LEGION AIRS ON THE BIG SCREEN

Four Pennsylvania posts sponsor a Legion membership recruitment ad that’s showed on eight movie screens.

By The American Legion

Tom Lawson was watching television when a membership recruitment commercial for a veterans service organization aired. With membership at the forefront of American Legion departments, districts and posts nationwide, the commercial sparked an idea for Lawson — airing Legion membership recruitment ads in movie theaters.

“Our post has been trying everything we can do to get membership up,” said Lawson, adjutant of Post 674 in Mt. Holly, Pa. “I don’t know what else to do, so I thought about a movie theater ad and thought why not try and see if it works.”

Lawson first contacted the director at Regal Cinemas Commons 8 in Carlisle, and they were on board to feature a Legion ad for $2,000, which included the theater creating the ad and a six-month airing. He then spoke to three other nearby posts to get their input and buy-in to help pay for the ad. Besides Post 674, the other posts sponsoring the ad include Post 109 in Mechanicsburg, Post 421 in Newville, and Post 223 in Shippensburg.

The 15-second Legion recruitment ad promotes the Legion Family and directs people to “The American Legion of Cumberland County PA” Facebook page. To view the ad, visit the Facebook page. It has been airing on eight movie screens and two entryway screens at Regal Cinemas Commons 8 since Feb. 6. In total, the ad will be displayed 49,000 times over the course of six months.

After six months, the four posts will evaluate the ads success with an option to renew.

“We really want to get the younger veterans and feel this is a great way to reach them,” Lawson said. “The younger veterans need our help more than anything.”
COMANDER’S MESSAGE

Help lawful immigrants prepare for citizenship

In 2008, The American Legion adopted Resolution 12, Task Force on New Americans, which calls upon American Legion posts to support the efforts of the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) – the federal government agency that oversees lawful immigration to the United States. And Resolution 31, passed during the 2014 Spring Meetings, also encourages posts to assist legal immigrants seeking the path to naturalized U.S. citizenship.

Last fall I met with the Chief of Staff for the Office of Citizenship at USCIS and returned from that meeting extremely enthused at the opportunities available to Legion posts to work in collaboration with USCIS to promote and support the naturalization process for immigrants seeking the lawful path to citizenship.

Posts throughout the country often host naturalization orientation sessions to help teach proficiency in the English language and lessons in U.S. history and civics. To encourage other posts to follow this tradition of helping lawful immigrants assimilate into our society, The American Legion has created the “Citizenship Outreach Guide.”

The guide can be downloaded for free online under Americanism:

www.legion.org/publications

The guide provides several examples of how posts can collaborate with USCIS to celebrate and honor lawful immigrants. For example, posts can hold naturalization information sessions; provide a color guard during naturalization ceremonies; host a welcome reception or naturalization oath ceremony; tutor immigrants with reading or writing; and more.

The guide also provides resources on how posts can promote citizenship and immigrant integration in their local communities. Failure to embrace new immigrants into society can be divisive to a community, and it can promote racial and cultural bias. The American Legion strives to uphold a commitment to mentoring candidates for U.S. citizenship and supporting their assimilation into local communities.

Share how your post is helping lawful immigrants assimilate into society:

www.legiontown.org

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

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
NATIONAL ADJUTANT’S MESSAGE

‘A clean, wholesome sport’ for youth

Idaho junior rifle club prospers with only eight targets for 60 shooters.

By Daniel S. Wheeler

This year marks the 25th anniversary of The American Legion’s Junior 3-Position Air Rifle National Championship in Colorado Springs, Colo., at the Olympic Training Center’s shooting range facilities. The Legion’s Shooting Sports program teaches youth the basic elements of gun safety, education, marksmanship and competition. And for 18-year-old Mitchell Van Patten, the Legion’s 2011 sporter champion, the program also taught him social skills.

“Right after winning I was invited to the national convention (in Minneapolis) and that was a huge stepping stone for me because I hadn’t done any public speaking before I was on the convention stage in front of thousands of people,” Van Patten said. “That was a good way for me to get out of my shell.”

Van Patten shoots for the Meridian (Idaho) Optimist Rifle Club, which is located in an old electrical transformer building that has eight targets, 60 shooters, and a waiting list every year with no advertising.

“The primary mission of this club is to teach as many kids as possible safe gun handling skills and rifle marksmanship skills,” said Brent Van Patten, Mitchell’s father and one of the club’s 15 coaches.

With 60 shooters and only eight targets, each Meridian Optimist Junior Rifle Club shooter is assigned one shift a week to practice for almost two hours. Registration is $100 for 26 weeks and that includes a gun, sling and pellets, all purchased through funds provided by Meridian Post 113.

“I love working with kids, and this is such a good, clean, wholesome sport and activity,” said Stan Lupkes, a member of Post 113 and a coach. Lupkes visits Legion posts around the area to discuss the Legion’s Junior Shooting Sports program and what it takes to get one started at the post level. He also encourages post to become affiliated with an existing shooting program, such as 4-H’s program, so youth can participate in the Legion’s Junior 3-Position Air Rifle tournament.

Of the 60 shooters at the Meridian Optimist Junior Rifle Club, about 25 compete in the Legion’s tournament.

“The Legion match is by far the best run, most organized and competitive match,” said Bill Lutz, a coach.

Lutz’s daughter, 16-year-old Casey, won The American Legion’s Francis M. Redington Sportsmanship Award in 2013 for exemplifying good sportsmanship. “What I like about shooting is that you’re always learning,” Casey said. “It’s never going to be perfect, so you always have something to work on to get better.”

Casey hopes to earn a spot in the Legion’s national championship tournament this July, shooting in the precision category.

“When it comes to shooting, we could not found have anything better for our kids to do that they would have benefited more from,” Bill said. “It’s not just about the physical act of shooting. It’s about discipline, self respect, motivation, drive, determination and mental focus.”

View membership standings online

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Post historians who have spent the last membership year chronicling the activities of their post should start finalizing their entries for the first round of judging in the National Post History Contest, which will take place during department conventions this spring and summer.

Entries in the One-Year Post Narrative and One-Year Post Yearbook categories will be judged by the department historian during the convention. Only the first-place finisher in each category, certified as such by the department historian, will be sent to National Headquarters in Indianapolis where it will be judged by a group of past and present department and national historians during Fall Meetings, Oct. 12-15. All department-winning entries must be postmarked to National Headquarters by Sept. 15.

The National Department History Contest for the best narrative and yearbook entries by department historians will also take place during Fall Meetings and those entries must be postmarked by Sept. 15 as well.

Now is also a good time to start planning a narrative or yearbook for the next membership year. They can serve as references and templates for future post members to continue the activities and community service that make your post special. Guidelines and advice can be found in the Post Officer’s Guide, found under Internal Affairs, beginning on page 145:

Fun fact: The National Post History Contest was first approved by the National Executive Committee in 1928 and the first competition was held in 1930. Post 41 of Norwalk, Ohio, won the Legion’s first contest when post historian Clark Tucker was credited for his 200-page entry, beating out more than 50 entries in the last stage. His prize was a “motion picture camera” according to the September 1930 issue of The American Legion Magazine.
AMERICANISM

A month of celebrating children and youth

The American Legion has celebrated “April is Children & Youth Month” for the past 77 years by supporting and promoting its national theme – “Children... Our Most Precious Natural Resource.” During this month of celebration, American Legion Family members are encouraged to show their local communities the Legion’s commitment to young people by hosting youth activities or by becoming involved in programs and organizations that support young people.

For ideas on how to support and promote Children & Youth Month in your community, download a copy of the “April is Children & Youth Month” brochure found under Americanism: www.legion.org/publications

Legion Family members can promote Children & Youth Month awareness through their local newspapers, radio and TV stations, civic groups, schools, social media, and in conversations with other veterans and their families. Communities need to know that American Legion services are available and why young people matter so much to us.

For the past four years, Legion Family members at American Legion Post 371 in Valparaiso, Neb., have hosted an event in late April at the post for Operation Military Kids and other local community youth. The children enjoy lunch, firetruck and hay rides, crafts, a petting zoo, a bounce house, face painting and a magic show. They also write Mother’s Day and Father’s Day cards for their parents and visit with members of the state and local police department.

“Our intentions were to give the kids the experience of meeting a deputy in person in a friendly atmosphere so if there was ever a time of need, they would not be intimidated with talking with a law official,” said Don Suchy, member of Post 371 and Ohio’s 13th District POW/MIA Legion Riders chairman. Suchy’s wife and Auxiliary Unit 371 member, Marge, said, “The afternoon is a very rewarding experience for the children and youth, as well as the volunteers. Our goal is to provide an afternoon of fun for all the kids with a lifetime of memories.”

Last April, Sons of The American Legion Squadron 331 in Omaha, Neb., donated 186 GI Josh Dog gift sets to patients at the local Children’s Hospital & Medical Center. The squadron raised nearly $7,000 to purchase the GI Josh Dog gift sets, which featured a golden retriever toy dog, a dog house and a book called “I’ll Be O.K.” Squadron 331 members and several other Legion Family members delivered the dogs to every child at the hospital to bring them comfort, security and companionship during their road to recovery.

Visit www.legiontown.org to share how your post, unit or squadron supported Children & Youth Month.

LEGION RIDERS

1,700 black balloons soar for POW/MIAs

Ralph Tharpe of Parma, Ohio, started the American Legion Riders POW/MIA Rittman Run and balloon launch in 2008 — an event open to the public that has grown to 750 riders. The riders are escorted by police for 35 miles to a solemn POW/MIA ceremony at Western Reserve National Cemetery in Rittman.

Until last year, the August event featured 300 black balloons released by hand during the ceremony to “symbolize the souls of all POW/MIAs,” said Tharpe, a member of Post 627 and Ohio’s 13th District POW/MIA Legion Riders chairman. Now, with the release of a cord, a 21-foot tall POW/MIA balloon sends 1,700 black balloons into the sky in remembrance of all POW/MIAs still unaccounted for from the Revolutionary War to the Vietnam War.

“People kept saying I was crazy and wasting $3,700 (for the large balloon), but I kept telling them it was for all those who have served and sacrificed,” Tharpe said. “I talked to different companies about sponsoring the balloon, and I accomplished what I started out to do.”

The large POW/MIA balloon, which can hold up to 4,000 balloons, was sponsored by a rent-to-own furniture, electronics and appliances company. Before the 1,700 black balloons are released during the POW/MIA ceremony at Western Reserve National Cemetery, everyone in attendance holds hands and forms a circle while the song “I’m proud to be an American” by Lee Greenwood is played.

“It is truly a beautiful ceremony to experience,” Tharpe said. “I didn’t think the ride would get this big, but word got out that this is a great event. I put my heart into it.”

Last November, the large balloon was featured for two weeks in front of Parma’s City Hall in honor of Veterans Day.

“The balloon served as a reminder to never forget our POW/MIAs till they all come home and the mission is done,” Tharpe said.

This year’s American Legion Riders POW/MIA Rittman Run and balloon launch is Aug. 8. The ride will start at Brook Park (Ohio) Recreation Center at 10 a.m.
Did you know?

- On April 2, the American Battle Monuments Commission (ABMC) is closing its Floral Fund program and will no longer process new floral orders. After April 2, friends and family members will still be able to have flowers placed within ABMC cemeteries, but they must place those orders directly with one of the florists. See a list of florists who provide international delivery online: [www.legion.org/documents/legion/word/florists.docx](http://www.legion.org/documents/legion/word/florists.docx).

  Because many families want to place flowers at their loved ones’ gravesite on Memorial Day, the ABMC will take Floral Fund orders until April 1. For all orders placed prior to April 2, the last day for placement of arrangements will be June 1.

- Anyone can donate a vehicle (car, truck, van, SUV, boat, motorcycle, RV and more) to The American Legion Vehicle Donation Program and a portion of the sales proceeds will benefit American Legion charities and programs. During the Legion’s Fall Meetings last October, Legion leadership approved an alliance with Insurance Auto Auctions (IAA), Inc. IAA accepts vehicles in almost any condition, whether they can be driven or not, in all 50 states.

  To donate your vehicle to The American Legion Vehicle Donation Program, fill out an online form at [www.legion.org/donate/auto](http://www.legion.org/donate/auto) or call (844) 353-4466. You will be contacted within 48 hours for pick-up arrangements. Most vehicles are sold at live auctions to licensed dealers, recyclers and exporters from around the world.

  If you have questions about the donation program, such as when you’ll receive your tax receipt, if you need your vehicle title and more, visit: [www.legion.org/donate/auto/faq](http://www.legion.org/donate/auto/faq).

DATELINE: CAPITOL HILL

2016 VA budget released

On Feb. 2, President Barack Obama released his proposed fiscal year (FY) 2016 federal budget. Presented below is a brief outline of funding levels in a number of accounts in the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).

**Medical care:** For the upcoming fiscal year, which begins on Oct. 1, the discretionary funding for VA medical programs would be set at $63.2 billion, an increase of $4.2 billion over the current year. In addition, a total of $66.6 billion in advance appropriations for FY 2017 was proposed. Included in the medical care programs are: $7.5 billion to expand institutional and non-institutional long-term care for veterans; $7.5 billion to expand veteran inpatient, residential and outpatient mental health care; $1.2 billion for telehealth programs to improve veterans access to VA health care; and $466 million for programs specifically aimed at women veterans.

**Information technology (IT):** The president’s proposal would assign $4.1 billion for VA’s IT programs, an increase of $230 million. This includes cyber security and supports delivery of veterans medical care and benefits. It also includes $233 million aimed at developing an Electronic Healthcare Record to better serve veterans, servicemembers and eligible beneficiaries.

**National Cemetery Administration (NCA):** The NCA would receive $266 million for its operations and maintenance, a $10 million increase over FY 2015. This funding supports the activation of two new national cemeteries in 2015 in Cape Canaveral, Fla., and Tallahassee, Fla., as well as the activation of a third national cemetery next year in Omaha, Neb.

**Veteran homelessness:** The FY 2016 budget requests $1.4 billion for VA homeless-related programs, including case management support for the Department of Housing & Urban Development-VA Supportive Housing program, the Grant and Per Diem program, VA justice programs, and the Supportive Services for Veteran Families program.

**Benefits claims processing:** The president’s budget proposal would fund the Veterans Benefits Administration at $2.7 billion. This amount supports various VA programs to decrease the benefits claims backlog, including the hiring of 770 additional claims processing and fiduciary examiners.

**Construction grants:** These programs—aimed to support construction of state veterans homes and state veterans cemeteries—would receive $1.6 billion under the administration’s proposal. The American Legion has sought increased funding for these two programs, which have essentially been flatlined for a number of years.

**President signs Clay Hunt SAV Act**

On Feb. 12, the president signed into law H.R. 203, the Clay Hunt SAV (Suicide Prevention for America’s Veterans) Act. The bill unanimously passed the House by a recorded vote of 403-0 and was approved by the Senate 99-0. The measure requires the Pentagon and VA to make information on suicide prevention more easily available to veterans. It also offers 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.
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.

| A MESSAGE FROM MEMBERSHIP |
| "Everybody should know that the key to membership retention is what happens at the post level. It’s the engagement of that Legionnaire, it’s the communication from all different levels, and it’s that sense of purpose that I belong to something that’s bigger than me, and we’re accomplishing something." |

Learn more about membership messages from watching American Legion videos online: www.legion.org/recruiting
Michigan post displays 150 years of military history

About 35 military uniforms had been gathering dust in the basement of American Legion Post 108 in Oxford, Mich., for several years until post member James Parkhurst made it his mission in 1993 to display history for all to see. Now, 22 years later, Parkhurst has inherited 225 military uniforms, an array of weapons and other military artifacts from Oxford locals that span from the American Civil War to Operation Iraqi Freedom, and it’s on display at the post.

Visitors to the museum receive an educational tour about the military artifacts sealed in glass cases from Parkhurst, the curator, and other Legionnaires. Parkhurst enjoys making history come alive for students “because many of the stories that the Post 108 museum chronicles are not taught in schools,” he said. “It’s unique for us to have the museum and to have everyone look at it.”

A Silver Star and Navy Cross recipient uniform is on display, as well as a Devil’s Brigade and Green Beret. There’s also 75 pillow cases embroidered with verses or illustrations of battleships that were sent home from soldiers to their mothers and significant others.