led by BLET National President Dennis Pierce. The main concern at this meeting, however, was about the issues with the outdated contract and the ongoing negotiations. I felt the tension in the air, but I also felt I was in the right place to hear what direction the union representatives were taking in defense of the members. The highlight of the morning was when President Pierce announced that one of the billboard vans was parked outside the hotel, at which time everyone cheered and the conference room emptied as everyone poured out of the hotel, filling the street, and having photos taken in front of the van.

At the auxiliary meeting that afternoon, we had a couple of informative presenters and good discussions among the members regarding local auxiliaries, scholarships, and social media. We socialized and networked with the new and potential members in attendance.

I feel fortunate to have had the privilege of getting to attend this meeting, as well as the one in Nashville last year. Meeting the wonderful members of the national and local auxiliaries and meeting the members and spouses of railroaders and their families from across the country has been a real treat. I have made friends and contacts, put faces to names, and was able to take all of that back to share with my local auxiliary sisters in Amarillo.

Onward and upward, and hopefully I will get to do it again in Myrtle Beach in August 2023. My fingers and toes are crossed!



Never Give Up! Just Keep on Bothering!!!

By Kelly Ann Pettus, Member-at-Large, San Antonio, TX

May 18 was a great day. I woke up frustrated because I have been writing lawmakers for months and had not received a response. I have pestered everyone I could think of through private message on Instagram and Facebook. I even leave an occasional comment on Twitter or Reddit if I think I can get someone to read it. I am not a person who gives up, but I was feeling ignored and it started bothering me. I woke up on Wednesday, May 18, and decided to do something about it.

I have written lawmakers on my own as well as directly through the BLET website and the Auxiliary website. I decided I would try again. I logged into the BLET website and noticed it was updated with the name of two lawmakers in my zip code that I hadn't written. It also included Joe Biden. I had a letter drafted so I made sure the name of every lawmaker on the list was checked as a recipient, copied my letter into the form, and hit send. I had written some of these people before, but they needed a reminder. I committed to being a pest from that moment forward because I needed a productive way to channel my frustration.

My brain flashed to a post I saw on Facebook in a group a couple of weeks ago that included contact information

for Gabriel Meyer at the Surface Transportation Board (STB). I couldn't remember where I saw it, but I went on a mission to find it, scouring every "wives" group I could find. It took me a few minutes, but I found it and e-mailed him. It was early in the morning, and I felt like I could go about my day because I did **SOMETHING!**

About two hours later, I logged into my e-mail account to check on an order and there it was! It

Gabriel was so easy to talk to. I felt like he absolutely understands our concerns. He used the words, "eye opening" after reading our stories. He said he has received a lot of calls and letters, and 75% of them have been BNSF families and crews. That made my heart smile. They are hearing us. They know who we are.

I discussed the labor conditions with Gabriel, the intimidation

conversation ended with him explaining that I had the option to keep my comments confidential because I could be subject to retaliation. I shared that I have already appeared in three different media interviews, so I am not concerned about remaining anonymous. He replied by telling me he had already seen my first media interview in January because he searched my name.

He gave me a website address where I could file my letter in the formal comments section of the docket for the STB hearing. He said that every letter is read and submitted. Some are selected to be forwarded to Chairman Oberman, but he was not part of the team selecting letters. I filed my comments that afternoon and they were posted publicly on the STB website under the docket the next day.

We have been fighting an uphill battle. I've been told it's useless and "why bother?". My experience on May 18 is the reason I bother. I keep bothering and bothering until someone answers me. Receiving a response from Gabriel Meyer at the STB has inspired me to keep writing and calling and bothering. I encourage everyone to dig deep for their inner pest and bother everyone who needs to be bothered. We may not win every fight, but we are holding our own! I plan to keep going. I hope you do too!



was a reply from Gabriel Meyer, Attorney-Advisor in the Office of Public Assistance, Governmental Affairs & Compliance, at the Surface Transportation Board. My heart was pounding; my hands were shaking. I felt victorious in that moment, and we hadn't even corresponded yet. It just felt so good to have someone respond, and so quickly. That e-mail exchange led to a 30-minute phone call that afternoon.

tactics crews are facing, safety concerns, dishonesty by corporate executives. I pointed out that if any crew member lies, they are subject to immediate termination. We discussed service issues to shortline railroads because my husband delivers to one and had some firsthand examples.

He genuinely listened and wanted to know. Our

Tidbits from National Secretary Lawana Poss

As this is my last newsletter article, I want to thank everyone for all of the support I received as National Secretary. It has been a labor of love for me. I will miss seeing everyone at the regional meetings. I wish all of the Auxiliary national officers the best four years ever! Voices are being heard and the Auxiliary has become a force to be reckoned with!

A big thank-you to Dallas Valentine for donating \$1000 to the auxiliary for the Auxiliary pin order!

WELCOME NEW MEMBERS!

Karen Landess, Auxiliary 99, Amarillo Texas and members-at-large Chris Myron, Duane Taddei, Stephanie Barnard, Christopher Dort, Roxanne Linn, Martha Oliver, Courtney Rahmel, Holly Rainwater, Holly Holdcraft, Ranchard Backus, Rhonda Forbes, Lois Boatwright, Elizabeth Griffin, Dallas Valentine.

MEMBERS AT LARGE

At the 2022 Convention in Las Vegas, it was proposed, voted on, and passed that dues would increase by \$10. The new rates are: MAL-not retirement age, \$70.00 per year; and MAL-retirees, widows, or widowers, \$42.00 per year. This increase will be applied to next year's dues. Dues notices will be sent out soon. 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

CARE AND ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

Established in 1921, the Care and Assistance Program (CAP) is our organization's way of saying thank you to long-time members. These members are usually elderly and their incomes are such that some of life's little pleasures are out of their reach. The CAP provides financial assistance to qualifying members and helps them to maintain a little bit more of the dignity they deserve. Our CAP recipients are grateful for what we do.

Please contact us 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!

SYMPATHIES

Christopher (Chris) Goose, brother of Missouri SLB Chairman Calvin Goose, passed away on Monday, September 19, 2022.

Cierra (CeCe) Dorin, daughter of Tom and Katy Dorin, passed away on Wednesday, October 26, 2022. Tom and Katy are founding members of Twin Ports Auxiliary 6388 and Katy is the VP/Chaplain.

Gwendolyn Mabel Carlson, Grandmother of Samantha Moder, passed away on Monday, October 31, 2022. Samantha is the Secretary and Treasurer of Twin Ports Auxiliary 6388.

Benjamin (Ben) Winston Seldon, Jr., cousin of Jewell Hill, passed away in October 2022. Jewell is a member of Philadelphia Auxiliary No. 71.

Sending our thoughts and prayers to all.

Please contact your newly elected National Secretary Jodi Wallace, 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 us know of any exciting happenings!

GOING GREEN!

Have you made the move to GO GREEN? You can choose to GO GREEN and receive a full color digital copy of the newsletter by e-mail! It is so easy to do. Send a note to newly elected National Secretary Jodi Wallace requesting your newsletter by e-mail rather than regular mail. When the quarterly newsletter is published, you will receive an e-mail with your full-color digital newsletter attached. Current and past newsletters are also available to read any time; find them on the Auxiliary website at bletauxiliary.net.

Thank you for your support and membership!!



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

"How lucky I am having something that makes saying goodbye so hard."

— Winnie-the-Poo

Legislative Update

Continued from Page 7

are in place aboard aircraft, and those same protections should extend to rail passengers and crews. Legislation was introduced in 2018 and the RPA is working with their partners for its reintroduction into this Congress. Please let your representative know that this is an issue that not only Amtrak passengers and crews care about, but all Americans.

Amtrak Appropriations

The Senate Appropriations Committee released its Fiscal Year Budget for 2023, which begins October 1, 2022. The proposed appropriations include an increase of \$269 million over Amtrak's budget last year. It also includes an FTA Capital Investment Grants program; Federal-State Partnership for State-of-Good-Repair for the replacement, rehabilitation, and repair of intercity passenger rail infrastructure; funding for Consolidated Rail Infrastructure and Safety Improvement program which can be used for freight and passenger rail projects such as stations or platforms, rail line relocation or improvement, highway-rail grade crossing improvement projects, and planning and environmental work. In addition to the proposed bills, funding was also secured in the Bipartisan Infrastructure Bill (the "BIL").

As part of the Senate Appropriations Committee, several important policy provisions of the bill include:

- RAISE Grants available for projects that alleviate blocked highway-rail grade crossings.
- Corridor Identification and Development Program. Once passenger rail corridors are selected as part of the BIL program, the DOT shall partner with eligible entities that submitted each proposal, relevant States and Amtrak as appropriate to implement the program.
- National Network Services. During the bill's consideration in 2019, the Senate voted 95 to 4 in favor of an amendment to express the desire of Congress to sustain

long-distance passenger routes ensuring connectivity for 4.7 million riders in 325 communities in 40 states that rely on Amtrak. The committee does not support proposals that will lead to long-term or permanent service cuts or segmentation of routes leading to less service for rural communities.

High Speed Rail

H.R. 5376, the Inflation Reduction Act of 2022, that passed the Senate on August 7, failed to include the \$10 billion in dedicated funding for electrified high-speed rail, a provision which had been included in previous drafts. Sean Jeans-Gail, Vice President of Government Affairs for the Rail Passengers Association, said, "It is a bitter pill in terms of rail and transit, which is the one clearly established, low-carbon emission transportation system we have going." It does feel like this is going to lock in highway dominance." He did note that an uptick in electric vehicles would further accelerate the collapse of the federal highway trust fund which is currently funded by gasoline taxes. He went on to say, "As a citizen of the planet, I'm happy they're doing something."

Source: Rail Passengers Association/Sean Jeans-Gail, VP of Government Affairs, RPA Round UP

STB Reauthorization Bill

The Freight Rail Shipping Fair Market Act (H.R. 8649) introduced on August 3, 2022, seeks to address complaints levied against the Class I railroads brought by customers and echoed by rail unions at hearings earlier this year. The bill reauthorizes the STB and, among other purposes:

- it strengthens the agency's authority to address rail service emergencies;
- requires contracts between railroads and shippers to include service delivery standards, while leaving those to be negotiated between the parties;
- provides the agency clear direction to resolve common carrier obligation complaints;
- creates financial incentives for railroads and shippers to efficiently move railcars (railroads

are allowed to charge demurrage when shippers are slow to load or unload cars. The bill will allow the shippers to assess a fee when the railroads delay moving cars efficiently);

- supports efforts to identify where freight is located while in transit;
- requires the return of furloughed employees to service to accomplish improved service standards; and
- provides STB funding to allow for quicker dispute resolution when petitioned.

Rail subcommittee Chair Donald Payne, Jr., said "The freight rail companies have focused on profits instead of performance and it has led to delays and problems in how we transport commodities to farms, factories, and stores across the country. My bill gives the Surface Transportation Board the power to prohibit rail rate increases during a rail emergency and resolve rail emergencies when they occur. The bill will improve the speed and reliability of rail service and guarantee that freight rail shipping continues to improve in the future without unnecessary regulations."

T&I Chair DeFazio expressed his satisfaction with the bill which will "hold the freight rail industry accountable for their appalling service to shippers and ultimately help American families burdened by the increased price of goods. It is imperative that our rail network is reliable, and yet consolidation and Wall Street pressures on railroads to cut costs and increase profits have made that near impossible."

Captured freight customers, numbering 85, who stand to benefit from the provisions of the Act. To no one's surprise, the American Association of Railroads says that the reauthorization bill would threaten the viability of the freight railroads and exacerbate ongoing service problems. The only threat is to the shippers, the supply chain, and the American consumer that are held hostage by the railroads.

Chairman Oberman suggested that railroad service is suffering for one

simple reason: The big four aren't paying enough to retain and recruit train crews. Ongoing crew shortages since last year have caused widespread congestion and significant delays. Chairman Oberman said he has told each railroad CEO that, "there is a price that will get you enough workers. I don't know what that price is. But everything has a price." He declined to comment on the negotiations process or the PEB, but he says it's clear that higher pay would help the railroads attract enough new workers to restore service to normal levels. At the hearing, he said, "Don't come in and tell me it's hard to hire. And it's not like they can't afford it. They're paying out billions and billions every year in stock buybacks. You could use some of that to get the workforce you need."

He went on to say that to him, "all of these problems stem from a lack of competition. They're not incentivized to run the business any differently because there's no real competition for so many rail users." UP, who is also struggling with crew shortages of its own in California, has not tried to snare any of the traffic BNSF is unable to move. Chairman Oberman said, "Railroads just have not employed enough human beings to get the job done."

Source: House.Gov T&I Subcommittee; Congress.Gov; STB Website; Smart-TD

Railroad Retirement Update

Cost of Living Adjustment for 2023: According to the RRB, most railroad retirement annuities will rise for 2023. Tier I benefits will increase by 8.7%, and Tier II benefits will rise 2.8%. Vested dual benefit payments and supplemental annuities are not adjusted for changes in the Consumer Price Index. Widow(er)s paid under Railroad Retirement Reform of 2001 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 otherwise payable. Approximately 49% of widow(er)s are currently paid

— continued on back cover

Auxiliary 417 Hosts 3rd Annual Golf Tournament

**By Rachel Pharris, President
Auxiliary 417, Springfield, Missouri**

On September 26, Auxiliary 417, Springfield, Missouri, hosted our third annual golf tournament fundraiser to benefit our local Scholarship and Care & Assistance Program.

The tournament was held at Silo Ridge Country Club in Bolivar, Missouri. The format was a two-man scramble. The country club provided lunch for all golfers. The auxiliary provided cash prizes as well as prizes for 1st, 2nd, and 3rd place teams, as well as two contests.

Our auxiliary is blessed to have many returning hole sponsors as well as new supporters. Our tournament was open to railroaders, friends and family, and the public.



Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!

A huge thank-you to our new member-at-large Dallas Valentine. Dallas joined the auxiliary at the Denver Regional Meeting in June. She was also in attendance at the 4th Quadrennial Convention in October. It was there that she heard we needed to reorder membership pins for our new members. She generously offered to donate \$1000 to the National Auxiliary to cover the cost of the pins.

In addition to being a railroad family, Dallas and her husband own a working Angus cattle ranch in New Mexico.

We appreciate you, Dallas!

In Memoriam

Brother Keith W. Bass, Division 48, St. Louis, Missouri, passed away on July 27 from injuries sustained in a crew van accident the day before. Brother Bass, 46, had worked for the railroad for 16 years, was a veteran of the U.S. Navy, and an involved BLET member. He leaves behind his wife, Amber, and children Keeton and Delaney. R.I.P Brother.

Brother Zackary T. Stine, Division 182, North Little Rock, Arkansas, passed away May 28 after helping to rescue four small children from a riptide before being pulled under and drowned. Brother Stine had been a BLET member for three years. He leaves behind his wife Brittany, son Shane, and his four-legged friend Daisy Rae, along with his mother, sisters, grandparents, nieces, and many other family and friends. R.I.P Brother.

Brother Ryan M. Jones, Division 103, Cheyenne, Wyoming, passed away on July 28 after suffering a major cardiac event while on duty. Brother Jones, 33, had worked for the railroad for eight years and recently joined the BLET. He leaves behind his father, Michael, and his sister's family, Jessica, Christopher, and son Decker. R.I.P Brother

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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.

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(717) 657-1890



Greetings from Your Editor, Rachel Pharris

*Coming together is a beginning,
staying together is progress, and
working together is success."*

— Henry Ford

Sisters and Brothers,

For those of you who attended the 4th Quadrennial Convention of the BLET Auxiliary in Las Vegas, I hope this newsletter finds you energized and full of excitement after returning home. I have attended a few regional meetings, which I always enjoy, but there is nothing like the national convention. The amount of people, the excitement, the solidarity, the fellowship with families that live the same lifestyle — every part was uplifting!

I served as Chairman of the Bylaws Committee. This was my first experience working on the proposed bylaw changes alongside Lawana Poss and Becky Schneider. Wow, was it a challenge! My heart is all in for this auxiliary and I know those changes are needed to keep us moving forward as an organization. Going through each proposed change was a very intense process. There are many steps, from reviewing them, to putting them in order, to reading them aloud to the delegates and officers.

The meetings each day were long, but we were able to accomplish so much. Each day included morning setup; working through the agenda; lunch breaks, which were usually a working lunch to answer questions and get caught up; and then starting up again for the second half of the day.

I knew the convention would be more rigorous than our Executive Council meetings, but I underestimated just how much. It was exhausting! We were in session from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. most of the days. As the Chairman of the Bylaws Committee, it was my duty to read the proposed changes aloud to the delegates and fellow officers for a whole day. It was physically and mentally exhausting. After each reading, we opened the floor for discussion, and then we voted. All proposed bylaw changes that were submitted after the deadline had to be read once on one day and again on the following day. All votes had to have a motion as well as a second. It's a very time consuming albeit rewarding process. Getting the bylaws up to date and making changes that serve the Auxiliary and its members helps us to move forward with the times. Adding a social media person to our list of national officers was definitely a must!

I very much enjoyed learning the history of the Auxiliary and being able to see and display history pieces from the museum. I really appreciate Becky Schneider for taking the time to do all that research.

My favorite parts of the convention were meeting the delegates; spending time with like-minded, passionate women; hearing thank-yous and encouragement during the long days; laughing; and brainstorming. The cherry on top was President Bisbikis's speech; it really got everyone fired up. She exited the stage with a standing ovation. She was amazing!

It was bittersweet to say goodbye to our outgoing officers. I am really looking forward to the new group of officers. I know we are going to do big things in the next four years.

I want to say a big thank-you to the auxiliary members and husbands who worked at our table in the vendor area. That is always a big help to us while we are in meetings.

Rachel Pharris

*BLET Auxiliary National Vice President and
Outreach Coordinator*

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Save These Dates!

June 26-30, 2023

Milwaukee Regional Meeting

August 14-20, 2023

Myrtle Beach Regional Meeting

Additional information coming soon!

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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417-872-9641

The next issue will be published in March 2023. Please have your submissions to Rachel on or before February 15, 2022.



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Legislative Update, Continued from Page 12

under the 2001 law. Tier I COLAs are also offset if an annuitant also receives social security or other government benefit, such as a public service pension; however, Tier II COLAs are not affected. The RRB will mail notices to all annuitants setting forth their breakdown for 2023.

Medicare: The standard Part B premium will decrease \$5.20 in 2023. Depending on adjusted gross income, premiums will vary. According to the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS), the Inflation Reduction Act of 2022 (IRA) contained changes to Parts B and D. Highlights include: a cap of \$35 for a month's supply of insulin effective January 1st covered under Part B durable medical equipment; and an announcement of the first 10 drugs to be negotiated for price targeting the highest-spending, brand-name drugs that don't have competition. Unfortunately, the savings roll out will be slow. Low-income assistance won't kick

in until 2024, nor will the elimination of cost-sharing under the Part D catastrophic phase. Capping at \$2,000 for out-of-pocket drug costs or the option to pay costs in monthly amounts rather than all at once won't happen until 2025. *Source: RRB.gov/Medicare Rights Center*

Financial Reports: Pursuant to the RRB's requirement to submit annual financial reports to Congress, as of September 30, 2021, assets of the National Railroad Retirement Investment Trust Fund (NRRIT) equaled \$30.4 billion. The report concluded that barring a sudden, unanticipated large decrease in railroad employment or substantial investment losses, the system will experience no cash flow problems during the next 25 years. The Actuarial Valuation for 75 calendar years indicated no cash flow problems occur under optimistic and moderate assumptions. Under the pessimistic as-

sumption they would not occur until 2055. The RRB does not recommend any change in the rate of tax imposed by current law on employees or employers. For more detailed information, visit rrb.gov under the publications tab.

Source: RRB.gov

Vote 2022

Thanks to all of our members who took the time to exercise their civic right and duty and voted. If you watched any of the election news, you couldn't help but realize just how much "every vote counts." It's not just a slogan, it is a reality.

Congratulations

President Pierce has appointed Brother Sean Simon, BLET Division 226 (Newark, NJ), to fill the position of Director of Legislative and Regulatory Affairs, effective July 25, 2022, replacing Brother Eric Gabaldon. Most recently, Brother Sean served as Chairman of the New Jersey State Legislative Board

having been re-elected in 2020. *Source: BLET News Flash*

A Heartfelt Goodbye

This will be my last legislative update as I believe it is time for me to ride off into the sunset (and my husband agrees). I have treasured my time serving the Auxiliary as your National Legislative Rep. and your National President, as well as this position of Assistant Legislative Rep. The invaluable opportunities I would have never been able to experience otherwise will stay with me forever, as well as all of the wonderful people I have met over the last 25 years. Keep the faith and never give up the fight! Wishing you a blessed Thanksgiving, Christmas, and holiday season. Vaya con Dios, mis amigos!

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