LEGION GIVES HOPE TO VETERANS

The Legion’s Veterans Benefits Center in Florida helped 175 veterans receive answers about VA benefits claims, financial assistance and more.

By Steve Brooks

In its effort to continue helping veterans enroll in VA health care, schedule VA medical appointments, file VA disability or pension benefits claims and more, the American Legion kicked off the new year with a Veterans Benefits Center (VBC) in Bay Pines, Fla. Legion staff worked alongside VA employees during the two-day event in January at the C.W. Bill Young VA Medical Center, providing assistance to 175 veterans.

Michael Rose, a U.S. Navy veteran, had been trying to get a service-connected disability rating since having two replacement surgeries on the same knee. After meeting with American Legion service officer Louis George during the VBC, he was able to get an immediate temporary disability rating of 100 percent. “(It means) everything,” Rose said. “I’ve been without for quite a long time now, so this is going to help me a lot. I never had any idea that this is what (the Legion does). It almost feels like I’m back in the military where you have brothers trying to help brothers, sisters trying to help sisters. Receiving help such as I did, it reassures the fact that people care and that the American Legion is truly out to be an organization of help and to be an organization of change for fellow Americans.”

Legionnaire James Stewart drove 170 miles to attend the Legion’s town hall meeting, which took place two days prior to the VBC. Stewart, a post and district service officer and member of Post 117 in Palm Bay, told staff at the meeting that he had been waiting on a ruling on an appeal he filed in 2012. The next day, Stewart got a call “like they promised me about my case and suggested I come over (to the VBC) and bring my military records,” Stewart said. (Legion service officer Ron Abrams) was a big help. He got everything straightened out, and one of the (VA) rating
COMMANDER’S MESSAGE

A family of passionate, dedicated advocates

There is a popular movie now playing in the theaters called “Selma” that tells the story of Martin Luther King and the civil rights movement. Dr. King did a lot of great things, but I believe his “I Have a Dream” speech is at the top of his list.

The civil rights movement was successful not just because it was morally correct but because it was comprised of passionate and dedicated advocates. The American Legion Family owes our success to passionate and dedicated advocates who work for causes greater than our individual selves.

For example, Legion founder Earl Dickerson became the first black graduate of the University of Chicago Law School in 1920, he helped organize George L. Giles Post 87 that’s still in existence, and he argued against the practice of allowing Legion departments to approve (or disapprove) post charters for fear that some may not have approved black posts’ charters like that of Post 87.

It’s because of Legion advocates like Dickerson that the Legion was once 3.3 million members strong.

I have a dream that we become a four million member American Legion Family that consists of Legionnaires, Auxiliary members, Sons of The American Legion members and Legion Riders. At four million strong, we will better be able to advocate for our Four Pillars and the needs of our veterans and servicemembers.

If The American Legion Family isn’t here to advocate for our veterans and servicemembers, who will? There is strength in numbers and the Legion’s numbers can and need to grow. Despite recent downward trends in membership, The American Legion is still the most respected, largest and influential veterans service organization in the country. But it is up to all of us to keep it that way.

My national commander’s theme is “Stay the Course,” but I would like to add the words “Step on the Membership Accelerator!”

When you hear me discuss my 4x4 goal, remember that it’s not just about fundraising for the Legion and Auxiliary charities. Without a strong membership, funds and programs become nonexistent.

Mike Helm
National Commander

MEMBERSHIP

National Commander Honor Ribbon

During the 2014-2015 membership year, American Legion National Commander Mike Helm will award his National Commander Honor Ribbon to any American Legion Family that achieves 100 percent membership by June 30, 2015.

For this award, the Legion Family is defined as a post and any combination of an Auxiliary unit, Sons squadron or Legion Riders chapter. Each branch must achieve 100 percent to qualify for the award.

The National Commander Honor Ribbon incentive program will end June 30, 2015, or when supplies are exhausted.

Download the form online: www.legion.org/commander/ribbon

MEMBERSHIP

Recruiters to be honored with ‘Stay On Course’ pin

During the 2014-2015 membership year, American Legion National Commander Mike Helm will award his national commander pin to any Legion Family member who obtains three new members or renews five members into the Legion.

A new member is any eligible person joining for the 2015 membership year who was not a member of the American Legion during the 2014 membership year.

Each member listed must be eligible for membership in The American Legion. Forward names of SAL members or Auxiliary members to your detachment or unit for use in their respective incentive programs.

To maintain the integrity of the national commander’s pin incentive program, only one pin will be awarded per individual.

Upon receipt, national membership staff will confirm the names and mail the pin directly to the person who earned it. Commander Helm’s pin incentive program will end June 30, 2015, or when supplies are exhausted.

www.legion.org/commander/pin
Creating a legacy worth remembering

The following is Department of Kansas Adjutant Charles Yunker’s recent column from the department’s monthly newsletter. It’s a reminder of the importance of remembering how we got here as we look for ways to move forward and create a legacy worth remembering every year.

Daniel S. Wheeler

In The American Legion Department of Kansas Sunflower Legioinnaire newsletter, I added the title “For God and Country” to my column to examine and explain each segment of the Legion’s Preamble to the Constitution, which begins with those same words. Admittedly, I have strayed from that task in recent months, but I intend to return to it in the future. Until then, I want to acknowledge those who gave us our Preamble.

Sadly our founders are no longer with us, but their impact and the tools they laid out still serve us well. Much like the U.S. Constitution, the constitution and by-laws of The American Legion were crafted by very gifted and visionary individuals. And they didn’t just stop with the Preamble or by-laws; they gave us programs that have touched the lives of millions (of veterans, servicemembers, their families and youth). A few programs include American Legion Baseball, Boys State and Boys Nation, and the Oratorical Contest. They too drafted the first U.S. Flag Code and GI Bill of Rights which were adopted by Congress. These programs can be traced directly back to the efforts of our nation’s World War I veterans who organized the first congressionally chartered veterans service organization.

One of the first steps of the organization was to recognize service to our nation in the military regardless of where you served. During the Paris Caucus (March 1919), our founders didn’t forget those back in America who kept them supplied with everything they needed in the trenches. They realized whether you were drafted or volunteered, more often than not you had little to say about where you were stationed. If you served honorably during the Great War, you were eligible for Legion membership. A veteran is a veteran regardless of gender, race, color, creed, or where they served.

Like many, I agree our nation’s World War II veterans were our greatest generation. But don’t forget the heroic generation before them, the founders of The American Legion, who gave World War II veterans the tools to take America from a war-torn economy to a time of peace by helping them aid the nation in avoiding a recession or perhaps even returning to the pre-war depression.

They did it by providing the original GI Bill of Rights, also known as the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944. The bill enabled about 20 million World War II veterans to buy houses and earn college degrees, thereby helping to create America’s post-war middle class.

My intention is to remind every (Legion) member that like the Sons of The American Legion’s Preamble begins, they should be a “Proud possessor of a priceless heritage” that was provided by our founders.

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www.legion.org/washingtonconference

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ASh A SERVICE OFFICER

Special monthly compensation eligibility

Q. Am I eligible for a special monthly compensation?
A. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Special Monthly Compensation (SMC) program may provide benefits in addition to, or instead of, disability compensation if there is loss (or loss of use of) a limb, sight, speech, hearing, mobility, sexual organ or functioning, or for certain other disabilities. There may be eligibility for SMC if the veteran is unable to leave the house or bed without help or is in need of regular help from another person in performing the basic tasks of everyday life, such as eating, bathing, dressing and transferring.

SMC compensates for non-economic losses, such as personal inconvenience and loss of use of a body part or body system. SMC is one of the most complex VA programs. There are about 60 levels of SMC divided into nine letter categories (K-T). If you get SMC, the VA will tell you which of these categories you qualify for. Some of the letter categories also have in between levels. The two most common SMC letters are:
- K: Anatomical loss of either one hand, one foot, both buttocks, one or more creative organs used for reproduction due to trauma while in the service (or as a residual of service-connected disabilities), one eye, voice due to disease or deafness of both ears.
- S: Veteran has a 100 percent service-connected disability; a qualifying, additional service-connected disability (or disabilities) that is separate from the first disability and is independently rated at 60 percent; or is approved for VA disability compensation. Or, disabilities must directly cause the veteran to be confined to home. Also, it must be certain that a veteran’s disability or disabilities and confinement will continue for the rest of his or her life.

Because VA's Special Monthly Compensation program is one of the most confusing and intricate programs that the VA offers, it is important that you seek assistance from an accredited veterans service officer.

Find an American Legion service officer: www.legion.org/serviceofficers

CENTENNIAL CELEBRATION SPOTLIGHT

Post 513 in Thibodaux, La.

The Raymond Stafford American Legion Post 513 was chartered in 1947 by 26 “concerned black” World War I and II veterans. Due to segregation, the veterans could not join an existing American Legion post in Thibodaux.

Post 513 was one of many black Legion posts being chartered in Louisiana with the number 500, which was used to distinguish the all black posts. While the number 500 no longer signifies race, the department did offer all posts the opportunity to change their numbers “to get rid of the stigma.”

Post 513 did not change its number because it “would have to get a new charter and lose years of history.”

Gerald Theriot, the 2011-2012 American Legion national chaplain, is a member of Post 513. He has served as the Department of Louisiana’s chaplain since 1997.

Share Your Post’s Legacy

Upload photos, print material and videos related to your post’s history on the Legion’s Centennial Celebration web page: www.centennial.legion.org

From Legion gives hope to veterans on Page 1

Officers has the statement of claim to clear everything up and hopefully move everything forward.”

Stewart said seeing the work the Legion is doing in his home state gave him a great sense of pride. “I’m an advocate for The American Legion because I know at our national level they’re working very hard to protect veterans.”

George Ervin, who served in the U.S. Navy from 2001-2004, came to the center to find out about a claim he’d filed relating to a VA Compensation & Pension Exam he underwent last summer. He left the center feeling he’d taken positive steps toward resolving the claim. “It has been frustrating not being able to see someone about my condition in a timely manner and address the issues that I have,” Ervin said. “It’s great to actually have that personal contact (at the VBC), to sit down and speak to someone and for someone to seem concerned about your issues that you’re having and actually wanting to do something about it.”

Providing that face to face interaction is important, said Suzanne M. Klinker, director of the C.W. Bill Young VAMC.

“This experience in partnership with the Bay Pines VA Healthcare System and The American Legion has opened the door even more for veterans to come in for patient advocacy, whether it be about their health-care claims, perhaps about cemetery administrations – it’s really a wonderful way to partner with an important stakeholder,” she said.

“Both organizations are all about the veteran. They want to do what’s right for the veteran and honor their service by providing them with the care and benefits they deserve.”

The American Legion will be hosting more VBC’s throughout the year. Visit www.legion.org for the announcement of when and where.

During The American Legion’s Veterans Benefits Center in Bay Pines, the Legion’s Operation Comfort Warriors (OCW) program provided nearly $3,000 worth of items, including tennis shoes, cases of water, sleeping bags, canned food, toiletries and other essentials to 96 homeless veterans involved with the Bay Pines VA Medical Center’s Homeless Patient Aligned Care Team program.

Legion staff also visited the nearby Society of St. Vincent de Paul homeless shelter, which works with VA to provide housing options for veterans. At the facility, Legion staff handed out 17 backpacks filled with toiletries purchased through OCW.
LEGION CHARITIES

Legion named official charity of country music festival

The American Legion will once again serve as the official charity of the Tree Town Music Festival – an annual country music event held Memorial Day weekend in Forest City, Iowa.

For the second year, American Legion service officers from Iowa and Minnesota will be onsite to meet with veterans and their families to help them with their Department of Veterans Affairs benefits and health-care interests. Legion charity Soldier's Wish will also be in attendance, granting wishes to soldiers, veterans and their families as a way to honor them for their bravery and sacrifice to our country.

“The continued support of the Tree Town Music Festival is a great display of patriotism,” Department of Iowa Commander Ron Struble said. “We look forward to spending the weekend leading up to Memorial Day at Tree Town Music Festival with veterans and their families while remembering our fallen heroes who have paid the ultimate price for our nation’s freedom.”

Tree Town Music Festival, May 21-24, will feature performances by country music stars Blake Shelton, Dierks Bentley, Rascal Flatts, Lee Brice, Eli Young Band, Thomas Rhett, Chase Rice, Maddie & Tae, Danielle Bradbery, Old Dominion, Casey Muesigmann, The Last Ride, Joe Denim, Hairball, Williams & Ree and more. The American Legion will also have a stage, featuring musicians .38 Special, Chris Hawkey, Iowa native Ben Lau and others. The grounds of the event will have food and beverage vendors, rock climbing, zip lines and much more.

Single-day tickets are now available for $35 for May 21 and $80 for May 22, 23 and 24. Four-day passes are $150 and VIP tickets are $525 until April 6.

To purchase tickets, visit www.treetownfestival.com or call (877) 569-7767.

MEMBERSHIP

Legionnaires greet, comfort traveling servicemembers

When active-duty military men and women traveled through Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport this past holiday season, they were greeted by faces who understood their service and sacrifice – Legionnaires.

American Legion Department of Georgia Legionnaires have volunteered their time in Delta’s Military Lounge at the airport for the past eight years. They help servicemembers with flight changes, provide comfortable accommodations and talk to them about their service.

“When we first started volunteering in Delta’s Military Lounge, there were a lot of men and women coming back from Iraq or Afghanistan, and they were just young, terrified kids,” said Tommy Hatton, a Legion Rider and member of Post 64 in Loganville, Ga. “It was good to have us Legionnaires there who have been through some of the same things that these servicemembers could relate to. It has given us an opportunity as Legionnaires to help some of these men and women understand, particularly ones who have lost a friend in combat, on how to deal with that.”

Delta’s Military Lounge, which was created 45 years ago and is only open during the holiday season, provides food, entertainment and sleeping accommodations for service members’ layovers. The Department of Georgia got involved with the lounge simply by calling Delta and asking. Now, about 25 Legionnaires volunteer at Delta’s Military Lounge where Hatton said he has handed out nearly 3,000 Legion membership applications.

“The first thing we hit on is, ‘Are you a Legionnaire?’,” he said. “We talk a lot about the Legion, what it does and how it can help them.”

Did you know?

- In 2014, The American Legion National Headquarters Membership Division conducted 107 post revitalization efforts in 32 departments, which resulted in 12,602 DMS members being transferred into 1,536 local posts. www.legion.org/membership

- The American Legion's Emblem Sales website is mobile friendly for smartphone users, allowing easier viewing and purchasing of flags, Legion apparel and more. www.emblem.legion.org
On Feb. 3, the Senate approved the Clay Hunt Suicide Prevention for American Veterans Act, S. 167 – a bill named after a Marine veteran who had post-traumatic stress disorder and committed suicide in 2011. It now heads to the White House for President Barack Obama to sign.

The measure, which passed the House on Jan. 12, would require the Pentagon and Department of Veterans Affairs to submit to independent reviews of their suicide prevention programs and make information on suicide prevention more easily available to veterans. It also would offer financial incentives to psychiatrists and other mental health professionals who agree to work for the VA and help military members as they transition from active duty to veteran status.

House passes Hire More Heroes Act

On Jan. 6, the House of Representatives passed the Hire More Heroes Act of 2015, H.R. 22, by a vote of 412-0. This measure is aimed at encouraging companies to hire more American veterans by allowing veterans who are covered by VA health care or TRICARE to not be counted as employees for the purpose of triggering the so-called “employer mandate.”

The Affordable Care Act mandates that employers who employ 50 full-time workers must provide health care, a provision that many view as overly burdensome for small businesses. This law would encourage small businesses to hire veterans by allowing veterans who are otherwise covered to not count toward the numbers for the purposes of the mandate.

The Senate introduced a companion measure, S.12.

Senate passes Keystone XL Pipeline bill

On Jan. 29, the Senate approved the bill S. 1, mandating the construction of the Keystone XL Pipeline. The bill has been amended from the version passed by the House and now goes back to the House to be approved as amended. If the House does not accept the amended bill, it will go to a conference committee to resolve the differences. If a conference committee is convened, the final legislation must be approved by both chambers.

“Constructing Keystone would pump billions into our economy,” said Sen. Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.). “It would support thousands of good American jobs and as the president’s own State Department has indicated, it would do this with minimal environmental impact.”

Obama has vowed to veto the bill. His official response is the administration is awaiting an environmental review by the U.S. Department of State.
MEMBERSHIP INCENTIVES AND AWARDS

POST EXCELLENCE AWARD CONTINUES

The Post Excellence Award program honors posts that show excellence in membership participation, youth activities, community service, and support to veterans and U.S. troops.

Criteria

- **Membership.** Post membership must be at least one member more than the previous year. A post officer must attend district meetings.

- **Youth activities.** The post must sponsor and actively participate in at least one primary youth program: Boys State, Legion Baseball, Oratorical Contest, Boy Scouts of America or Junior Shooting Sports.

- **Community service.** The post must organize a community service project that involves members of the Legion, Auxiliary or Sons of The American Legion. A monetary donation may only be one part of a project.

- **Service to troops or veterans.** The post must organize a project supporting troops or veterans (for example, Family Support Network or Operation Comfort Warriors) that involves members of the Legion, Auxiliary or SAL outside the post. A monetary donation may only be one part of a project.

Certification. District commanders must certify posts as having fulfilled the four specified criteria, and submit a list of the post’s name, number, address and commander’s name to department headquarters. If possible, accompany with copies of press releases submitted to local media that raise awareness for the projects and enhance the Legion’s public image.

Awards. Each qualifying post, as well as district commanders whose districts have at least 50 percent of posts reach certification, will receive a certificate of recognition.

www.legion.org/commander/postexcellence

DISTRICT COMMANDER RACE-TO-THE-TOP

The District Commander Race-to-the-Top award is given to district commanders who attain at least 100 percent of the district’s assigned membership objective by March 31, 2015. Competition is divided into five categories:

- **Category I** – districts of 15,1,499 members
- **Category II** – districts of 1,500-2,999 members
- **Category III** – districts of 3,000-4,999 members
- **Category IV** – districts of 5,000-7,499 members
- **Category V** – districts of 7,500 or more members

**First Place Award** is a trip to the 97th National Convention in Baltimore, Aug. 28 to Sept. 3. The award will be presented to the top district commander and guest in each category whose district membership on March 31 represents the greatest percentage over the final previous year membership of that district. Cannot be less than 100 percent to qualify. This entitles each winner and guest to a trip to attend the national convention as a distinguished guest of the national commander, including round-trip airfare, tickets to the National Commander’s Banquet, and hotel accommodations for six days/five nights. These district commanders will also be awarded a Legion cap that signifies they are a Race-to-the-Top winner and ribbons will be awarded for each of the district’s posts.

**Second Place Award** is presented to the district commander in each category whose district membership on March 31 represents the second highest percentage over the final previous year membership of that district. Cannot be less than 100 percent to qualify. A $500 check will be awarded.

**Third Place Award** is presented to the district commander in each category whose district membership on March 31 represents the third highest percentage over the final previous year membership of that district. Cannot be less than 100 percent to qualify. A $375 check will be awarded.

A MESSAGE FROM MEMBERSHIP

“It’s critical that once you transfer a department holding post member into a local post that you show the member the difference between the two posts and that’s through engagement. That’s through involvement in post activities. That’s through rising up through the hierarchy of a post and sitting in the chairs and taking a leadership role and responsibility.”

Learn more about membership messages from watching American Legion videos online: www.legion.org/recruiting
Gold Brigade spotlight: Ken Teunissen of South Dakota

Three-time American Legion Gold Brigade Award recipient Ken Teunissen of Post 15 in Sioux Falls, S.D., recruited 318 new members into the Legion in 2014. And he has already recruited enough to earn his fourth Gold Brigade Award for 2015. Teunissen credits his recruiting success to searching for and contacting expired members found on mylegion.org, speaking with veterans at local events, and handing out P-38’s (a small can opener).

When Teunissen is recruiting potential Legion members at the grocery store, church, job fairs, veteran stand downs, car races, state fairs and National Guard/Army and Navy reserve drills, he hands out plastic bags with a P-38 in them, thanking the veteran for his or her service on behalf of The American Legion.

“This (the P-38) is the ice breaker. They will think of their days when they were in the service,” Teunissen said. “I shake their hand, thank them for their service and ask the question if they are a member of The American Legion. If not, I ask them if they have ever considered becoming a member. I have a Why You Should Belong brochure ready to fill out the membership application.”