

VALT reaches out to veterans

by Marcella Durand

Vietnam War veteran John Spacek did not learn until 26 years after his first exacerbation that his MS could be service-connected. He swore to himself that when he finally received his veteran's benefits, he would help other vets with MS.

"When my chapter asked me if I wanted to be part of the MS Veterans Action Leadership Team, I said **yes!**" he said. Spacek spent over five years tracking down medical records and witnesses to prove his MS was service-related. "I just persisted," he said. MS may be classified as service-related within seven years of separation from the military. Veterans might still be eligible after seven years, but must have a diagnosis directly linking symptoms to MS during the seven years.

The MS Veterans Action Leadership Team, or VALT, began in March 2009 as a collaborative effort by the Society's North Carolina chapters. Many veterans with MS in the South and beyond don't know that the VA may provide disability benefits to them. Even if they do know, the process of applying may seem impossibly daunting to do alone. VALT helps to educate and assist them.

"I never knew I could apply

The MS Veterans Action Leadership Team is getting the word out to veterans with MS about benefits they may be eligible for.

until someone just happened to mention it to me," said Deanna Deschenes, who served in the Navy for almost 8 years. "VALT put me in touch with Paralyzed Veterans of America, who gave me tons of guidance with the paperwork—and there is **a lot** of paperwork. Just having someone behind you telling you what step to take next is tremendous."

In order to reach more veterans in North and South Carolina, VALT produced a brochure that includes information on benefits eligibility, tips on how to begin the application process,

resources and more. "We're very proud of it," said VALT co-chair Lori McKee, a Gulf War veteran diagnosed in 2002.

VALT serves a limited area, but members have met with congressional representatives to get its message across more widely. "Their response has been wonderful and engaging," said Abby Carter Emanuelson, director of Public Policy for the North Carolina chapters. The new brochure will be available as a template that other regions can modify and print.

VALT shares its information and resources with MS Navigators at the Society's toll-free number, 1-800-344-4867, or visit nationalMSsociety.org/veterans.

Marcella Durand is an associate editor of **Momentum**.



From left, Abby Emanuelson, Congressman G.K. Bufferfield, Lori McKee and Elizabeth Page.