

WORLD'S LARGEST VETERANS ORGANIZATION



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107th National Convention



National Convention Report

SAL POW/MIA Watchfire

Affordable Housing Progress 2025-2026 Legion Family Project

Governor's Challenge

COMMANDER'S MESSAGE

Be the Light. Stop the Slide. Build Legacy.

There are moments on this journey when I find myself standing quietly in a post home, listening to stories from veterans whose service spans generations. Stories of sacrifice. Stories of courage. Stories of young men and women who answered our nation's call without knowing what tomorrow would bring. In those moments, I am reminded that The American Legion is far more than an organization. It is a promise. A promise that we will never forget those who served. A promise that no veteran stands alone. A promise that each generation will carry forward the ideals of service, patriotism and community that have defined us for more than a century.

Everywhere I travel across New Jersey, people ask me the same question: "Commander, how's the year going so far?"

My answer comes not from statistics, reports or meeting agendas. My answer comes from what I have seen.

I have seen posts opening their doors to veterans in need. I have seen Legion Family members giving their time, talents and hearts to strengthen their communities. I have seen hope where others saw obstacles. I have seen unity where others saw differences. Because of that, I can say with complete confidence, the future of The American Legion, Dept. of NJ has never looked brighter.

Over the past four months, we have traveled thousands of miles throughout our great Garden State and beyond. We have visited 13 of NJ's 21 counties, meeting new friends and reconnecting with old ones. Every stop has reinforced a simple truth: The American Legion Family is alive, engaged and making a difference every single day. We are not just doing official visits...we are doing what we have coined as "SOCIAL VISITS". These visits have quickly become something much more meaningful, not just to us but our entire Legion Family here in NJ. They became opportunities to listen. To learn. To share ideas. To strengthen relationships. To remind ourselves that while we may wear different caps, jackets and titles, we are united by a common mission and common purpose.

Whether attending the National Membership Conference in Indianapolis or representing NJ alongside our outstanding Legion Family delegation at the National Convention in Louisville, one message has become abundantly clear: people want to know who we are. They want to know what we do. They want to know how they can help. Not just Legionnaires, but everyday Americans who believe in service, patriotism and community. They are looking for purpose, and The American Legion has plenty of purpose to offer. Along the way, I have had the privilege of working closely with some truly remarkable people.

Our headquarters team of Tammie, Tricia and our little ray of sunshine Lois, work tirelessly every day to keep this dept. moving forward. Much of what they do happens quietly behind the scenes. Most members never see the endless phone calls, paperwork, planning, coordination and problem-solving that occur daily. I see it, and I want them to know that their dedication matters. They are not simply employees; they are caretakers of our mission and champions of our members. They are, in many ways, the North Star of our dept. I am equally grateful for people like John Baker, whose wisdom and institutional

knowledge continue to guide us. In every conversation, he reminds me that progress does not require abandoning our past. In fact, true progress depends upon understanding it. To move confidently into the future, we must never forget where we came from. That lesson is especially important as we confront one of the greatest challenges facing our organization: MEMBERSHIP. Membership is our greatest challenge and greatest opportunity. For nearly a decade, NJ has experienced an average annual membership decline of approximately 2,000 members. Every member lost represents more than a number on a report. It represents a veteran whose voice may no longer be heard. It represents lost opportunities to mentor young people. It represents fewer volunteers supporting our communities. It represents fewer resources to sustain the programs and initiatives that make such a profound difference across NJ. Many organizations would look at those numbers and see decline. I see something different. I see opportunity. I see a challenge worthy of The American Legion.

During the National Membership Conference, the NJ Membership POSSE, Chair Sophia Dmoch, our dedicated dept. vice commanders Ezell Jackson Jr., Joe Fricker III, Frank Landis, Sr., Randy Grizzard and I, met with national leadership to establish our membership goals for 2026-2027. The result was ambitious. The result was bold. The result was exactly what we needed. Our dept. has embraced an exciting goal of reaching 28,102 members this Legion year.

Can we achieve it? Without question, YES, we CAN. But only if we stop thinking like separate organizations and start acting like one family. For too long, many of us have approached membership through the lens of our individual programs. The American Legion recruits' veterans. The Auxiliary recruit's eligible family members. The Sons recruit eligible male descendants. The Riders recruit from across the entire Legion Family. There is nothing wrong with that. But there is something better. Recruiting and growing the entire Legion Family together. Are you ready to be part of the NJ Membership POSSE?

Think about it for a moment. Every Auxiliary member, Son and Rider begins with eligibility connected to a veteran and hopefully an American Legion member. Every branch of our Legion Family becomes stronger when the entire fam-

Cover photo: Past Dept. Commander Dan Channel (left) and Dept. Commander Anthony "Tony" Gladden before the opening of the National Convention, Louisville, KY on Sep. 1.

New Jersey Legionnaire

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Articles submitted may be edited for space and/or clarity.

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ily grows together. So, what if we changed the conversation? What if every Legionnaire looked beyond one membership application and saw an entire family waiting to become involved? What if every Auxiliary member helped identify veterans eligible for Legion membership? What if every Son and Rider became ambassadors for the entire Legion Family? What if every post family committed to growth together? Imagine the possibilities.

If NJ increased membership by just 25%, we would add more than 7,000 members to our Legion Family. If every post family increased its membership by only 10%, we could stop the slide this year. Not next year. Not someday. This year. In fact, if NJ can stop the slide, NJ can help lead the nation in demonstrating what is possible when an entire Legion Family works together toward a common goal. The solution is not complicated. Posse members "DON'T FAKE THE FUNK on MEMBERSHIP". One conversation. One invitation. One veteran. One family. One life changed. That is how movements begin. That is how organizations grow. That is how legacies are built. The solution has always been us.

Our theme this year is simple: Be GLADDEN to Be the Light to Be the One. The light does not wait for someone else to act. The light does not ask permission to shine. The light breaks through darkness. The light provides direction. The light offers hope. Everywhere I travel, I meet members who are already living that message. They are mentoring veterans. Serving communities. Leading programs. Supporting posts. Strengthening families. They are proving every day that one person can make a difference. And when enough individuals decide to be the LIGHT, extraordinary things happen. Our challenge is not whether we have enough opportunities. Our challenge is whether we are willing to seize them.

History has taught us something important. The future of The American Legion has never been determined by what happened around us. It has always been determined by what happened within us. Within our hearts. Within our posts. Within our communities. Within our Legion Family. One day our names will be forgotten. The titles we held will pass to others. The meetings we attended, the miles we traveled and the reports we submitted will eventually fade into history. But the lives we touched will remain. The veteran who found help when they needed it. The child who learned the meaning of patriotism. The military family that discovered a place to belong. The post that survived because someone cared enough to step forward. That is our

legacy. Not the offices we hold. Not the ribbons we wear. Not the recognition we receive. Our legacy is the light we leave behind for others to follow.

Today, NJ stands at a crossroads. We can continue talking about membership decline or we can become the generation that reversed it. We can continue accepting the slide or we can become the leaders who changed the future. We can wait for someone else to act or we can decide that we are the someone we've been waiting for. The future of this great organization will not be written by chance. It will be written by Legionnaires. It will be written by Auxiliary members. It will be written by Sons. It will be written by Riders. It will be written by every member of our Legion Family who chooses to stand up and make a difference. Years from now, future Legionnaires will not remember how difficult the challenge seemed. They will remember who answered the call. They will remember who stepped forward when membership was declining. They will remember the generation of Legion Family members who refused to accept decline as their destiny. They will remember the men and women who chose action over excuses, hope over doubt and unity over division. They will remember the year NJ came together. The year we stopped thinking as separate groups and started acting as one family. The year we stopped the slide. The year we chose growth over decline. The year we chose hope over doubt. The year we chose action over excuses. They will say that when The American Legion needed its light to shine brightest, NJ answered the call.

So, I leave you with the same challenge that guides me every day: Be the Light to Be the One. Be the one who recruits. Be the one who mentors. Be the one who serves. Be the one who inspires. Be the one who refuses to let our legacy fade. Because together, we will not simply stop the slide, together, we will build the future and we will strengthen The American Legion Family. Together, we will leave a legacy of service that will illuminate the path for generations to come.

Be the Light to Be the One. Don't FAKE the FUNK on membership. Together We Will Stop the Slide.

Legion Family Project 2026-2027

Commander Gladden and the NJ American Legion Family have chosen a project that will enhance the lives of NJ veterans. The 2026-2027 Dept. Family Project will focus on veterans in need and suicide awareness, with a total of \$120,455, as follows:

- American Legion, Dept. of NJ Operations \$40,455. Provide funds for relief of programs, staffing, travel, per diem, and initiatives for dept. personnel.
- Affordable Housing for At-risk, Homeless and Aging Veterans (ALA) \$30,000.
- Wreaths Across America (SAL) \$5,000.
- American Red Cross (JBMDL) \$5,000.
- Other Organizations (Based on need / to be determined at a later date) \$40,000:

MA22 works in preventing veteran suicides because of PTSD. MA22 reaches out to male and female veterans of all eras who may be suffering emotionally, physically or financially because of PTSD from their military service.

Woods-n-Water is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization that provides free services and activities designed for veterans, active-duty military and first responders. Through structured activities, our nation's heroes are provided with camaraderie through an environment easily identifiable as the familiar brotherhood/sisterhood that brings comfort to them during their period of service, while also incorporating holistic and empirically driven wellness methods shown to help reduce the impact of post-traumatic stress, traumatic brain injuries and other negative effects which may have come about from their honorable service.

Horses for Healing Foundation is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization dedicated to restoring hope, resilience and emotional well-being in US military veterans, through equine-assisted therapy. Their mission is simple, yet powerful: to provide a safe, supportive environment where veterans can heal from the invisible wounds of wars, such as PTSD, depression, anxiety and moral injury – by building meaningful connections with horses.

American Warriors Outdoors is a 100% veteran owned and operated nonprofit organization dedicated to reconnecting veterans and active-duty service members with the healing power of the outdoors. The mission is to provide outdoor experiences that foster camaraderie, mental clarity and a renewed sense of purpose.

Guitars for Vets (G4V) serves at-risk US veterans impacted by PTSD and other service-related trauma. Through a unique, 10-week structured guitar instruction program, the healing power of music is put in the hands of our nation's heroes, helping to foster renewal, connection and community.

Revised Legion

NEC Eugene O'Grady, Chair



Our committee has worked hard in the past year, and we will continue to do so under Commander Gladden. Many changes in policies and procedure have been accomplished with a few more yet to be rolled out.

The mission of this committee is to make our Legion better and this talented group of Legionnaires are making it happen: Vice Chair ANEC Mike Wilson (19), Secretary Andrea Adair (12), Dan Channel (209), Dan Dunn (87), Steve Fisher (286), Berley Hanna, Jr., (499), Ted Howarth (72), Andy Jackson (493), Will Kramer (43), Ray Miller (129) and Chuck Robbins (351).

We understand the problems at home and from national. We will do our best to rectify any issues that arise. When an issue is encountered, please follow the chain of command to have it resolved. If you're unsure of your chain of command, contact your post commander first. When proper procedures aren't followed, it reflects poorly on the dept., as a whole. Failure to utilize the chain of command could result in charges "Unbecoming of a Legionnaire".

Please, be kind and courteous to the staff, as they are implementing changes on both state and national levels. With many changes in our near future, we will have speed bumps and I urge you to have patience in the upcoming transition period.

We will continue to do our best for you; feel free to submit ideas to improve our organization.

Membership

Sophia Dmoch, Chair



Fellow Legionnaires of NJ, we are off to a strong start and have met our first two target goals. As of Oct. 1, our dept. reported 15,514 members, 55.21% of the 2027 target of 28,102, ranking 34th nationwide out of 55 depts. and 8th in the Northeast Region. Continue to

increase membership, as the next goal will be more challenging. In the first week of Oct., national will send the second renewal notice, which should boost our numbers and help us reach our third target, scheduled for Nov. 12. We need everyone to come

together and conduct outreach in their communities, especially during Veterans Day. If your post can offer complimentary membership on Veterans Day, it would be a great way to thank a veteran for their service. Team Gladden is here to support you in any way possible. The dept. vice commanders have confirmed dates and locations for their district membership roundups. Click this link for all events: <https://bit.ly/NJAL-Events-List>.

On another note, you may have already heard that The American Legion Auxiliary's membership eligibility requirements changed at this year's American Legion National Convention in Kentucky. What changed? Here is the resolved clause of Resolution No. 27: RESOLVED, By The American Legion in National Convention assembled in Louisville, Kentucky, September 1, 2, 3, 2026, that the Constitution of The American Legion, Article XIII, Section 2 is hereby amended to read: Section 2. Membership in The American Legion Auxiliary shall be limited to: (1) grandparents, parents, siblings, spouses, and direct or adopted descendants within two degrees of consanguinity of members of The American Legion; and (2) grandparents, parents, siblings, spouses, and direct or adopted descendants within two degrees of consanguinity of all service members who served in either of the following periods: Apr. 6, 1917, to Nov. 11, 1918 and any time after Dec. 7, 1941 who, being a citizen of the United States at the time of their entry therein served on active duty in the armed forces of any of the governments associated with the United States during either eligibility periods and died in the line of duty or after honorable discharge; (3) grandparents, parents, siblings, spouses, and direct or adopted descendants within two degrees of consanguinity of all service members who were in the Armed Forces of the United States during either of the following periods: Apr. 6, 1917, to Nov. 11, 1918; and any time after Dec. 7, 1941, who served on active duty in the Armed Forces of the United States during either eligibility period and died in the line of duty or after honorable discharge; and (4) to those women who of their own right are eligible for membership in The American Legion. Please use this change to increase membership throughout our Legion Family. I keep preaching: use your family to help you recruit new members. At the post level, keep your members engaged; find out what they like or don't like to keep them part of your family.

A reminder: do not hold membership cards. Either process them online immediately or mail them in the traditional way. Members pay dues and

should receive a membership card immediately. You can't hold membership funds. The preferred method is to process them online, so we get instant credit toward the membership goal from national.

I also want to congratulate the following counties: Bergen, Burlington, Camden, Cape May, Gloucester, Hudson, Middlesex, Ocean, Somerset, Sussex, Union and Warren for submitting 100% of their CPRs. As of Aug. 1, 2026, we stood at 76.65%; 197 posts submitted their CPRs out of 257. Thank you to the county leadership for putting in the effort to get it done. Reminder: any suspended posts count against you and remain in the database until you submit their charter for cancellation. Scrub your lists and get those charters turned in by the Dec. DEC meeting. Next year, we need to focus on submitting the CPRs by July 1, the actual deadline for possible award recognition by National. CPRs also help our National Commander when he testifies before Congress. Why wouldn't you want to receive credit for all the great things your post does for the community and veterans? The information we gather from CPRs shows how much we care about and value veterans.

For additional details, contact the dept. vice commander assigned to your district, or follow us on Facebook or Instagram. Don't hesitate to reach out if you have questions or need help. As one Legion dept. said, "the Four Pillars of the American Legion can only stand if they have a strong foundation: MEMBERSHIP." Without members, our programs weaken, our voices diminish, and someone else will take our place. Let's value what we've built. Let's grow it. Let's protect it. Be the foundation — renew, recruit, and stay engaged. <https://legion.org/renew>, #inspire #engage #Additional resources are available on mylegion.org, and materials can be obtained from emblemsales.org.

In closing, remember: BE THE ONE to break the chain of veteran suicide:

- ❖ To ask a veteran in your life how they are doing.
- ❖ To listen when a veteran needs to talk.
- ❖ To reach out when a veteran is struggling. It takes just one person to help save a veteran's life. You can Be the One. To learn more, go to www.betheone.org.

BE THE ONE

Affordable Housing for At-risk/Homeless Veterans

Jim Scanlon, Chair



Our mission: Building permanent supportive housing for veterans on American Legion posts: 100% affordable, 100% veteran-occupied, 100% veteran-owned.

The NJ American Legion Committee for Housing Homeless Veterans is a New Jersey nonprofit focused on creating permanent, affordable housing for veterans experiencing homelessness.

Our current development pipeline includes early-stage projects in Montclair, Gloucester City and South Amboy, with projects in Westfield and Hoboken breaking ground in late 2026.

These projects demonstrate the potential for a replicable model for veteran housing at other American Legion posts across NJ.

New Jersey's Bringing Veterans Home initiative is designed to make veteran homelessness rare, brief and non-recurring. Veterans in temporary housing will enter these projects as the end point of the BVH program.

Our objective: turn NJ's commitment to ending veteran homelessness into permanent, supportive housing on American Legion posts, making their pillar of service permanent at each location.

Three projects are in pre-development: Montclair, Gloucester City, South Amboy. Two projects are breaking ground in 2026: Hoboken (Nov.), Westfield.

National Convention



Delegates to the 107th American Legion National Convention assembled in downtown Louisville, KY, home of baseball bats, bourbon, burgoo, Hot Brown and a horse race. Running from Aug. 28 to Sep. 3, the weather was typical NJ: sunny, hot, humid with heat index over 100 degrees, not appreciated

by the delegates from Maine Colorado and Alaska.

On Sunday, Aug., from 3:30 p.m. to 5 p.m., in the Dept. of NJ hospitality room, the election and installation of Doreen Gallagher as ALA National Vice President of the Eastern Region, Henry Haselhan as SAL National Vice Commander and the announcement of Jeffrey Hicks as Trailing Candidate for SAL National Commander as celebrated! Congratulations all!

The NJ delegates caucused on Mon., Aug. 31 at 7:30 a.m. in the Wheat Room of the Omni Hotel, the NJ delegation's KY headquarters.



After Commander Dan Channel opened the meeting, the delegation was addressed by Matt Shuman of Arizona (photo left, pictured with Channel &

Judge Advocate Dan Dunn), candidate for national commander 2027-2028. His platform is stopping veteran suicide; getting posts outside their walls; and Legion Family membership, encouraging every member to recruit one member into The Legion Family.

He was followed by representatives of John W. "Jay" Bowen, of Colorado, leading candidate for national commander 2026-2027, Cris Flores (photo right), Dist. 9 Commander, and Joy Bowen.



An award was presented to Ken Connors (center) by Commander Channel (right) and NEC Eugene O'Grady for his many years of dedicated service to the Dept. of NJ as Dept. Service Officer.

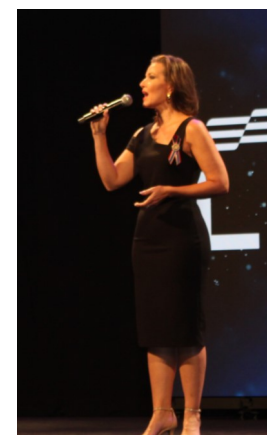
That was followed by reports by the various committee chairs who attended national committee meetings over the weekend. Highlights in-

clude Frank Landis reporting that the Americanism Committee approved a resolution regarding voter ID for federal elections; PNEC Berley Hanna, Jr. reported that national is in a stronger position financially than a year ago, from \$2.8 million to \$14 million today with about an 8% return on investments. The goal is to grow revenues outside of membership dues. Creating the most discussion was a proposed resolution reported on by Anthony Santinello, regarding changing the membership eligibility for The American Legion Auxiliary to permit male children to join. The delegation voted to not support that resolution. One of the issues was the effect the change would have on the SAL. (The resolution was passed by the general assembly; and is explained in Sophia Dmoch's column, page 4).



Following the caucus, at 10 a.m. in room L0006 in the Convention Center, PSVC John Brouse did a presentation on service animals and how to protect them.

The first day of the convention was called to order by National Commander Dan K. Wiley on Tues., Sep. 1, at 8:30 a.m. Lady Lake Post 347, FL, posted the colors; Heather French Henry, Miss America 2000, (photo right) sang the National Anthem. French, a KY native, is the daughter of a disabled veteran and former Commissioner of the KY Dept. of Veterans Affairs. She is the founder of the Heather French Foundation for Veterans and was the recipient of The American Legion James V. Day "Good Guy" Award.



The opening ceremony featured Churchill Downs Bugler Steve Buttleman who played the

famous Call to the Post, the iconic 13-note bugle call which alerts fans and handlers that the horses are arriving on the track and post time is near. Buttlemann compares the tradition to shouting "Gentlemen, start your engines!" at the Indy 500. In May 2027, he will be playing the call at his 32nd Kentucky Derby.

Louisville Tourism VP Doug Bennett welcomed everyone to Louisville and presented Commander Wiley with a red, white & blue Louisville Slugger.



After welcoming remarks from KY Gov. Andy Beshear, Louisville Mayor Craig Greenberg, KY American Legion Commander Joseph Garrett and National Convention President William Moore, Wiley presented The American Legion Youth Champions: (from left) Tylar Hanley, American Legion Baseball All-academic Team Captain; Alexis McCullough, Eagle Scout of the Year (in 2019 became a Gold Star Daughter), who established a four-pillar monument for Gold Star Families; Juliet Hetzel, Oratorical Contest winner, who noted the contest made her "a braver, more convicted person"; Alexandra Orr Jr. Shooting Sports Sporter Champion (her 2nd championship); Maggie Palfrey, Jr. Shooting Sports Precision Champion; and Sawyer Ray, Boys Nation President (who lost his speech & had to wing it), "what kind of president loses his speech" he commented.

Up next, Wiley, Medal of Honor Recipient Donald Ballard and BG Lance Langfeldt, presented the Spirit of Service Awards to (from left in photo above right) Langfelt, Wiley, Specialist Jenna McIntosh (Army); CS2(SW) Brianna Cruz (Navy); Corporal Jessi Stegall (Marines); MST3 Zachary Epps (Coast Guard); Sgt. Thomas Rowley (National Guard); Ballard, SrA Julissa Martinez-France (Air Force); Specialist 3 Jonathan Ingram (Space Force).

Ballard, a Vietnam veteran, smothered an enemy grenade with his body. It did not go off, until he



picked it up & threw it away. He is looking to start a program promoting ham radio to prevent veteran suicides.

Wiley then presented The American Legion Distinguished Service Medal to the Mount Vernon Ladies Association, the oldest patriotic women's org. (estab. 1853). Award was accepted by Anne Neal Petri, Regent. The medal is The Legion's highest award.

At 10:48 a.m., National Adjutant Rodney K. Roland officially convened the convention. After videos promoting Legion youth programs, baseball and Legion gaming, a videomessage from President Donald Trump was shown. "We are very proud of you and under the Trump administration we will never stop fighting for you," he said, giving an accounting of his administration's progress in improving programs for veterans. "Nobody fights harder for our veterans."



Collins reviewed "where we are, where we are going and where we need to be. Albert Einstein said: 'curiosity has its own reason for existing.' I had curiosity when I came to the VA. I was curious about why the VA was the way it was. Veterans have earned every bit of what we have gotten. Does the VA have to be this giant bureaucracy? So, we started streamlining, so veterans are first, not the bureaucracy.

Community care is up 16%; 3.6 million visits this year.

We had to organize ourselves; better as to staffing.

Six out of ten claims have been approved for disability. We are doing more claims, reduced the time from 145 days to 75; we look to reduce that to 30 to 40 days.

VA will have new informed consent forms to provide information on medications.

Ibogaine: treatments are being researched for approval.

Over 75% of VA hospitals are rated at 4 or 5 by the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services.

Six out of ten veterans who commit suicide have not had contact with the VA. We've added 250,000 veterans to programs this year. If we are wrong, we will fix it; if we do it right, I will have our employees' backs. Veterans are first at the VA, and that's the way it will be."

For the first time, an intermission was scheduled from 11:30 a.m. to 1 p.m.



Following that "time-out", the delegates heard from "Waldo the Wingman", which sounded like it would be very entertaining. LTC Rob "Waldo" Waldman is a leadership speaker, executive coach and author of the book

Never Fly Solo. He is an Air Force Academy graduate and an experienced combat veteran with over 2,650 flight hours and 65 combat missions. Scheduled from 1 – 1:30 p.m., he finished his remarks at 1:58 p.m., basically taking almost an hour in a disjointed presentation to tell the audience to "Be the One". He noted the challenges facing The Legion: budget issues, a volatile economy; aging membership; burnout. "The mission is how you can reduce turnover and increase membership. You have to push up the throttle; you have the choice to push it up or push it back. Resist the temptation to ease up, especially when things are going well. Resist complacency. Can I depend on you? Can I trust you to have my back? Together we can win, but we can't win alone. 'I need help' is a Legionnaires call to action.

"Your comfort zone is your danger zone. You have to take a leap of faith and do something

different. Your passion has to be greater than your fear. Others are depending on you. We can't focus on fear, but on courage. Service is love in action.

"Commit to the team. Leaders lift. Remember that. Show you care. Develop loyalty. We need loyal veterans for loyal veterans. Trust is tough to gain; easy to lose."

Other speakers that afternoon included Vice Minister LTG Chin-Kung Chen, Veterans Affairs Council of the Republic of China, who presented Commander Wiley with a Medal of Honor from the council; Allen Greenly, president general of the National Society of Sons of American Revolution, who presented Wiley with the Distinguished Patriot Award; Cory Boatwright, president & CEO of Student Veterans of America, who encouraged the delegates to reach out to student veterans. "Open your post to them; connect with them."

At 3:27 p.m., a video retrospective of Commander Wiley's year was shown before he made his report to the convention. "A year ago, I promised The American Legion would have your back. That's why we support the TAKAVA legislation. We have the backs of our veterans."

Wiley then accepted donations to the Veterans & Children Foundation by Legion Riders members. SVC Frank Landis (left) and Brian Hagel (right) presented a check for \$1115 from NJ.

Total raised was \$437,018.99.



From left: Brian Hagel, National Commander Dan Wiley, SVC Frank Landis .



After the report of Credentials & Rules Committee and Finance Report (no national dues increase in 2028) , Commander Dan Channel (left) and Adjutant John Baker right) presented a check to Wiley for the National Emergency Fund.



From left: Past NJ Commander Dan Channel, National Commander Dan Wiley, NJ State Adjutant John Baker.

Day one ended, mercifully, at 4:48 p.m.

Day two, Wed., Sep. 2, was called to order at 8:30 a.m.

The Philip Onderdonk Religious Liberty Award from First Liberty Institute was presented to Chris Avell, Ohio, who founded Dad's Place for those in need. He received a Henry Repeating Rifle.



Next was a "Fireside Chat" on the topic of Electronic Health Record Deployment and the enormous task of coordinating Dept. of Defense and VA records. Panelists were (from left) Dr. James Ellzy, vice president federal health executive & market

lead, Oracle Health, and William Call, director of Veterans Affairs and Rehabilitative Division of The American Legion.

Before intermission, at about 11:30 a.m., employment and membership awards were given out. At 1 p.m., the Legislative Committee gave a brief report before Chapel of Four Chaplains Legion of Honor Bronze Medallions were presented to Wiley and vice commanders Benjamin Headen, Jan Larson, Jerry Landkamer, Stephen Weisman, Ronald Larose and National Chaplain Michael Pollitt, by Capt. Louis A. Cavaliere, USN (Ret.), Chapel of the Four Chaplains Board of Directors.

Commander Wiley called Day three of the convention to order at 8:30 a.m. and presented Fourth Estate Awards to KXAN-NBC, Austin, TX, and The Bucks County Courier Times, Levittown, PA.

Rounding out business was the unanimous election of John W. "Jay" Bowen, a U.S. Army veteran with 20-years of service.

Bowen said his fundraising project will be for The Legion's Veterans & Children Foundation.

"As many of you are aware, the VCF began in 1925 as The American Legion Endowment Fund and now has been transformed to the Veterans and Children Foundation," he said. "This great charity has helped millions of veterans and their families in need throughout our organization through the Temporary Financial Assistance program, or TFA as it is better known. This foundation relies totally on charitable donations, and the foundation also funds training and accreditation for our veteran service officers.

"The past four national commanders' themes have been of Be The One. Be the one to help prevent veteran suicide," Bowen said. "And folks, they have done such an amazing job getting that message out. Letting our veterans know that it's OK not to be OK. Getting our members educated. Getting them to be able to recognize a veteran in crisis and then helping them find a place to go to get help.

"They have done such a great job that it's no longer a theme. It's a mission. It's the No. 1 mission of The American Legion ... and it needs to stay that way. It's got to stay that way because when you have 17 (veteran suicides) a day, or 22 a day, or any other number greater than zero, it's too many. So we've got to continue that conversation."

Bowen then shared what his theme will be for his year leading the organization: BPOTS, or Be Part of The Solution. "I know you've heard most of your life, 'You're either part of the problem, or you're

part of the solution,” he said. “Well folks, let me tell you something. If you can be part of the solution and you choose not to be, then you’re part of the problem. It’s just that simple. If you can be part of the solution and you choose not to be, then you’re part of the problem.”

“So I’m asking everybody to join me. Let’s work together to be part of the solution.”

That led to a series of asks from Bowen:

- “Let’s be part of the solution and be the one to help reduce veteran suicides.”
- “Let’s be part of the solution and be the one to take care of our veterans and their families.”
- “Let’s be part of the solution and be the one to educate and mentor our youth.”
- “Let’s be part of the solution and be the first ones out there waving that American flag and showing our true patriotic spirit.”
- “And let’s be the one and be part of the solution help to advocate for a very strong national security.”

“Together, we can take this great organization we belong to and make it even greater,” Bowen said. “Thank you for putting your trust in me to represent you and The American Legion this coming year. I vow to you that I will work hard to vindicate that trust you’ve placed in me.”

The Legion’s five national vice commanders also were elected. They are:

- Hugh (Homer) Holmes, a member of Coacher-Goetsch American Legion Post 18, Mitchell, S.D.
- Michael W. Westergren, a member of Post 91 in Beebe, Ark.
- Martha (Marti) Bigbie, a member of Post 142 in Sun River, Utah.
- Roy E. Smith, a member of Post 914 in Louisville, Ill.
- Frank J. Peters, a member of American Legion Gold Star Post in Staten Island, N.Y.

Education Through Effective Communication

Bob Looby, PDC

National Honorary Member of the Employment & Homeless Commission



Some of you may recall my theme as dept. commander was “Education Through Effective Communications”. This should continue with everything we do to educate all members and others of our accomplishments, mission and future.

As a member of the NJ Dept. of Corrections (NJDOC) Military Services Liaison Committee, we reinitiated, will conduct and facilitate a repeat of our Benefit Fairs for Correction Officers and civilian staff (400+) employed by the DOC at their 9 prisons. The first two fairs were on April 23 at DOC’s HQ in Trenton, and Southwoods State Prison on June 11, Northern State Prison was July 23, and most recently Bayside was conducted Sep. 24 (our 17th), with the remaining dates to follow, including the woman’s prison, Edna Mahan. Additionally, I was asked, again, to help coordinate a Veterans Day observance on Nov. 10 at Jones Farm, Ewing.

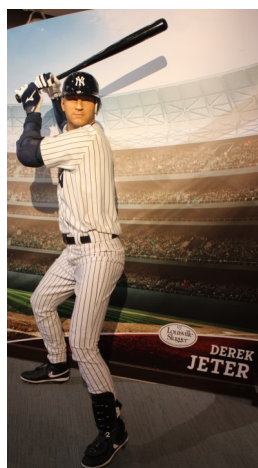
We met, mentored and presented resources to soldiers in the medical hold unit, awaiting discharge, for the sixth session on Oct. 10 in Sea Girt. We, including the VA’s from Wilmington, Philly and NJ, and other providers have now met with about 250 Guard members offering all earned benefits, mental health, including housing and employment support. Pat Carney, VA Wilmington Peer Mentoring, Camaraderie and Support Program spearheads this initiative. We will also continue our Keep Our Veterans Alive/Be the One (KOVA/BTO) events with the three VA Medical Centers’ Community Engagement, Partnership and Suicide Teams, including monthly meetings, incorporating the national Governor Challenge initiative to prevent veteran suicides.

The Governor’s Suicide Challenge is progressing, under the leadership of Dr. Sam Hayes, DVA, within four Priority Groups (PG). They include PG1, Identify Service Members, Veterans, and their Families and Screen for Suicide Risk, led by me; PG2, Promote Connectedness and Improve Care Transitions, led by VA Wilmington’s Pat Carney and Jaime Kazmarck; PG3, Increase Lethal Means Safety and

Safety Planning, led by NJ DHS; and a new Priority Group 4 led by VANJ’s Martha Richardson. PG1’s mission is to contact every agency which may encounter veterans and furnish them with pertinent questions for their mental health and suicide risk factors and needed services. See separate article below for more details.

I was honored to be on a three-member panel on Sep. 23, entitled, “Pathways For Veterans Leaving Incarceration”. The goal was to explore barriers to housing and employment, how case management can connect veterans to wraparound services, and ways providers can work with jails and prisons to strengthen re-entry and reduce recidivism. The two other panelists were the CEO of the Council on Criminal Justice, and an attorney within a VA partnership. Close to 700 registered, attended with feedback “over the top”. As some of you may remember, a MOU with the NJ State Parole Board was approved at our 2011 annual convention and has continued since. The Legion also “walks the talk” for this effort with posts in prisons, including Minnesota, Florida, North Carolina, Louisiana, Idaho, Indiana and Oklahoma. Hundreds of parolees were assisted in those earlier years, and recently 902 incarcerated vets were interviewed, with 8,200 encounters, 445 DD214’s obtained on their behalf, 38% were identified as homeless, all housed upon released, and clothing and other resources provided.

For years we have championed the veteran suicide causations, such as homelessness, unemployment, criminal justice involvement, food insecurity and mental health issues. A recent VA news article highlights the homelessness tragedy: “The compounded stresses of housing instability are particularly high right before a veteran actually becomes homeless. Specifically, when veterans are afraid of losing their home and uncertain about the future of their housing, that anxiety can quickly turn into a suicide crisis. Similarly, for veterans experiencing chronic homelessness, unexpected barriers in connecting to housing services can lead to increased suicide risk. Helping veterans effectively address housing challenges can ease some of these stresses and be an important part of suicide prevention. According to VA’s 2025 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report, the suicide rate in 2023 among homeless veterans who recently received VHA care was 146% higher than among veterans without a homelessness diagnosis.” Admittedly,



there are additional NJ services contained in Bringing Our Veterans Home (BVH) to combat this issue, but we as veteran advocates still must do our due diligence when encountering an at-risk veteran and follow through to completion and sheltered. Additionally, if we want to succeed with ending veteran suicide, we must tackle all those causations!

Future planning includes:

A Mobile Stand Down on Oct. 28 in Vineland, flyer distributed by HQ. This will be our eighth such type of event, i.e. taking our services to known areas of homelessness, designed and implemented during COVID.

Further DOC Correction Officers Benefit Fairs at Edna Mahan, Mid-State, Garden State, East Jersey, ADTC, NJ State Prison TBD and a Veterans Day ceremony on Nov. 10.

We supported the South Jersey (Cherry Hill) Stand Down on Sep. 24; and was at the Newark event on Oct. 17.

As published in a previous Employment, Homeless & Education policy, it is the responsibility of every member, post and county to implement these award-winning programs. If you need any assistance, please contact me anytime.

Governor's Challenge to Prevent Suicide Among Service Members, Veterans and their Families

By Bob Looby, PDC

On Sep. 9, the governor & staff had the official and formal announcement of the NJ Governor's Challenge, a national initiative to prevent veteran suicide, including a proclamation signed by Gov. Sherrill. We are now part of a 51-state and territory challenge to partner for this elimination of the veteran suicide tragedy, but we need you! The all-encompassing challenge consists of four priority groups. In summary: Priority Group 1: Identify service members, veterans and families and screen for suicide risk through statewide service providers; contact me at r.looby@njamericanlegion.org to be a champion; Priority Group 2: Promote connectedness and improve care transitions; contact Patrick.Carney@va.gov or Jaime.Kazmarck@va.gov, e.g. assisting the Army National Guard Medical Hold Soldiers; Priority Group 3: Increase lethal means safety and safety planning; contact rob-ert.eilers@dhs.nj.gov, e.g. partnering with the Rutgers NJ Gun Violence Research Center and the Armory Project working with firearms retailers; Priority Group 4: Faith & Community Engagement; contact Martha.Rodriguez2@va.gov, e.g. gathering faith-based leaders to help suicide awareness. See the following link for more information: [SaveNJVets. BE A CHAMPION – JOIN THE GOVERNOR'S CHALLENGE!](https://www.nj.gov/governor/press-releases/2020/09/09/governor-sherrill-announces-the-nj-governor-s-challenge-to-prevent-veteran-suicide/)

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SAL Watchfire



The Sons of The American Legion (SAL) Detachment of New Jersey, held their 36th Annual POW/MIA Watchfire on the beach of Seaside Heights on Sep. 19th and 20th, the weekend of POW/MIA Awareness Day. The 12-hour vigil included a bonfire stoked throughout the night "shining the way home for our Prisoners of War and Missing in Action."



SAL National Commander Thom Skelley, of Texas, one of the first speakers of the night, began by quoting a toast said every day at 7 p.m. throughout the Dept. of Arizona, "To those who went, to those that are there still, to those who never returned, and to those who never will ... we honor you."

The Watchfire, started in 1990, is an event held annually by the state-level SAL to remember those service members who are still Prisoners of War (POW) and Missing in Action (MIA) abroad.

"Nothing speaks more to our core values as Sons of The American Legion than this Watchfire event", stated Detachment Commander Rusty Myers. "On the flag next to me is written 'You Are Not Forgotten'. Those powerful words speak volumes about our commitment [as Sons] as 'Proud Possessors of a Priceless Heritage.'"

Attended by around 200 people, the event started at 7 p.m. with a series of speeches. The POW/MIA table was also displayed, and was explained by Watchfire Chairman Rich Hodum.

Standing behind the POW/MIA Table were wooden honor rolls listing all the names of NJ's missing since 1941. Following the ceremonial lighting of the bonfire by PDC Amel Balega, Jr, veterans placed wreaths in honor of each of the armed services.

After a dinner provided by the detachment, the remembrances continued concluding with the reading of New Jersey's POW's and MIA's by the Legionnaires. The reading of 2,322 names from World War II, Korea, Vietnam, and the Cold War took about a half hour; an incredibly solemn remembrance.

The vigil continued throughout the evening, with members placing donated pallets on the bonfire, keeping lit that "beacon of hope shining the way home for the missing." Members of the community, along with Legion Family members passing by, dropped in throughout the evening to join those who stayed overnight to place a pallet or two on the fire; some just because they saw the event happening and wanted to be a part of it, and some in honor of a relative.

The vigil concluded at 7 a.m. with a closing ceremony, attended by those who stood sentinel all evening and Legion Family members who returned.





New Jersey

LEGIONNAIRE



BE THE ONE

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Deadline for Winter issue is January 8, 2027

2026 Sons of The American Legion Watchfire

