‘WE HAVE TO WORK AS A LEGION FAMILY’

Tennessee Legion Family supports department Auxiliary president’s fundraising project, raises $15,000 for the purchase of three service dogs for local veterans.

By The American Legion

When Anita Darnell was elected as the 2015-16 Tennessee Auxiliary president, she immediately knew what her fundraising project would be—providing a service dog to a local veteran. She also knew it would take the Legion Family working together to raise the $10,000 needed for one dog through Vet Dogs of America.

With the support of the entire Tennessee Legion Family, Darnell not only raised the money for one dog, she raised enough money to purchase three service dogs to benefit Tennessee veterans living with post-traumatic stress, a missing limb or hearing loss.

"It has been very important that the whole Legion Family be a part of this because we are a family and we've been preaching this for years," said Darnell, a member of Unit 287 in Medina. "To do the things that we want to do and to be the organization that we want to be, we have to work as a Legion Family."

After being elected Tennessee Auxiliary president, Darnell asked Department of Tennessee Commander James Patterson if he would help her promote her fundraiser and he said yes. He helped her promote her fundraiser and he was invited to all district meetings with him," Darnell said. Every district meeting Darnell attended she brought along a stuffed dog, which she dressed in Army camo and named "Chris the Vet Dog," and shared what her fundraiser was and how much she was trying to raise.

See 'We have to work as a Legion Family' on Page 3
Accountability at VA

While the Veterans Access, Choice and Accountability Act holds VA officials accountable, the American Legion remains concerned about lack of accountability within VA for employees at all levels of the workforce, not only executives.

WHAT CAN CONGRESS DO?

- Ensure that bonuses for VA senior executives are tied to qualitative and quantitative performance measures that are transparent to the public.
- Request a special prosecutor to investigate and vigorously enforce appropriate repercussions for any VA employees engaged in fraudulent practices in pursuit of bonuses or other awards.
- Continue to offer protections and see to their enforcement, for whistleblowers who step forward to expose mismanagement and other practices that might harm veterans or their families.
- Provide the VA secretary the legal authority to better manage all VA employees and hold them accountable when they fail to perform their duties in a manner befitting of a federal servant, particularly when veterans entrust their care to VA.

A System Worth Saving

The American Legion's knowledge and insight into VA medical care is built on firsthand experience. With more than 3,000 accredited service officers nationwide, thousands of volunteers and tens of thousands of stakeholders in every VA community, the American Legion understands the problems and dynamics confronting veterans and the health-care facilities that exist to serve them.

WHAT CAN CONGRESS DO?

- The American Legion encourages members of Congress and their staffs to attend town hall meetings prior to System Worth Saving site visits and hear firsthand the issues veterans have with their VA care at the local level.
- Members of Congress are asked to review the annual System Worth Saving report to consider the American Legion's findings, understand trends and act on needs in their districts and states, and beyond.

VA recruitment and retention

The American Legion has consistently been concerned about staff shortages of physicians, medical specialists and leadership in the Veterans Health Administration.

WHAT CAN CONGRESS DO?

- The American Legion supports legislation addressing VA's recruitment and retention challenges regarding pay disparities among physicians and medical specialists who are providing direct care to our nation's veterans.
- Congress can direct VA to develop a recruiting and retention strategy to incentivize medical practitioners to practice in rural communities.

The American Legion urges VA to work more comprehensively with community partners when struggling to fill critical shortages within VA's ranks. 

American Legion testimony, during a House Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Health hearing May 13, 2015
21st century health care

The American Legion supported passage of the Veterans Accountability Act as a temporary fix to help veterans get the health care they need. The Legion supports a strong VA that ultimately relies less and less on outside care, rather than move toward vouchers and privatization.

WHAT CAN CONGRESS DO?
- Work with VA to ease access pressure points in the system to reduce long-term reliance on non-VA providers.
- Ensure that non-VA providers are compensated fairly in regions where costs exceed standard federal payment guidelines.
- Ensure VA’s non-VA claims and reimbursement system is automated and using the latest technology. No veteran should receive a letter or call from a collection agency because VA failed to pay the non-VA provider in a timely manner.

Fair benefits for all caregivers

The American Legion, by Resolution 160 passed at the 96th National Convention in Charlotte, N.C., supports the VA providing the same level of benefits to all eligible enrolled veterans, including those who require a caregiver to assist them in their day-to-day health-care needs. VA caregiver benefits should not be limited to post-9/11 generation veterans but expanded to help all eligible and VA-enrolled veterans regardless of when they served.

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Alternative PTSD-TBI care

The American Legion’s TBI/PTSD Committee continues to investigate scientific and medical procedures, including alternative methods, to help veterans suffering from traumatic brain injury and post-traumatic stress disorder.

WHAT CAN CONGRESS DO?
- Provide VA funding necessary to make complementary and alternative treatments part of their programs for veterans suffering from combat-related injuries, such as PTSD, TBI and other mental health and neurological conditions.
- Call on VA and DoD to improve research, screening, diagnosis and treatment of TBI/PTSD, as well as provide oversight and necessary funding to develop joint offices for research collaboration.
- Require DoD and VA to assess and improve their suicide-prevention programs.
- Provide oversight for DoD and VA mental health care services programs, and make available to servicemembers and veterans all possible treatments and therapies to assist them.
- Work with VA to expand PTSD/TBI treatment programs to help entire families of those who are afflicted.
Exposure to hazardous materials

The American Legion has long been at the forefront of advocacy for veterans exposed to environmental hazards. The American Legion’s position has been to:

- Treat the affected veterans.
- Study effects to improve treatment and protect future generations.
- Fully fund research and publicly disclose all instances of contact so affected veterans can seek treatment.

WHAT CAN CONGRESS DO?

- Ensure any new Institute of Medicine findings on possible medical conditions linked with Agent Orange are treated as they have been for the past 20 years.
- Provide equal treatment for all those who served in the Vietnam theater by passing the Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act of 2015 (HR 969 and S. 681).

Veterans at risk for hepatitis C

Multiple studies indicate that the veteran population has the highest prevalence of hepatitis C as compared with other demographics. The American Legion advocates that resources must be made available to the Veterans Health Administration, for treatment and research alike, to take down hepatitis C.

WHAT CAN CONGRESS DO?

- Pass legislation to provide for a statutory presumption of service connection for hepatitis C under certain conditions in service.
- Ensure approved budgets are substantial enough to cover the cost of treatment and care for diseases such as hepatitis C.
- Require VA to provide regular notification to Congress, veterans service organizations and veterans about the prevalence of the condition and the use of new treatments.

A lot of Vietnam veterans can have hep C and either be misdiagnosed or never diagnosed, and have this chronic nausea and other things they can never explain. Now, not only is hep C pretty much curable, but it is surely controllable, so that they can have a good life.

American Legion Past National Commander Marty Conatser, speaking at a hepatitis C screening event at an Illinois American Legion post in May 2015.
Military sexual trauma

The American Legion supports implementation of processes to ensure that all veterans and servicemembers, active duty or VA patients, receive proper and discreet care and assistance when struggling with the effects of military sexual trauma (MST).

WHAT CAN CONGRESS DO?

- Ensure that all VA medical facilities employ MST professionals to conduct professional screening and treatment referrals.
- Require the employment of VA women veterans coordinators who can provide MST sensitivity training for benefits claims processors.
- Direct VA to improve its adjudication process to ensure MST claims are decided uniformly throughout the nation.
- Improve investigation and prosecution of reported cases of MST. DoD is encouraged to examine the underreporting of MST and to permanently maintain records of all reported allegations.
- Pass H.R. 1603, known as the Military Sexual Assault Victims Empowerment Act/Military SAVE Act, which will improve the private treatment of veterans who are victims of MST.

Virtual lifetime electronic record

In 2009, President Obama directed DoD and VA to develop a Virtual Lifetime Electronic Record to ensure a seamless account of a veteran’s health and well-being. The American Legion has long supported a single, interoperable record between VA and DoD, and VA is starting to deliver.

WHAT CAN CONGRESS DO?

- Continue to apply pressure to VA and DoD to deliver on this critical project.
- Ensure the future of the program develops beneficial functionality, such as allowing records to be flagged with injuries on active duty to speed up disability claims processing down the road, include duty assignment locations, and seamless communication not only between all DoD networks but the Veterans Health Administration, Veterans Benefits Administration, Veterans Cemetery Administration, Social Security Administration and other agencies.

"Because a bilateral medical record is not currently available, there is not an ability for a patient’s record to be flagged at the time of injury/illness occurred during military service, which makes it difficult and more time-consuming for DoD/VA physicians and raters to find proof of service connection."

Resolution 105, 96th American Legion National Convention, 2014

Services for women veterans

Substantial growth in the number of women veterans and increasing needs to provide gender-specific care and services led the American Legion to pass Resolution 18 in October 2015, a comprehensive statement to amplify its position that all servicemembers deserve quality health care, including gender-specific care. For 2016, the Legion is conducting a new women veterans survey and holding a major event to pinpoint areas of concern for women veterans.

WHAT CAN CONGRESS DO?

- Pass legislation permanently extending the VA child-care program for veterans.
- Pass legislation to better facilitate the needs of the Department of Veterans Affairs to obtain gender-specific care that includes clinicians, mental health care providers and prosthetics.
Military-to-civilian transitions

Approximately 422,000 U.S. military veterans are unemployed, and many are encountering great difficulty obtaining employment. The American Legion will continue to participate with U.S. Chamber of Commerce Hiring Our Heroes career fairs, Department of Defense career fairs, American Legion-sponsored events and others across the country.

WHAT CAN CONGRESS DO?

- Expansion, enhancement and better integration of Transition Assistance Program services from DoD continue to be needed and should be introduced well in advance of military discharge to better prepare personnel for the shift to civilian life.
- Call for updated performance data to assess compliance with Veterans Preference Hiring Act provisions for federal jobs.

Maintain force strength

Massive cuts to the U.S. defense budget continued through fiscal 2015. The latest two-year budget deal raises the debt limit after the wartime force has been cut significantly by sequestration. Sequestration is not only reducing our military’s end strength but servicemember benefits as well.

WHAT CAN CONGRESS DO?

- The most critical task facing Congress regarding force strength is recognizing the security the United States needs in the face of global extremism and the rise of the Islamic State. Congress cannot allow U.S. military forces to enter a weakened condition, especially at a time of war.
- In fiscal 2018 and beyond, the budget proposes an end to sequestration, and increases in defense resources must be made to ensure the U.S. military is capable of defending and defeating any aggressors against U.S. and allied interests. Congress needs to work to ensure that sequestration ends, without extension, particularly when veterans entrust their care to VA.

Home Loan Guaranty program

Some 19 million veterans have used VA’s Home Loan Guaranty program since 1944 to purchase homes. However, veterans using the program for the first time now pay 2.15 percent (no down payment) of the loan amount. Those using it for a second or subsequent time pay 3.3 percent, while conventional loans are typically about 0.5 percent to 1 percent, according to Bankrate.com.

WHAT CAN CONGRESS DO?

- The American Legion strongly urges Congress to consider either eliminating the funding fee or significantly reducing it. Veterans should not have to make such a significant financial sacrifice to use a benefit they have earned as a result of their service to the United States.
Enhance DVOP/LVER services

The American Legion continues to advocate for change within the Department of Labor’s Veterans’ Employment and Training Service (VETS) program. Reorganization of the Disabled Veterans’ Outreach Program (DVOP) and Local Veterans’ Employment Representatives (LVERs) requires reduction of LVERs and restricting DVOPs to case-manage veterans with barriers to employment.

WHAT CAN CONGRESS DO?

- Congress should seek changes to the Department of Labor VETS policy that now states DVOPs can only see service-connected disabled veterans. DVOPs should see all disabled veterans, regardless if the disability is service connected.
- Veterans should have the option, if they so choose, to see a DVOP or LVER. Current Department of Labor VETS policy states that only veterans meeting certain significant barriers to employment can see DVOPs and LVERs. Congress can urge change in this policy.
- The American Legion supports legislation that calls for VA and state workforce agencies to share responsibilities for all Title 38 veterans’ employment services.
- The American Legion supports the Military Family Stability Act. If enacted, the bill would provide employment and education stability for family members of the active-duty servicemember.

Credentia lization of veterans

Many specialized industries require specific federal and state licenses and credentials but do not recognize military training or experience. When civilian credentialing boards and employers fail to fully recognize military education, training and experience, veterans face reduced chances of obtaining jobs that match their skills, and the civilian workforce cannot take full advantage of the extensive training in which our nation has so greatly invested.

Small business access to capital

The legacy of the original GI Bill is remarkable. But as times change, GI Bill benefits need to evolve. Access to education is no longer the issue it was in the 1940s and ’50s. Today, access to start-up business capital for veteran entrepreneurs is an unmet need for veterans, who may lack equity or collateral but not the capability to succeed in business upon exiting the service.

WHAT CAN CONGRESS DO?

- Support and pass legislation that would expand availability of GI Bill benefits to help veterans with access to small-business capital.

Together with Congress, The American Legion is looking for ways of making it easier for veteran entrepreneurs to access capital so that these folks can grow their small businesses, create jobs and get the nation’s economy back on track.

Joe Sharpe, director, American Legion Veterans Employment & Education Division

WHAT CAN CONGRESS DO?

- The American Legion encourages Congress to eliminate the requirement that Post-9/11 GI Bill recipients use an entire month’s worth of entitlement for a certification or licensing test fee – even when the fee amounts to far less than the full month’s entitlement.
- The American Legion recommends that VA’s credential program approval process be reviewed by the Government Accountability Office to ensure that the credentials approved meet legislative and other standards for legitimate credentialing programs.
- The American Legion’s goal is to reduce the burden for servicemembers, veterans and their spouses concerning obtaining licenses and certifications. Over the past few decades, the share of U.S. workers holding an occupational license has grown sharply. However, the current U.S. licensing regime also creates substantial costs, and requirements for obtaining a license are often not in sync with the skills needed for the job. There is evidence that licensing requirements raise the price of goods and services, restrict employment opportunities and make it more difficult for workers to take their skills across state lines. These are some key points policymakers should consider when making decisions about industry regulation.
Help end veteran homelessness

The Department of Housing and Urban Development showed about 47,000 homeless veterans across the country in January 2015. The American Legion recognizes the need for a coordinated effort that provides housing, meals, physical health care, substance abuse after care and mental health counseling, as well as personal development.

WHAT CAN CONGRESS DO?
■ Continue funding for permanent supportive housing through the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Housing and Urban Development partnership, which provides homeless veterans with housing and case management services.
■ Fund the Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program within the Department of Labor's Veterans Employment and Training Service at the full authorized level of $50 million.
■ Appropriation of funds ($500 million) for the Supportive Services for Veteran Families program, which prevents many veterans from becoming homeless and assists those who need little more than short-term rental assistance and limited case management in getting back on their feet.
■ Support the homeless veterans Grant and Per Diem transitional housing program. This program provides short-term housing help to homeless veterans, allowing them to get connected with jobs, supportive services and more permanent housing, and ultimately become self-sufficient.

Small business federal contracts

The Small Business Administration (SBA) was created in 1953 to encourage and promote small business growth, and to foster free-market competition.

WHAT CAN CONGRESS DO?
■ The American Legion urges Congress to fully fund SBA Office of Veterans Business Development's programs, such as Boots 2 Business, Veterans Business Outreach Centers, Reboot and WISE, to name a few.
■ The American Legion urges Congress to assess the performance of federal agencies in living up to the mandate to make no less than 3 percent of federal contracts available to service-disabled veteran-owned businesses.

Vocational training, employment

Vocational Rehabilitation & Employment (VR&E) services are a responsibility of the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA), and effective employment programs through VR&E must become a higher priority.

WHAT CAN CONGRESS DO?
■ Ensure that adequate funding is provided to properly staff Vocational Rehabilitation & Employment services of the VBA.

Protect the U.S. flag

Since the American Revolution, millions of men and women have proudly defended this nation under the Stars and Stripes.

There is hardly a more poignant image of the sacrifices made by America's heroes in defense of this nation than a U.S. flag draped over a deceased servicemember's coffin, the last full measure of respect to those who have made the ultimate sacrifice. However, since the U.S. Supreme Court's 5-4 decision in Texas v. Johnson in 1989, the American people have been denied the ability to make laws protecting this great symbol of our nation from desecration.

WHAT CAN CONGRESS DO?
■ Co-sponsor and support legislation – House Joint Resolution 9 and Senate Joint Resolution 2 – introduced in January 2015 calling for a constitutional amendment to prohibit desecration of the U.S. flag.
to raise.

Patterson’s Legion Post 19 in Columbia was the first to donate. Legionnaires initially gave her $500 from funds that would have gone to a local veteran who had a service dog, but he had recently died. They then passed the hat and contributed $525 more.

“In Tennessee, I have tried to make sure that everyone knows that we are a Legion Family,” Patterson said. “We have to all work as a family to make projects like this work.”

Other posts and units throughout Tennessee also held fundraising events for Darnell’s cause, which resulted in $10,065 raised in four months.

When Darnell called Vet Dogs of America last November to inquire about sending the donations, they informed her of a promotion they had until the end of the year – two dogs for $11,000 or three for $15,000. “My heart skipped a beat because I only needed $935 more for two dogs,” Darnell said. That same week, Darnell attended Ninth District’s meeting and Legion members donated $1,025 out of their pockets.

The next day Darnell called Vet Dogs of America and they asked “if I wanted to try for a third dog,” Darnell said. “I said, ‘Honey, I’m so thrilled to have two, but I don’t think that I can raise another $4,000 by Dec. 31.’” The organization extended Darnell’s deadline, the first time ever for them to do so, until June 2016. But Darnell didn’t need that long of an extension – $4,000 was raised during the Department of Tennessee’s mid-winter conference in late January.

“I always said every dollar that I get is one more dollar toward the cost of a dog for the betterment of the welfare of a (Tennessee) veteran,” Darnell said.

“The most important thing that we can do is show that we are a Legion Family. And that we can come together and work together and make a difference.”

Patterson believes that Darnell’s project is a testament to what can be accomplished when “we all work as a family,” he said.

“The dogs will go to veterans in Tennessee to make them have a better and safer life. When we can work as a family to raise money for any worthwhile project, everyone wins.”

C&Y MONTH

Time to plan children and youth activities for April

The month of March reminds us that not only spring is almost here, but so is Children & Youth month.

The American Legion has celebrated “April is Children & Youth Month” for the past 78 years. 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.

Legion Family members can invite families and community leaders to the post to discuss the challenges facing children, families and the community, as well as share ideas for addressing those issues. Also, invite a subject-matter expert on child safety, health and education to present at the post event.

For the past several years, Legion Family members at American Legion Post 371 in Valparaiso, Neb., have hosted an event-filled day in April at the post for military kids and other local youth. The children enjoy lunch, firetruck and hay rides, crafts, a petting zoo, a bounce house, face painting and a magic show.

Whatever event you host or participate in as a Legion Family, remember to invite local leaders and officials to support the event and engage the media in publicity and promotion. 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.

Download the Americanism Division’s “April is Children & Youth Month” brochure online at www legion org/publications.

Did you know?

- The American Legion created a PowerPoint titled “This is The American Legion” for department, district and posts leaders to share with community members about what the Legion does for veterans, servicemembers and their families. The PowerPoint is located under Membership Resources online at www legion org/dispatch.

- Two Georgia Legionnaires received the VA Volunteer Services Worker of the Year Award last month during The American Legion’s Washington Conference. James Whelan and Fred Zamora donated 8,000 hours of volunteer service, collectively, to VA facilities throughout the state.

- 1953 Legion Baseball Player of the Year Chuck Lindstrom shares the lessons he learned from Legion Baseball, his time with the Chicago White Sox, and from his Hall of Fame father. Read the story at www legion org/baseball.
New Jersey post clothes and feeds 505 flood victims

A snowstorm in late January raised tide levels in several New Jersey Shore communities, causing severe flooding in areas such as the resort town of Wildwood. The local American Legion Post 184 opened its doors to helping flood victims by collecting food, clothing, household and monetary donations, and the outpour received was “unbelievable,” said Post 184 Commander Harry Weimar. The post assisted 505 families.

For two weeks following the flood, 62 Legion Family and community volunteers worked more than eight hours a day to collect donations such as bedding, clothing, toiletries, baby items and unperishable food to distribute to the families in need. Auxiliary Unit 184 members helped sort, fold and organize the donated items that were piled on tables set up throughout the post. And the $4,000 that was mailed from American Legion and VFW posts from around the state helped purchase items not already donated.

Post 184’s efforts to assist local flood victims was promoted on Facebook by Weimar and by local newspapers and dignitaries who visited the post.

“The drive for flood victims was something that we needed to do,” Weimar said. “When (Superstorm) Sandy hit (in 2012) we helped out. I just could not believe the return that we got. It made me feel like I was back in the service again where we all helped one another.”