VETERANS FOOD CONVOY DELIVERS GRATITUDE

Department of Idaho has provided $1.5 million in food and cash donations to three veterans homes.

By Cameron Richardson

Over the past 32 years, the Department of Idaho American Legion Family has provided three state veterans homes with nearly $1.5 million in food and monetary donations. The longstanding tradition started in 1982 when then Idaho Department Commander Frank Dalton declared the “Veterans Food Convoy” his commander’s project, donating $8,000 in food in its first year to the Idaho State Veterans Home in Boise.

The success of the food convoy grew to include two more Idaho state veterans homes in Lewiston and Pocatello where a convoy of trucks and cars filled with canned, boxed and frozen food now parades to the homes every year after Veterans Day.

“This has been a Legion Family event since its first year, and it’s a tradition that’s looked forward to,” said Idaho Department Commander Michael Thurlow, who has been involved with the convoy for the past 18 years.

“We are very proud of this event; this is how we in Idaho choose to take care of our veterans.”

Thurlow added that at 73 years old, Frank Dalton still attends every Boise food convoy in the rain or snow. “He lines all those vehicles up. He is like the conductor of the orchestra. That is special.”

Planning for the food convoy begins after the Department of Idaho’s convention in July. Posts are tasked with working with food distributors in their area, as well as promoting the food convoy through radio and newspaper announcements, telling local residents where to drop food or monetary donations off. Schools, farms and businesses also support the food convoy by donating and collecting food.

For example, Wada Farms and Liberty Gold Potato Co., provide potatoes year-round for...
COMMANDER’S MESSAGE

A new year to stay on course

As another year comes to a close, I look forward to what the new year has in store for The American Legion Family and their efforts in raising a combined $4 million for the various American Legion Charities. When I was elected as your national commander, I knew I wanted to involve the Legion Family in everything that The American Legion does, including being rewarded for helping to meet my fundraising goal for Legion programs.

A “Stay On Course” fundraising pin will be awarded to any individual who donates $100 or more to American Legion Charities. And three pins will be awarded to any Legion post, Auxiliary unit, Sons of The American Legion squadron or Legion Riders chapter that donates $500 or more to American Legion Charities.

The pin is just a small incentive. What’s more important is that for every donation that you or your post, squadron or unit give to American Legion Charities, you are being rewarded with the knowledge that you are helping our veterans, servicemembers and their families. Through the Endowment Fund you are providing funds for veterans affairs and rehabilitation programs and helping a family in need pay a bill or keep food on the table for their child(ren); through Operation Comfort Warriors you are helping wounded warriors recover quicker with the comfort items that they need; through the National Emergency Fund you are helping a post or Legionnaire rebuild their life after a natural disaster; through the Child Welfare Foundation you are helping other nonprofits address the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual needs of children; through the Legacy Scholarship Fund you are giving youth of a fallen servicemember a chance to achieve higher education; and through Soldier’s Wish you are making a hero’s wish come true.

I know $4 million may seem like a lofty goal to achieve, but it’s almost a new year and with that comes new aspirations. Our veterans, servicemembers and their families are counting on The American Legion.

Mike Helm
National Commander

MEMBERSHIP

National Commander Honor Ribbon

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

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

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

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

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
Radiothon raises nearly $20,000 for TFA

Department of Iowa partnered with a local radio station to support the Legion’s Temporary Financial Assistance program.

By Daniel S. Wheeler

As we prepare for a new year of serving veterans, servicemembers and their families, I’m reminded of the many ways American Legion members have given back and given forward over the past year to support our heroes. A great example is The American Legion Department of Iowa’s radiothon that was held this past Veterans Day, which showed how building relationships with community businesses can financially impact veterans and their families in a positive way at the local and national level.

Thanks to years of establishing a strong relationship with Des Moines, Iowa, radio station 93.3 KIOA, the department and KIOA held a radiothon on Veterans Day to support The American Legion’s Temporary Financial Assistance (TFA) program, raising $18,465. KIOA titled the radiothon “Vets of Valor,” and the local First Class Credit Union and Prairie Meadows Race-track Casino Hotel partnered for the drive.

The radiothon was held in the lobby of the casino, and five staff members from First Class Credit Union manned the phones for eight hours. KIOA on-air personalities conducted challenges with listeners and advertisers, while 15 Iowa Legionnaires accepted in-person donations.

“It was so much fun,” said Kathy Nees, Department of Iowa programs director. “The number of veterans and their families that will be assisted with the funds we raised is why the program is so important, and it’s why KIOA said ‘yes’ to hosting the radiothon on a special day — Veterans Day.”

Department of Iowa leadership provided on-air interviews to KIOA’s six sister stations the week prior to the radiothon, explaining the impact TFA has had locally. Since Sept. 11, 2001, TFA has provided more than $200,000 in grants, benefitting 190 Iowa veterans and their families.

“The impact TFA has made locally really struck KIOA as an opportunity where they could continue to make a big difference in the state for veterans’ families,” Nees said.

During the radiothon, a few TFA recipient families from Iowa spoke on air about their struggles financially and how the Legion’s TFA program came to their aid in a time of need. One recipient even received his check while on air, which Nees believes empowered more people to call in and donate.

Following the radiothon, additional funding came in through donation boxes placed at First Class Credit Union’s two locations in Des Moines and KIOA challenge donations, bringing the TFA donation total to $19,854.

“Iowans have made great sacrifices to keep our country free and safe, from the warfront to the home front,” said Tim Fox, KIOA’s brand manager. “We wanted to do something that showed just how much that sacrifice means to us, and to make things a little easier for the servicemembers who are struggling.”

The Legion’s Temporary Financial Assistance program is funded through The American Legion Endowment Fund, which was established in the 1920s. Through TFA, a local post can request cash assistance to help maintain the basic needs of veterans’ children. The fund helps families meet the costs of shelter, food, utilities and health expenses when parents are unable, thereby keeping the minor child or children in a more stable home environment. Since January 2014, TFA has disbursed grants totaling more than $584,902, benefitting 564 families with 1,265 children.

For TFA eligibility information, visit: www.legion.org/financialassistance
American Legion Simeon L. Nickerson Post 64 in Middleborough, Mass., held an American Legion Field Day on Oct. 13, 1919, which was sponsored by many local businesses. Events included a baseball game, potato race, tug of war between Army and Navy veterans and a tug of war between members of Post 64 and the fire department, a one-mile run, a 100-yard dash and a 440-yard dash, and a sack race. Following the events was a concert performed by the Bay State Band and a dance.

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

The three state veterans homes – 9,000 pounds of potatoes was delivered to the Boise veterans home during the food convoy. And D.L. Evans Bank, which has branches in 12 Idaho cities, puts food donation boxes at all of their locations. Additionally, several elementary and middle schools in Pocatello donated 2,011 cans of food for the convoy by hosting a food drive on Veterans Day.

Between the three Idaho state veterans homes, the food convoy delivered $63,000 in food and cash donations in early November to feed the 280 veterans living in the homes.

“It’s awesome to see the support from the community, and it’s great for the veterans to see and feel that the service they provided to their country was not in vain,” said Josiah Dahlstrom, administrator for the Idaho State Veterans Home in Pocatello. “We will definitely take advantage of the kindness and generosity of others and let that roll into our veterans so they can feel the love this holiday season.”

When Lynne Jones, food service operations manager for the Pocatello veterans home, reaches for a can of food from the pantry, she will oftentimes find small handprints cut out of construction paper. The schools that participate in the food drive tape students’ handprints to the cans and write messages on them, such as “Thank you for keeping me safe.”

“When you walk into the front doors you are so humbled because this isn’t just another place, this is where our veterans are so we try to make sure that their meals are outstanding,” Jones said. “The American Legion food convoy is an answer to prayers. America’s finest are here, and it’s our privilege to take care of them and with the Legion’s help, we can make sure that they are fed well.”

Jones said one veteran she was taking care of was so ill that the only thing he could eat was bean and bacon soup. “And the food convoy came up and they had bean and bacon soup,” she said. “When I served the soup to the veteran, he would touch my hand, a tear would fall, and he would say, ‘Thank you.’ The American Legion food convoy is making an impact on our veterans and their wants and needs.”

The food and monetary donations also help the veterans’ homes budget by allowing the staff to provide special meals and ensuring that the veterans enjoy activities away from the facility.

The three Idaho veterans homes serve prime rib on Veterans Day and take the veterans to local fairs and on fishing trips.

“It’s the most exciting and wonderful thing that The American Legion does for us,” said Phil Hawkins, activities coordinator for the Idaho State Veterans Home in Boise and a member of Post 151 at the veterans home. “Serving prime rib would never happen if it wasn’t for the food convoy. The food convoy allows us to take care of our veterans.”

Currently, Idaho is the only department to conduct a veterans food convoy, but Legion Family members from Idaho hope the idea of feeding veterans will spread to other departments.

“When you come to the food convoy and see the camaraderie, it’s the Legion Family at work,” said Ron Adams, past department commander of Idaho. “It’s veterans helping veterans.”
**MEMBERSHIP**

**Legion Family caravan boosts membership**

For the Department of Illinois American Legion Family, December is a time of preparation for its annual membership caravan that occurs in January.

The caravan began 18 years ago when the department noticed a decline in membership after the holiday season, never moving more than two percentage points during the month of January. To get membership back on the minds of Legion Family members, the caravan of 10 to 20 department, Auxiliary and Sons of The American Legion members visit 19 posts in several districts over the course of nine days in January. Letters are mailed to all 800 posts to notify members of where and when the caravan will stop for members to turn in membership cards. Last January, the caravan collected 2,000 membership cards.

Since the caravan began, Past National Commander Marty Conatser of Champaign, Ill., said membership numbers are now no less than five percent in January. “It causes members to have to go out and work membership in January – to get the renewals or sign up new members so they have something to turn in at the caravan,” Conatser said. “Instead of the big Christmas lull, it gets us back to doing what we know we should have been doing all the time, which is focusing on membership.”

A national leader also participates in the caravan to discuss important Legion issues, answer questions and promote the chosen fundraiser. Last year, the caravan raised nearly $5,800 for the Legion’s National Emergency Fund program. And this year’s national leader will be Past National Commander Dan Dellinger.

“The caravan is a motivational tool for us,” Conatser said. “It increases membership, it gets us back to working membership, and it gives us a chance to take a national representative to an individual post. Many of posts will say that they never had a national officer visit before. So it’s an honor that out of 800 Illinois posts, only 19 get selected. We sell that as a positive.”

**POST ACTIVITIES**

**A tree shines for remembrance**

During the first week of December until after New Year’s Day, members of American Legion Post 10 and Auxiliary Unit 10 in Barre, Vt., light a 30-foot Colorado blue spruce tree on the post’s lawn “as a visual reminder to the community of the sacrifices of many of their citizens,” said Maria McKnight, a member of Unit 10.

The tree is located next to a granite monument that reads, “In honor of the veterans living and deceased who have served their country.” The tree limbs are decorated with blue lights to remember the deceased veterans and with white lights to remember the living veterans and active-duty servicemembers.

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**Did you know?**

- American Legion Family customized table tops are now available for purchase through Werzalit of America, Inc. All Legion Family logos are available to use on the table tops, as well as Legion program logos. Order a table top by calling Werzalit: (800) 999-3730
  Visit Werzalit’s website: www.werzalitusa.org

- “The American Legion Christmas Special” – with The Oak Ridge Boys and other performers - is airing on individual stations across the country through Christmas. The Grammy-winning group – who share the Legion’s passion to help veterans and their families – recently teamed up with the Legion for a series of direct-response TV ads that invite viewers to join the effort to assist those who served our nation in uniform. To see if or when the Christmas special will be aired on TV in your area, visit: www.legion.org/media

DVDs of “The American Legion Christmas Special” are available for purchase – five DVDs for only $19.99 plus $7.95 for shipping and handling.
Purchase online: www.legionchristmasdvd.com
Call to order: (888) 982-2256

- Operation Comfort Warriors served 200 wounded servicemembers and staff on Nov. 12 at the Naval Medical Center San Diego. American Legion Department of California members served the food and handed out OCW backpacks, water bottles and hats.
On Oct. 29, the Ninth Circuit Court ruled that no one has the right to wear military combat decorations that were not earned. This falls under the definition of “conduct” and is therefore not protected as “free speech” under the First Amendment to the Constitution. Lying about receiving a military medal is still constitutionally protected.

The defendant, Elven Swisher, served in the U.S. Marine Corps from 1954-1957. In 2001, he applied to the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) for service-connected disability compensation benefits, claiming he had been wounded in a secret mission to North Korea in 1955, two years after the Korean War ended. VA granted the request in 2004 after Swisher submitted what appeared to be a military document saying he had received a Silver Star and other medals for his actions.

VA learned in 2006 that Swisher’s document was forged and ordered him to repay the benefits. He was later convicted and sentenced to a year in prison on charges that included stealing government funds and wearing unauthorized medals at a veterans event.

Congress has rewritten the Stolen Valor law to prohibit lying about military honors for financial gain, while repealing the ban on wearing medals one has not earned. But the repeal did not help Swisher, whose conviction under the former law was upheld.

According to an article in the San Francisco Chronicle, the law under which Swisher was convicted “regulated harmful conduct” and “was unrelated to the suppression of a particular viewpoint.”

Keystone XL Pipeline bill update

H.R. 5682, the Approve Keystone XL Pipeline bill, which authorized the construction and operation of the Keystone XL pipeline, passed the House on Nov. 14. The Senate companion measure, S. 2280, which was sponsored by Sen. Mary Landrieu, D-La., failed to gain the necessary 60 votes to pass the Senate on Nov. 18. This Senate action effectively ends work on this bill for the remainder of the 113th Congress.

However, authority to build the northern half of the pipeline, including cross-border facilities, still awaits approval by the State Department and a Nebraska state court decision regarding the routing of the pipeline in that state.

After the Senate vote, House and Senate Republican leaders indicated they plan to introduce new legislation in the 114th Congress approving the pipeline.

House Committee chairman for 114th Congress

The House Republican Steering Committee made recommendations for committee chairmanships in the House of Representatives. See who the recommendations were: www.legion.org/dispatch
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.

DISTRICT COMMANDER RACE-TO-THE-TOP

The District Commander Race-to-the-Top award is given to district commanders who attain at least 100 percent of the district’s assigned membership objective by March 31, 2015. Competition is divided into five categories:
- Category I – districts of 15,1,499 members
- Category II – districts of 1,500-2,999 members
- Category III – districts of 3,000-4,999 members
- Category IV – districts of 5,000-7,499 members
- Category V – districts of 7,500 or more members

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

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

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

A MESSAGE FROM MEMBERSHIP

Retention of a new Legionnaire is critical during the first five years. If they sign up and don’t hear anything from the post, are not made to feel welcome and are not given any position of responsibility or involvement in the post, they are more likely to lose interest and focus their energy elsewhere. So it’s important that longtime Legionnaires focus the first one to five years on developing the new members relationship with his or her post, mentoring them and making them feel welcome and expanding their knowledge of the Legion.

Learn more about membership messages from watching American Legion videos online: [www.legion.org/recruiting](http://www.legion.org/recruiting)
2014 Gold Brigade spotlight: Joe Dudley of Virginia

Six-time American Legion Gold Brigade Award recipient Joe Dudley of Post 2003 in Scottsville, Va., recruited 51 new members into the Legion in 2014. The U.S. Navy Vietnam veteran said he gets his recruiting motivation from the first four words to the Legion’s preamble — “For God and Country.”

Dudley sets up membership booths at job fairs, wine festivals, local fairs, Sams Club, Walmart, Sears and at Veterans Day and Memorial Day parades. “The main reason I get out and attend several events a year is because I love to help other veterans,” Dudley said. “When I recruit a new member, I feel like I’ve helped the post, I’ve helped the state, and I’ve helped national too.”

Dudley is also a six-time American Legion Silver Brigade Award recipient. He credits his recruiting success to always asking people, “Are you a veteran? Has anybody talked to you about joining The American Legion?”

“Every time I sign up a new Legion member I know I’ve helped a veteran,” Dudley said. “It’s a lot of fun, and I get to help a lot of veterans.”