

# Bridging the Divide: HLAA Is Uniting Veterans...Virtually

BY ERIN MIRANTE



Veterans who attended the HLAA2018 Convention were invited to an impromptu meeting to discuss how they could support other veterans with hearing loss. Out of that meeting came the idea for the HLAA Veterans Across America Virtual Chapter.

Hearing loss is not something isolated to only one region or place; it is present in every community across the United States. HLAA relies heavily on our chapters as valuable extensions of the national organization in order to serve as many local communities as we can. However, we can't be everywhere. We have more than 150 chapters across the country, but that still leaves many areas where HLAA Members don't have access to a local chapter.

Further, in local chapters the common denominators that bring people together are location and the fact that members have a hearing loss. But what happens when a group of people with hearing loss have something besides location in common? In fact, what if these people were spread all over the country?

## HLAA Veterans (Virtually) Unite

There are several groups that fall into this category, one of them being military veterans. HLAA Members who are also veterans are obviously not all located in one place. While they might be involved in their community—perhaps as a member of a local chapter—they also have a special bond



and unique experiences to share with each other about their hearing loss. So how could we address that?

At the HLAA2018 Convention in Minneapolis, a group of veterans got together for an impromptu meeting to discuss this

very issue and to prove that with a bit of tenacity, enthusiasm, technology, and the desire to assist other veterans with hearing loss, distance is a barrier that can be overcome.

Out of that meeting was born a concept which allows people—in this case veterans—to belong to a chapter without leaving the comfort of their own home. HLAA is proud to introduce the very first online “virtual” chapter: HLAA Veterans Across America Virtual Chapter.

The HLAA Veterans Across America Virtual Chapter is a pilot for what we believe will be an exciting and viable new option for individuals looking for support, camaraderie, information, and education but who don't have the opportunity to join a traditional chapter. Virtual chapters provide the benefit of accessibility and the opportunity for members to engage with their chapter network outside of a physical meeting space. We are confident that this concept opens up new opportunities for both present and future chapters and members all over the country.

## Getting Connected

Utilizing the team management software Basecamp, members of a virtual chapter can log on remotely, collaborate with others on projects, join discussions, delegate tasks, store documents in a library, and more. The functionality of Basecamp paired with its intuitive framework makes it the perfect place to grow and develop an online chapter.

Chapter meetings are held via a video conferencing platform called Zoom, which also allows live captioning using CART. Through Zoom, meeting attendees can ask questions, chat with others, and collaborate on ideas and projects regardless of where they are.

The HLAA Veterans Across America Virtual Chapter had its very first meeting on September 26 via Zoom. The meeting was attended by 11 chapter members. I also participated, along with HLAA staff members Nancy Macklin and Dave Hutcheson. Everyone was aware that this was uncharted territory and that we would all be learning and developing the chapter together.

We (staff) are staying involved only temporarily. Since this is a new initiative we want to make sure the chapter gets off to a smooth start by being available to answer any questions and making sure everyone is comfortable using the technology. We will eventually step back and give the chapter the autonomy to function on its own.

We know all of our chapters have huge goals and ambitions in mind, and the HLAA Veterans Across America Virtual Chapter is no exception. But those who attended the first meeting were extremely passionate about the cause and helping other veterans; they are ready and excited to not only take on this responsibility, but to seize an opportunity.

## But Is It Really a Chapter?

The formation of a virtual chapter will follow the same process as any other physical chapter and will be recognized as such. They must go through the same start-up process, which includes finding at least four other members of HLAA who are interested in becoming involved. Founding members will still be required to create their own bylaws, budgets, committees, and file for their own Employer Identification Number (EIN) and obtain 501(c)(3) status to be able to accept tax-deductible charitable donations.

We hope to continue developing virtual online chapters to reach other groups with similar challenges as veterans, including young adults, working professionals, those who are unable to attend meetings due to their location, and individuals interested in joining an online chapter in addition to a local one. There is already so much strength in HLAA's network of chapters, and

now it is time to see if we can utilize online platforms to continue increasing our presence in local communities and across the nation.

If you are a veteran, caregiver, or anyone else interested or involved in helping veterans with hearing loss, please contact me for more information about joining the HLAA Veterans Across America Virtual Chapter.

We are looking forward to the growth we anticipate in the coming months, and can't wait to welcome new veterans into the group! **HL**

*Erin Mirante is the HLAA national chapter and membership coordinator. She can be reached at [emirante@hearingloss.org](mailto:emirante@hearingloss.org).*

## Starkey Hearing Technologies: How We Made It Happen

Launching the new HLAA Veterans Across America Virtual Chapter would not have been possible without the generous support of



Starkey Hearing Technologies. As a longtime supporter of veterans with hearing loss—and HLAA—Starkey believed in the mission and concept for the chapter and agreed to sponsor this new venture without hesitation. "No veteran should have to face hearing loss alone. I'm proud Starkey Hearing Technologies is working with HLAA to give our nation's heroes the resources, information and support they deserve," said Brandon Sawalich, president of Starkey Hearing Technologies.

Starkey's sponsorship meant the chapter was able to hit the ground running. It allows the chapter to subscribe to Basecamp and Zoom, essential communication platforms that facilitate the online meeting space, and covers CART expenses for the monthly chapter meetings. Starkey's total sponsorship package will cover these expenses for a minimum of three years. Not only does Starkey proudly sponsor this chapter and veterans with hearing loss, they regularly communicate their support and dedication to assisting the chapter via various social media platforms.

New endeavors cannot succeed without a solid foundation on which to build, and we are fortunate to have such a dedicated network of sponsors. A huge *Thank You* to Starkey Hearing Technologies for making the HLAA Veterans Across America Virtual Chapter possible! Not only does this offer veterans a new resource and educational opportunity, it also paves the way for future virtual chapters to do the same.