THE AMERICAN LEGION
Dispatch
April 15, 2011 • Vol. 20, No. 8 — A National Headquarters Publication

LEGION RIDERS

RIDERS WITH A CAUSE

Kansas chapters raise money, put in volunteer hours, and make big differences in the lives of veterans young and old.

By James V. Carroll

Kansas Legion Riders Kenny White, Sam Langhofer and Don Behrens view Marine Sgt. Jonathon Blank's challenge-coin collection. Blank lost both legs when an IED exploded while he was in Afghanistan. *James V. Carroll*

Before he was even 10, Jonathon Blank dreamed of becoming a Marine. As a youngster in Augusta, Kan., he camouflaged his face and uniformed himself for combat. He had his picture taken, framed it in Popsicle sticks, and scribbled in felt pen, "U.S. Marine Corp, sharp shooter or fighter." So it was no surprise to anyone in his family when he enlisted shortly after his 18th birthday.

Last year, when Blank learned that his unit would soon deploy to Afghanistan, he decided to extend his tour in order to go with them. "I wasn't going to let my guys go without me," he remembered. "I didn't have to give it much thought. If something happened over there to one of them, I'd always wonder, 'If I was there, could I have changed anything? Could I have helped them?'"

Last Oct. 26, Marine Sgt. Blank was on a foot patrol in the Taliban-infested Helmand province of Afghanistan, with his Camp Pendleton-based 1st Force Reconnaissance Battalion. Blank stepped on an improvised explosive device (IED) and was thrown several feet. When he came to seconds later, he knew something was terribly wrong.

"I was like, OK, something really bad just happened, but I didn't know what," he said. "It was kind of like a dream. I remember as I started to regain consciousness, smoke and dust was everywhere. I started crawling because I knew my legs were gone. I didn't have to look. Then the pain came, and I knew that was it."

Upon hearing the news, Blank's family began preparing for his return. So did the Kansas American Legion Riders. In the next few months, the Legion Riders and the American Legion family led efforts across Kansas to raise more than $125,000 to help the 23-year-old Marine and his family cope with expenses associated with his injuries and recuperation.

"Our original goal was to raise $10,000 to $15,000," said Chapter 401 Legion Rider Sam Langhofer. "Blank's heart-wrenching story touched anyone who heard it, and we soon realized we were going to get much more than we first anticipated."

The success of the Jonathon Blank project was possible because communities across the state joined hands with the Legion Riders and the entire Legion family to show their gratitude for Blank's service and sacrifice to his country, Behrens added.

"Legion Riders are part of the military family," Kansas Legion Riders Chairman Don Behrens

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TROOP SUPPORT

Troop pay can't be threatened

A narrowly averted government shutdown earlier this month would have caused America's men and women in uniform to go without their paychecks. The American Legion is calling on Congress to ensure that the well-being of servicemembers is never again threatened by a budget crisis.

"It is inconceivable that our federal government nearly held up the pay of men and women who are fighting and dying for this country," said National Commander Jimmie L. Foster.

Noting that many critical civilian workers in the federal government, including members of Congress, would have received their full paychecks during a shutdown, Foster asked, "What jobs are more critical than those being done by our troops in Iraq and Afghanistan, engaging the enemy and protecting our country?"

The American Legion wants Congress to pass a law that will guarantee the timely delivery of full paychecks to active-duty servicemembers. The Legion received many calls prior to the shutdown from military families concerned about how they would be affected by pay stoppages.

In the days preceding the threatened shutdown, the Legion stood ready to help military families affected by paycheck delays through its Family Support Network. This program was created during the Persian Gulf War to help servicemembers' families with household needs such as child care, grocery shopping and auto repairs.

To contact the Family Support Network, go online or call **(800) 504-4098**. Requests from military families for assistance are referred to a local American Legion post for action.

On the Web:
www.legion.org/familysupport

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PLANNER

APRIL

Children & Youth Month

22 Good Friday

24 Easter

MAY

1 Child Welfare Foundation Board of Directors meeting, Indianapolis

2-5 Spring National Executive Committee meeting, Indianapolis

15 Peace Officers Memorial Day

21 Armed Forces Day

30 Memorial Day

31 End of Child Welfare Foundation Award year

JUNE

14 Flag Day

JULY

1 Department Children & Youth reports due to National Headquarters

4 Independence Day

15 Child Welfare Foundation grant applications due to National Headquarters

22-30 Boys Nation, Washington

27-29 National Membership Workshop, Indianapolis

COMMANDER'S MESSAGE

The sacred trust at Arlington Cemetery

In Section 34 of Arlington National Cemetery, just down the hill and within sight of Gen. John "Black Jack" Pershing's gravesite, the last surviving U.S. veteran of World War I has been laid to rest.

Jimmie L. Foster
National Commander

Frank Buckles was our only living link to the 4.7 million Americans who served in "the war to end all wars," and to the generation that founded The American Legion. Until the end, he humbly represented them, asking only that his comrades be honored with a national memorial. Buckles understood the importance of remembrance.

Now he belongs to Arlington, where the story of our republic is heard from row upon row of white marble headstones, each one a monument. On May 13, 1864, Pvt. William Christman of the Union Army was the first person buried at the former estate, and since then Arlington's soil has become ever more sacred. Its 624 acres are home to veterans and military casualties of every war and conflict involving the United States, from the American Revolution to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Burial among such noble company is one of the nation's highest honors.

That said, revelations last year of hundreds of unmarked or mismarked graves, dumped burial urns and millions of dollars wasted at Arlington were nothing less than stomach-turning. Behind the pristine grounds and ordered ceremonies, dysfunctional management plagued our most revered military cemetery, leaving its Army overseers to concede that they violated the public's trust.

As the scandal made headlines in 2010, veterans organizations – including The American Legion, with a resolution passed at the 92nd National Convention in Milwaukee – called for operations at Arlington to be transferred to the Department of Veterans Affairs, which oversees 131 cemeteries with 3 million graves. Secretary of the Army John McHugh agreed that there is "no excuse" for negligence but told the House Armed Services Committee that it remains the military's responsibility, particularly in wartime, to carry heroes to their final resting places.

Nearly a year later, we are cautiously optimistic about the Army's efforts to right the wrongs found at Arlington. Top officials have been fired, new staff hired and trained, and accountability enforced.

Speaking candidly to Legionnaires at the Washington Conference in March, Kathryn Condon, executive director of the Army National Cemeteries Program, said that most issues have been resolved, but others were uncovered. It appears that the Army won't settle for patching a hole at Arlington, and is committed to an extensive overhaul of operations, from new burial equipment and digital mapping to a consolidated call center for families wishing to schedule services.

With 300,000 graves, and an average of 25 funerals a day, Arlington is no ordinary cemetery. To every American sent into harm's way on our behalf, this hallowed ground stands as a pledge: whether you die doing your duty or return home to us, your service and sacrifice will forever be remembered in this place. Those who are entrusted with their remains have no room for error.

Memoranda

ONLINE GIVING

The American Legion's ability to improve lives for children, disaster victims, wounded warriors and others depends on financial contributions from members and nonmembers alike. A safe, easy web page at **www.legion.org** makes donating to the Legion fund of your choice – or to American Legion Charities, which allows you to make a credit-card donation and choose a specific program to support – more convenient than ever.

www.legion.org/donate

BLUE STAR SALUTE

The Indiana Blue Star Salute, one of the nation's biggest and most exciting events honoring military families, is scheduled for June 18 at Stout Field in Indianapolis. The program includes special guest speakers, live entertainment and a Legion Riders caravan with 500 or more motorcycles, along with ceremonies to honor Gold Star families, activities for kids, parachuting, and the distribution of Blue Star Banners to those with loved ones serving in harm's way. More information is online.

www.indianabluestar.org

www.legion.org/troops/bluestar

Dispatch

Published monthly.
Printed by HNE Printers, Columbus, Ind.

All American Legion publications are entitled and encouraged to reproduce all staff-written stories within, but please credit *Dispatch* as the source.

A proud member of The National American Legion Press Association.

Correspondence and letters to the editor:
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P.O. Box 1055
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Subscriptions or customer service:
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Annual subscription rate: **$15**

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Online: **www.legion.org**

STILL SERVING AMERICA

Does your post have a unique community program, an innovative recruiting method or a creative way of spreading the Legion message that could be implemented at posts across the country? Tell us how your post and its members are ***Still Serving America.***

In submitting your information, include your full name, address and telephone number. Send your items, labeled ***Still Serving America****, to the correspondence address at left.*

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ACTIVATION

Want to get involved in one of The American Legion's many national programs? Do you have a question about veterans affairs, national defense or what is going on in Washington? All you have to do is pick up the phone or send an e-mail.

Americanism/Children and Youth
(317) 630-1203
acy@legion.org

Economic
(202) 861-2700
econ@legion.org

Finance
317-630-1222
finance@legion.org

Internal Affairs
(317) 630-1330
ia@legion.org

Legislation
(202) 263-2981
leg@legion.org

National Convention
(317) 630-1292
dholmes@legion.org/bwilliams@legion.org

National Emblem Sales
(888) 453-4466
emblem@legion.org
emblem.legion.org/

National Security/Foreign Relations
(202) 861-2700
nsfr@legion.org

Public Relations
(317) 630-1253
pr@legion.org

The American Legion Magazine
(317) 630-1298
magazine@legion.org

The American Legion Library
(317) 630-1366
library@legion.org

Veterans Affairs and Rehabilitation
(202) 861-2700
var@legion.org

American Legion Baseball
(317) 630-1249
jquinlan@legion.org
http://legion.org/baseball

American Legion Child Welfare Foundation
(317) 630-1202
www.cwf-inc.org

American Legion Endowment Fund
(317) 630-1202

Boys Nation
(317) 630-1207
acy@legion.org

Family Support Network
(317) 630-1395
(800) 504-4098
familysupport@legion.org

Junior Shooting Sports
(317) 630-1249
cshort@legion.org

Legion College
(317) 630-1265
mherndon@legion.org

National Emergency Fund
(317) 630-1321
ia@legion.org

National Oratorical Contest
(317) 630-1249
cshort@legion.org

NATIONAL ADJUTANT'S MESSAGE

Sharing his experience to benefit others

Seven years ago, Legionnaire Terry Rice received Temporary Financial Assistance. Now he makes sure others know about the valuable program.

By Daniel S. Wheeler

Seven years ago, Legionnaire Terry Rice from Elizabethtown, Ky., had recently gotten a new job after being unemployed for more than seven months. And even though he now had a steady income, he'd fallen behind on his mortgage and other bills during his time of unemployment.

"When you're in that situation, it's kind of embarrassing," Rice said. "I knew everyone in town. I had a public job. And now, suddenly, I'm getting these, 'Hey, you're behind' phone calls. It was tough."

But Rice got help from The American Legion's Temporary Financial Assistance program. Through TFA, eligible veterans and servicemembers with minor children in the household can, through their local post, request cash assistance to meet the costs of shelter, food, utilities and health expenses. Last year alone, the program provided more than $515,000 to 640 families, benefiting 1,408 children.

Rice's grant allowed him to catch up on his mortgage and electric bill without the shadow of more debt to pay back, and it put him back on his way. Now, Rice spends a great deal of time educating people on the existence of TFA.

Rice served as commander of The American Legion Department of Kentucky from 2009-2010, and this year he was appointed department Children & Youth chairman. In that role, not only is he responsible for approving TFA grants, but whenever he gets a chance to talk about the program, he makes the most of it.

"Temporary Financial Assistance really got me going," said Rice, a member of Post 113 in Elizabethtown. "It's a great, great program. Just look at me. TFA allowed me to get out of my situation. I just needed a little bit of help, and TFA gave me that help."

Rice – who served in the National Guard from 1979-1986 and the Army from 1986-1990 – had been working a well-paying sales job when the economy took a downturn and he lost his position. He began collecting unemployment, which represented a fraction of his previous salary, but managed to use that and his savings and 401K accounts, which he depleted, to stay current on his bills for awhile. He eventually found another good job, but it took more than seven months to do so.

"Even if you're working again, it still takes some time to catch up," Rice said. "It's tough to get out of that hole, as hard as you may have tried."

Rice was a district commander at the time but didn't really know the specifics of TFA. Neither did members of his former post. But when some fellow Legionnaires at the state level suggested Rice apply for a grant, he took the advice and was approved for the assistance.

"When you get a loan for something like this, it helps, but then you have to worry about paying back that loan," Rice said. "With TFA, it was a grant. I got caught up (on bills), and I could focus on keeping caught up. There wasn't that added worry of paying a loan back with it."

As department Children & Youth chairman, Rice does what he can to spread the word about the program that allowed him to move on with his life after a rough spot. Recently, Rice contacted Kentucky's department service officer, Randall Fisher, about giving a presentation at the department's service officers school.

"I brought in a PowerPoint presentation on TFA," Rice said. "I went over what the program is, how you apply, everything they'd need to know. More people need to know this program is out there. We've all been there at one point in our lives — in a situation where we were doing all we could to make the best of a bad situation, but we couldn't do it completely on our own. We needed help. And if we were lucky, we got that help, and we did our best to never forget who provided that help.

TFA didn't save Terry Rice's life, but it did serve as a bridge to get him from a difficult point in his life to a better point. And not only will he never forget that, he wants to make sure others know of the opportunity to benefit from the program the way he did.

"When you get a TFA grant, it really eases your mind," Rice said. "Now you can worry about normal things – taking care of your bills, your family, saving some money. You don't have this debt hanging over your head. It takes awhile to get back in the saddle when you're in a situation like this. TFA is a stirrup to help you back on that saddle."

For further information on the Legion's Temporary Financial Assistance program, please visit
www.legion.org/financialassistance

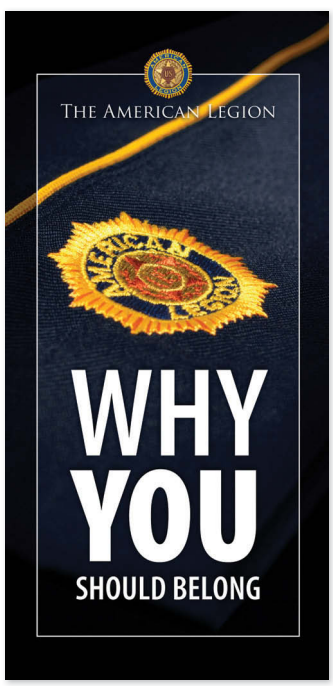
MEMBERSHIP

Why You Should Belong

New booklet provides information on dozens of American Legion programs, serves as a valuable recruiting tool.

Each year, American Legion department service officers (DSOs) help thousands of veterans receive VA benefits they earned through service to their country. The Legion conducts, promotes and supports hundreds of career fairs for veterans and transitioning servicemembers, bringing employers face to face with job hunters. Through Operation Comfort Warriors (OCW), the Legion raises funds to provide comfort items for U.S. troops recovering in military hospitals and transition units worldwide. Legion staff lobbies Congress for a better quality of life for U.S. military personnel.

Through American Legion Baseball, nearly 100,000 young men get to experience teamwork and competition each year. The Legion provides more than $138,000 in scholarships through The National American Legion High School Oratorical Contest. And Legion Riders, through the annual Legacy Run, have raised more than $2 million for the Legacy Scholarship, helping to ensure that the children of U.S. servicemembers killed on or after Sept. 11, 2001, have a chance at a college education.



None of this may be news to active Legionnaires, but chances are that most prospective members do not realize all that The American Legion does for people of all ages at the local, state and national levels. Now, it's much easier to share that information with those prospective members.

The Legion's "Why You Should Belong" booklet, available for download or by contacting your department headquarters, is a one-stop recruiting tool that provides information on dozens of Legion programs, as well as the impact of those programs. It's a valuable asset for any Legionnaire on the recruiting trail.

On the Web:
www.legion.org/documents/legion/pdf/Why_You_Should_Belong.pdf
www.legion.org/departments

THE AMERICAN LEGION

Legion Web streaming schedule in place

The American Legion will stream live several of its major summer events over **legion.org** live.

The Boys Nation candidate debates, elections, final senate session and graduation ceremony will be streamed during the session in Washington, July 22-30. The American Legion Baseball World Series will be streamed from its new permanent home in Shelby, N.C., Aug. 12-16. The National Convention color guard cont EDT, band cont EDT, patriotic memorial service, parade and general sessions will be streamed during the convention in Minneapolis, Aug. 26-Sept. 1.

Streams will emanate from **www.legion.org**.

National Oratorical Finals – Indianapolis
Sunday, April 17, 10 a.m. EDT

Boys Nation – Washington
Candidate Debates: July 26, 3 p.m. EDT
Elections: July 26, 6:30 p.m. EDT
Final Senate Session: July 29, 8 a.m. EDT
Graduation Ceremony: July 29, 7:30 p.m. EDT

Baseball World Series – Shelby, N.C.

Aug. 12
Game 1: Central Plains vs. Great Lakes, 10 a.m. EDT
Game 2: Western vs. Mid-South (Doubleheader)
Game 3: Northwest vs. Mid-Atlantic, 5 p.m. EDT
Game 4: Southeast vs. Northeast (Doubleheader),

Aug. 13
Game 5: Loser Game 1 vs. Loser Game 3, 10 a.m. EDT
Game 6: Loser Game 2 vs. Loser Game 4 (Doubleheader)
Game 7: Winner Game 1 vs. Winner Game 3, 5 p.m. EDT
Game 8: Winner Game 2 vs. Winner Game 4 (Doubleheader)

Aug. 14
Game 9: Winner Game 6 vs. Loser Game 7, 1 p.m. EDT
Game 10: Winner Game 5 vs. Loser Game 8, 5 p.m. EDT
Game 11: Winner Game 7 vs. Winner Game 8 (Doubleheader)

Aug. 15
Game 12: Winner Game 9 vs. Loser Game 11, 4 p.m. EDT
Game 13: Winner Game 10 vs. Winner Game 11 (Doubleheader)

Aug. 16
Game 14: Winner Game 12 vs. Winner Game 13, 4 p.m. EDT
Game 15: if Winner Game 11 loses Game 13 or if Winner Game 12 wins Game 14: (Doubleheader)

National Convention – Minneapolis
Color Guard Contest: Aug. 27, 8 a.m. CDT
Band Contest: Aug. 27, 1 p.m. CDT
Patriotic Memorial Service: Aug. 28, 11 a.m. CDT
Parade: Aug. 28, 4:30 p.m. CDT
General Session Day One: Aug. 30, 8:30 a.m. CDT
General Session Day Two: Aug. 31, 8:30 a.m. CDT
General Session Day Three: Sept. 1, 8:30 a.m. CDT

RIDERS from Page 1

said. "When our military brothers or sisters are injured or need help, it's our duty to step forward. That's what we do. As Legion Riders, our mission is to serve our veterans, our communities and the programs of The American Legion."

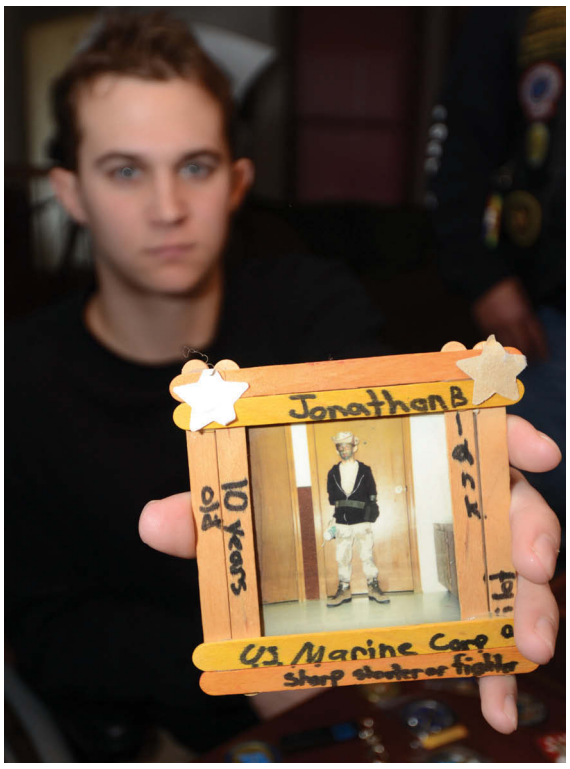
"Legion Riders are not only an asset to The American Legion, but also to their communities, fellow veterans and their families," Department of Kansas Adjutant Charles Yunker says. "Riders are quick to aid or assist at a moment's notice – be it a funeral escort, a welcome-home ceremony for a returning soldier, airman, sailor or Marine, or to give a helping hand to a fellow veteran who finds himself or herself homeless."

Last year, the Legion family across Kansas raised more than $70,000 for the American Legion Legacy Scholarship Fund, said Dave Schoonover, Kansas Legacy Run road captain. The Legacy Fund provides college scholarship funds for children of military men and women who have lost their lives serving their country since Sept. 11, 2001.

"(Kansas) had 11 Riders and four passengers complete the entire 3,300-mile Legacy Run round trip to the Legion National Convention in Milwaukee," Schoonover said. "The trip was a joy. The sad thing is that approximately 25 young military men and women lost their lives protecting our way of life during the 12 days it took us to complete the ride. That's why we work so hard to raise money to assure those children have the means to attend college."

The 72 chapters and nearly 3,200 members of the Kansas Legion Riders – with help from the state's entire Legion family – raised more than $377,000 in 2010 alone, and more than $1 million in the last three years, to aid veterans and support Legion programs. Some of the group's accomplishments last year included:

- $159,411 for veterans projects
- $72,396 for Legion post projects
- $70,000 for the Legacy Scholarship Fund
- $45,537 for Children & Youth programs
- $33,562 for the Warrior Transition Battalion at Fort Riley
- $21,000 to purchase 35 televisions for the Kansas Soldiers' Home
- $26,033 to Winfield Veterans Home, Kansas Veterans' Home at Fort Dodge and the Warrior Transition Battalion at Fort Riley
- $5,100 to purchase 30 smart pens for wounded warriors
- $2,550 for turkeys, food baskets, gift cards and checks for Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners for wounded warriors and their families



Above: Kansas Legion Riders Kenny White, Sam Langhofer and Don Behrens present a welcome-home flag to Marine Sgt. Jonathon Blank. The flag contains more than 100 signatures of area Legionnaires, Legion Riders, Auxiliary members, Sons of The American Legion and Wichita-area citizens. **Left:** Blank holds a framed photograph of himself wearing "Marine" garb, taken when he was 10.

Photos by James V. Carroll

Kansas Legion Riders chapters of all sizes – which range from six to 236 members in the department's 72 groups – contribute substantially to the efforts. Donations from individual chapters in 2010 ranged from $400 to $18,000. Chapter projects range from paying American Legion membership dues for active-duty troops, to raising $10,000 for the Legacy Fund.

Not all Kansas Legion Rider projects are about money. Last year, members logged nearly 310,000 volunteer hours to support local activities and Legion programs. Legion Riders and Patriot Guard riders provided escorts and security at several military and veteran funerals. They attended troop send-offs, welcomed home military men and women returning from deployments, and visited local VA hospitals, veterans homes, and soldiers at the Warrior Transition Battalion at Fort Riley.

Two homeless Wichita veterans were recently laid to rest with full military honors, and Kansas Legion Riders were there to take part.

"These two men (Navy veteran Franklin Myers and Marine veteran Kenneth Calhoun) were homeless and had no next of kin," Rider Ron Herndon said. "These two departed veterans honorably served our country, and they deserve the respect of a full military funeral. We honor them for everything they did."

Kansas Legion Riders serve as pallbearers and flag-carriers in the Dignity Memorial network's Homeless Veterans Burial Program. Gold Star Mothers accept the American flags draping the coffins of the homeless veterans. More than 1,800 funeral-service providers sponsor the nationwide program.

More than 50 Wichita-area Legion Riders recently gathered in a school parking lot to form a ride to welcome home Jared Smith, a young soldier who sustained injuries from an IED explosion. Smith and his family gathered on the front lawn, awaiting the two-by-two parade of U.S. flag-adorned motorcycles. The roar of revving engines reverberated throughout the Smiths' neighborhood, leading more than a few to investigate the unusual activity. Many then joined the Riders in a homecoming celebration.

"It was an awesome thing to see," said a surprised Smith, as he greeted each Rider with a hug. "I knew something was going on but had no idea until I saw you Legion Riders round the corner. You don't know how much this means to me. Thank you all for what you do."

After introductions and a gift exchange, Smith shared his battlefield story with the veterans filling his front lawn – not as strangers, but as fellow warriors with a common bond.

Smith explained that the IED explosion was only his first wound of the day. As a buddy carried him from the battlefield, he was hit again – this time by enemy gunfire. Later, the helicopter transporting him to the hospital experienced trouble.

Riders, family, friends and neighbors barely stifled a laugh when one Rider quipped, "Sounds like it was not a bad day you were having, Jared, but a very lucky day. You made it home."

The fact that the Kansas Legion Riders – some of them old enough to be his grandfather – cared enough to help raise more than $125,000 to help ease the burden of his battlefield wounds gives Jonathon Blank pause.

"I've thought about it a lot," Blank said. "At the end of the day, in my mind, there is no generation gap when it comes to military men and women. We can sit and talk about day-to-day experiences, frustrations, fears, and all of us get it. So, for that reason, I'm not a bit surprised that veterans of a different era are here for us young guys.

"I can't say enough about how thankful I am to have the support and respect of The American Legion Riders and The American Legion family. War and the consequences of war is not a mystery to them. They get it."

LEGACY RUN

Online form available for 2011 Legacy Run

Online registration is currently available for the 2011 American Legion Legacy Run, which will begin in Indianapolis on Aug. 21 and end on Aug. 25 in Minneapolis, the site of the 2011 American Legion National Convention.

Registration and check-in will be Aug. 20 in Indianapolis, while the run itself commences the morning of Aug. 21 and wraps up the afternoon of Aug. 25. Once in Minneapolis, ride participants will gather for meetings to review the run, as well as for events sponsored by the Department of Minnesota and the Minnesota Legion Riders.

The Riders will also lead the National Convention Parade on Aug. 28.

On the Web:
www.legion.org/riders

The 2010 Legacy Run to Milwaukee covered more than 1,400 miles and six states, raising more than $634,000 for The American Legion Legacy Scholarship Fund. In five years, the run has generated more than $2 million for the Legacy Fund, which raises money to cover college expenses for the children of U.S. servicemembers killed on active duty on or after Sept. 11, 2001.

James V. Carroll

HEROES TO HOMETOWNS

H2H program works small but dreams big

In Florida, a dedicated group of Legionnaires has big plans for the state's Heroes to Hometowns program.

By Andy Romey

Heroes to Hometowns (H2H) is an American Legion program that's still trying to gain traction nationally. But it's flourishing in the Tampa Bay area of Florida.

There, a dedicated group of Legionnaires, mostly from Post 14 in St. Petersburg, do all they can to ensure that local servicemembers are transitioning smoothly back into civilian life after they separate – the main tenet of the Heroes to Hometowns program.

As local district H2H coordinator Chris McCabe has found, a returning servicemember's needs can range from menial to dire. McCabe has arranged award ceremonies for severely injured veterans who returned home without ever being properly presented with their service medals. He's coordinated trips to Disney World, and even helped young 20-somethings fresh from combat find employment.

"(Heroes to Hometowns) could be something as simple as a welcome-home celebration," McCabe says. "It could be an awards ceremony ... Or it could be finding someone a job who hasn't been able to find a job. I can pave the way a little bit for a veteran to go in for a job interview. I can tell the (human relations) officer from a company that I am with The American Legion's Heroes to Hometowns program, and we're trying to help this severely wounded vet. That might get them an interview they wouldn't have gotten."

For three years, McCabe and other Legionnaires from Post 14 have done what they can to cater to the needs of returning servicemembers not just locally, but throughout Florida. The plans for the future, however, include something much grander.

It was an idea that was hatched when McCabe and Post 14 Commander Jerry Meekins met a young female veteran who was living in her car. The Legion's traditional channels for monetary aid couldn't provide her any financial relief. She wasn't eligible for Temporary Financial Assistance because she didn't have children. She didn't even have an address, so mailing a check to her wasn't possible.

McCabe and Meekins came up with a solution: start a fund, administered by Post 14, to provide direct, on-the-spot financial assistance to any displaced veteran who needs it. Meekins wants to be able to walk to his office in the back of the post building anytime and cut a check with a veteran's name on it. "There's no reason it should take 10 days, two weeks to get a check to somebody in dire need," Meekins says. "Someone comes to me and says they need $700. We're going to write them a check for $700, whether you're single, young, old or without children."

The fund has already been started, and it's growing. A big source of its revenue comes from the annual American Legion Day at nearby Tropicana Field. Each summer, Post 14 brings veterans from local VA hospitals to the venue for a Tampa Bay Rays game. The department H2H program gets a portion of each ticket sold, and Legionnaires staff a merchandise kiosk at the stadium that generates additional revenue for the fund.

Chris McCabe, right, and Post 14 Commander Jerry Meekins thank Army Ranger Staff Sgt. Cory Remsburg for his service during the American Legion Post 14 Heroes to Hometowns Banquet on March 12. Remsburg was injured Oct. 1 while serving in Afghanistan. *Photo by Matt May*

An American Legion Day is something that any post or department could potentially set up with their local MLB team, said Dan Newhart, group-sales account executive for the Rays. It's just a matter of reaching out to the organization. "We're all friends," Newhart says. "We're all looking for the next big idea, the next big event, the next big thing to do."

Fundraisers are also integral in maturing the fund. In March, Post 14 hosted a prime rib and shrimp scampi dinner that brought in around $3,000. Local companies gave donations, and a handful of wounded warriors sat at the front of the banquet room as guests of honor.

It's the little things, like fundraisers, that McCabe and Meekins hope amount to something great. Their ultimate vision is to buy a foreclosed home from a bank, and refurbish it into a residential center for veterans who need housing or a place to stay while they receive outpatient treatment at the VA hospital.

"The goal is to have our own house ready for people, similar to maybe a Fisher House, or it could be for the actual wounded veteran while he is undergoing some treatments," McCabe says. "If he doesn't have to be in inpatient care, but he doesn't actually live here near the hospital, maybe we could ease some of the financial burdens for him."

Finalizing the project is a personal mission for Meekins, a Vietnam War veteran. "When I came back from Vietnam, it was a whole different world," he says. "They hated us, they cursed at us. We're trying to make sure these kids are welcomed – deservedly so."

On the Web:
www.legion.org/heroes

The Making of a Star

MULTIMEDIA

Legion supports 'The Making of a Star'

Auditions for summer TV series, seeking talented servicemembers and veterans, planned in eight cities nationwide.

With help from The American Legion, a reality-performance television program debuting this summer on a major broadcast network is looking for talented servicemembers and veterans. Judges for "The Making of a Star" will be traveling the nation in the coming weeks, holding auditions in eight different cities to select 12 finalists, who will compete for a chance to become a star. The series begins in July, and wraps up in New York City during the week of the 10th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks. Created by the producers at 5 Streams Global Entertainment, "The Making of a Star" is on a mission to prove that veterans, military personnel, National Guard members and reservists have the talent it takes for stardom.

Auditions, some of which will be in Legion posts, are planned between April 27 and May 14, when the 12 finalists will be selected. They will then be drafted into a "performing-arts boot camp," where they will be trained to sing, dance and entertain. They will compete for various prizes, including a role in a feature film, a live international tour and other various sponsor-related awards.

Episodes of the star-studded series will be shot in New York City, where troops from all over the world will be entertained by some of the biggest names in the industry in every show.

The entire series supports The American Legion by raising awareness of the organization in audition cities, and by making a substantial financial contribution to Legion programs.

A dedicated website provides an opportunity for online registration. Audition dates and cities are: April 27, Washington; April 30, Charlotte, N.C.; May 1, Atlanta; May 3, New York City; May 6, Chicago; May 7, Detroit; May 13, Los Angeles; and May 14, Dallas.

On the Web:
www.makingofastartv.com/

MENTAL HEALTH

VA revamping suicide prevention campaign

The Department of Veterans Affairs will soon launch a new suicide prevention campaign that focuses on heading off a potential suicide before it reaches the crisis point, and is asking The American Legion to help spread the word.

The "It's Your Call" campaign revolves around the formerly named National Veterans Suicide Prevention Hotline (800-273-8255, press 1). The new name, the Veterans Crisis Line, establishes a unique identity and is designed to get veterans and their families to make a call for help long before suicide is considered.

The line, available 24 hours a day and seven days a week, has answered more than 390,000 calls and made more than 13,000 lifesaving rescues since its launch.

The rebranding is a national outreach effort to increase awareness and use of the Veterans Crisis Line and confidential online chat service; support and promote broader VA suicide prevention efforts; and promote help-seeking behaviors among veterans at risk of suicide and other mental-health problems.

The rebranding emphasizes the "press 1" option for veterans and family members who call the Veterans Crisis Line, ensuring their call is immediately transferred to VA's call center in Canandaigua, N.Y., staffed with professional responders trained and dedicated to serving veterans and their families. New messaging will reinforce the confidentiality of the Veterans Crisis Line for both veterans and their family members, who may be the first to recognize a crisis.

The American Legion has been actively involved with VA's suicide prevention efforts, and now Legionnaires will have the opportunity to spread the word about the new campaign and the crisis line through a variety of promotional materials – including posters, print ads, online ads, wallet cards, magnets and coasters. The promotional materials, which include ads targeted toward specific demographics, will be available electronically in the near future. Legionnaires will also have the opportunity to set up VA training for state, district and local Legionnaires, as well as refer veterans to VA for assistance.

Check **www.legion.org** for updates on the campaign.

On the Web:
www.mentalhealth.va.gov/suicide_prevention/index.asp

DATELINE: CAPITOL HILL

Hearings focus on TRICARE, military health system

Two Congressional hearings were held in March by the House Armed Services Subcommittee on Military Personnel regarding the topic of the military health-care system and TRICARE, the Department of Defense's health-care program. Testimony was heard from DoD representatives and military service organizations. The first hearing on March 15 started off in a promising way with Chairman Joe Wilson, R-S.C., raising a number of concerns that The American Legion shares regarding proposed TRICARE fee increases and the linking of future fee increases to the medical inflation rate (part of the 2012 defense budget request). Unfortunately, these concerns were not really addressed, and there was little follow-up in the Q&A later in the hearing.

Dan Dellinger
Chairman, National Legislative Commission

Written testimony, in the form of a joint statement by Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness Clifford Stanley and Assistant Secretary of Defense for Health Affairs Jonathan Woodson, contained this sugar-coated statement:

Finally, for working age retirees, we are proposing minor changes to out-of-pocket costs that are exceptionally modest, manageable and remain well below the inflation-adjusted out-of-pocket costs enjoyed in 1995, when TRICARE Prime was first introduced. We also propose minor adjustments in prescription drug copayments that include both reductions and increases in co-pays, the increase or decrease dependent upon the outlet selected by beneficiaries…We have made progress in the last few years in encouraging beneficiaries to elect prescription drug home delivery, and we believe this proposal will accelerate the adoption of this option as it has demonstrated greater medication compliance while saving on overall costs for the beneficiary.

Our proposals have been carefully considered. We have incorporated numerous safeguards – grandfathering in all current enrollees to unique programs; phasing-in new reimbursement methodologies for providers; and exempting certain beneficiaries (survivors and medically retired Service members) from enrollment fee changes – in order to protect our most vulnerable beneficiaries and providers. None of these proposals affect the free health care we deliver to our Active Duty Service members.

Neither this statement nor any of the other written statements contained any discussion of what medical inflation indexing rate the Pentagon plans to use for future fee increases.

The only real controversy during the hearing was Wilson's questioning of DoD's recent hiring of former Maine governor John Baldacci to undertake a full-scale review of military health care. Wilson asked: "Why is having a 'military health-care czar' not a duplication of the duties already assumed by Under Secretary Stanley and Assistant Secretary Woodson?" Neither witness saw Baldacci's appointment as either duplicative or interfering. Wilson sharply responded that the hiring appears to be the kind of government waste that needs to be eliminated, not encouraged, and could be cause for Congress to defer action on DoD's proposals to raise TRICARE fees and revise pharmacy co-pays.

The focus of the second hearing – held on March 16 – was the military health system from the beneficiary perspective. Sharp differences among the views of military associations about DoD's plans to raise health-care fees for working-age retirees were revealed during the hearing.

The proposal to raise annual enrollment fees in TRICARE Prime by $30 for individuals and $60 for families "is fair," said Kathleen Moakler of the National Military Family Association. Steve Strobridge of the Military Officers Association of America said his group "has not taken the position that TRICARE fees should never rise. If retired pay doubles or triples due to cost-of-living adjustments over a lifetime, we believe it would be unrealistic to expect fees would not rise by even a dollar."

The National Association for Uniformed Services (NAUS) was the only group that came out in opposition. "Our members ask to hold the line," said Rick Jones of NAUS, who is concerned that DoD intends to push for large fee hikes in future years. Jones said, "At first look, the plan for TRICARE increases may indeed seem 'modest'... However, it is clear that the plan is 'a camel's nose under the tent,' a Trojan Horse designed to divide the voice of retirees and start the roll-out for substantial increases in TRICARE fees and co-pays."

The Pentagon has not provided specifics on the size of future fee increases, but the current proposal calls for increases to match any rise in "medical inflation." That unknown formula for future increases is a concern for military associations, as well as The American Legion.

Deirdre Parke Holleman of The Retired Enlisted Association said the 2012 fee hike is "certainly not as appalling" as previous Pentagon plans that would have doubled or tripled fees. But she said her organization "is completely opposed" to linking future fee hikes to the medical inflation rate.

Five of the military associations, including one who spoke on behalf of 13 other groups, said they could accept what would be the first TRICARE fee increases in 16 years. The same groups could accept annual adjustments to these fees, if the inflation index used were the same one used to set retiree cost-of-living raises.

Every beneficiary advocate at the hearing, however, rejected DoD's call to adjust working-age retiree TRICARE Prime fees based solely on medical cost inflation. Defense officials haven't picked the particular health cost index they want. But their budget savings assume fees would rise by an average of 6.2 percent a year if tied to medical inflation.

Legislative Division stays on top of packed hearing schedule

Springtime in Washington brings cherry blossoms and dozens of hearings related to the upcoming federal budget. This year is further complicated by ongoing negotiations on the fiscal 2011 budget that still had not passed at press time. During the past month, Legislative Division team members attended a number of congressional hearings, many related to the fiscal 2011 and 2012 budget proposals.

VA's Office of the Inspector General. A House Appropriations Committee hearing was held March 9 regarding the Office of the Inspector General (OIG) of the Department of Veterans Affairs. This office, which has an annual budget of $116 million, is responsible for oversight and review of VA's programs and facilities. Included in that oversight is a review of more than 50 medical centers each year, 85 clinics, and some 29,000 complaints received through its hotline or website.

In 2010, OIG identified over $1.9 billion in savings from the community voucher program administered by the Veterans Health Administration and over $1 billion in savings from the Veterans Benefits Administration related to the granting of disability benefits. The American Legion is skeptical that greater scrutiny of each of these programs could generate further savings of significance. However, even if they could achieve a 50-percent success rate, an additional $1 billion in savings should be reprogrammed to meet the under-funded needs of VA within major construction, prosthetic research and other accounts. Some of these savings are part of the budget gimmickry contained within the current budget proposal; others will be scrutinized in upcoming hearings with other VA leadership.

State Department-Foreign Operations. On March 10, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton testified before the House Appropriations Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations and Related Agencies. The subject was the president's 2012 budget request for the State Department. In an atmosphere of fiscal belt-tightening, rapidly unfolding events in the Middle East and North Africa, and State Department preparations to become the lead agency in Iraq Oct. 1, Clinton pleaded with lawmakers not to cut spending for diplomacy and foreign aid, which she says is necessary to protect the country from foreign threats. Cutting the department's budget, she added, would also threaten U.S. progress in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Clinton also pointed to the department's support of dissidents in the Middle East as good reason why the agency should be funded at levels proposed in the president's 2012 budget. By getting a sufficient level of funding, she said, the agency would be able to help stop Egypt, Tunisia and Libya from becoming crucibles for terrorism. "In the years ahead," she said, "Libya could become a stable, peaceful democracy or it could fall into chaos and violence. The stakes are high."

The House made its spending preferences known in the recently passed House continuing resolution that reduces almost all State and Foreign Operations Accounts, except for specific security assistance accounts. While the Pentagon, Department of Homeland Security or VA do not currently face funding reductions as Congress attempts to address the federal deficit, no special exceptions for the State Department were enumerated.

This year, for the first time, the State Department's request is divided into two parts: the "core budget" and a separate "Overseas Contingency Operations" (OCO) account. The department defines its core budget as "the ongoing programs that accomplish our base mission of advancing America's security interests." OCO is defined as the "extraordinary and temporary costs for civilian operations and assistance in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan."

VBA-National Cemeteries. On March 17, American Legion officials attended the first hearing of the House Veterans Affairs Subcommittee on Disability and Memorial Affairs (DAMA). The first hearing of the subcommittee addressed the budget presentations of two branches of VA, the Veterans Benefits Administration and the National Cemetery Administration. The Legion has concerns that areas of NCA operations, particularly State Cemetery Construction Grants for the purposes of ensuring State Veteran Cemeteries meet National Shrine standards, could be underfunded. A simple increase of as little as $5 million could ensure full funding; no projects would be backlogged as a

See DATELINE on Page 7

MEMBERSHIP

Incentives remain for district commanders

National Commander Jimmie Foster has continued a program that honors district commanders and district vice commanders who make regular visits to their posts.

Personal contact at this level sets an example for post membership workers to make the personal contacts necessary for successful membership programs.

In order to qualify for the award, district commanders and/or vice commanders must visit each post in his or her district during the year.

For districts with more than 30 posts, district vice commanders can assist in making post visits, but the district commander must visit at least 30.

A list of posts in a district can be obtained with the assistance of department headquarters. The list is mailed in spreadsheet format to each district commander.

At the completion of the 100-percent visit requirement, district commanders will send the completed spreadsheet to the department, and it will be forwarded to National Headquarters by Aug. 1.

www.legion.org/commander
Click on Post Visitation Award

Awards

District commanders who achieve the 100-percent visit requirement receive certificates recognizing their achievements. Additionally, qualifying districts will be split into five categories and given special prizes, based on drawings. Categories will separate districts by number of posts.

The district commander drawn from each category will receive a gift certificate from National Emblem Sales. The certificate amount will reflect the increased difficulty for larger districts.

Category 1 (up to 20 posts) – $100
Category 2 (21-35 posts) – $200
Category 3 (36-50 posts) – $300
Category 4 (51-65 posts) – $400
Category 5 (over 65 posts) – $500

Additionally, department commanders whose departments have all districts achieving the 100-percent requirement will receive special recognition at the 93rd National Convention.

MEMBERSHIP

Post Excellence Award continues

Purpose

National Commander Jimmie Foster has continued the Post Excellence Award program, which honors posts that show excellence in membership participation, youth activities, community service, and support to veterans and U.S. troops.

The award promotes membership growth, demonstrates Legion values to youth, and increases the Legion family's visibility through community-service projects. Many posts may already qualify for a Post Excellence Award because of their programs and activities.

Criteria

Standards to be achieved in each area include:

- **Membership** – Post membership must be at least one member greater than the previous year. 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 Legion family members. Potential projects abound; for example, a post could focus on a Children & Youth service or fulfill a strictly local need. A monetary donation may be part of the project, but it does not constitute an entire project.
- **Service to Troops or Veterans** – The post must organize a project supporting troops or veterans, involving Legion family members outside the post. Projects could include Legion programs such as the Family Support Network or Heroes to Hometowns. Or they could simply help a local veteran with needed improvements to a home. A monetary donation may be part of the project, but it does not constitute an entire project.

www.legion.org/commander
Click on Post Awards

Certification

District commanders must certify posts as having fulfilled the four specified criteria. District commanders will submit a list of posts meeting the criteria to department headquarters. The list should include the post name, post number, address and commander's name. Ideally, the last two criteria are accompanied with copies of press releases submitted to local media that raise awareness for the projects. This ensures the projects were not only accomplished but that an attempt was made to enhance The American Legion's image. The copy submitted should include a date-time stamp showing receipt by the media outlet. The department adjutant will transmit information as posts qualify.

Each qualifying post receives a certificate of recognition, mailed to the department and awarded to the post. District commanders whose districts have 50 percent or more posts reaching certification receive framed certificates recognizing their achievements. District commanders whose districts achieve the highest percentage of recognized posts will receive additional awards. In the event of a tie within a department, all district commanders with the same percentage will receive recognition.

DATELINE from Page 6

result of this shortfall. VBA's budget is also an area of concern as it attempts to tackle a caseload backlog of over a million claims while transforming operations to a paperless, electronic model.

Vocational Rehabilitation Budget. The House Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity held a hearing March 31 on VA's Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) budget for fiscal 2012. The VR&E program is designed to return disabled veterans to the workplace through individualized rehabilitation plans, including education, training, and job placement; and provides those with severe disabilities services to help them live independently. The number of individuals applying for benefits under this program has increased as military personnel, Guardsmen and reservists return from conflicts and transition to veteran status. Subcommittee Chairman Marlin Stutzman, R-Ind., expressed both his support for and concern about the VR&E program and its budget, stating, "Clearly, the members of this committee support the concept of vocational rehabilitation. However, the Department of Veterans Affairs has been somewhat cavalier in implementing the provisions in section 334 of Public Law 110-389 that require VA to conduct a longitudinal study of at least 20 years' duration of three cohorts of VR&E participants. I find that unsatisfactory in light of the generous budgets given to VA since passage of that law."

Reflecting the general mood of the subcommittee, Stutzman noted that, "There is an old saying in business – if you don't measure it, you can't manage it, and unfortunately, the department's reluctance to fully implement Public Law 110-389 does not improve the current shortage of data that could help us improve the performance of this program."

MEMBERSHIP

Lucky 7 incentive program

During the 2010-2011 membership year, National Commander Jimmie Foster will award his national commander pin to any Legion family member who signs up at least two new members and renews five current members into The American Legion.

A "new member" is defined as any eligible person joining for the 2011 membership year who was not a member of The American Legion during the 2010 membership year.

National Commander Foster's goal is to recognize those in the Legion family who actively recruit new members into the world's largest veterans service organization for the 2011 membership year. To maintain the integrity of the National Commander's pin incentive program, only one will be awarded per individual.

www.legion.org/documents/legion/word/Foster2011IncentivePinForm.doc

Certification forms for this program can be submitted at any time. Upon receipt, national membership staff will confirm the names and mail the pin directly to the Legionnaire. National Commander Foster's "Lucky 7" pin incentive program will end on June 30, 2011 – or when supplies are exhausted.

"LUCKY 7" PIN CERTIFICATION FORM

Send to ***The American Legion, National Membership Division, P.O. Box 1055, Indianapolis, IN 46206,*** *or fax to* ***(317) 630-1413***

Recruiter's ame N Date

Membership number

Street address

City/state/ZIP

Phone number

TO QUALIFY YOU NEED TO LIST AT LEAST TWO (2) NEW MEMBERS AND (5) RENEWALS.
(include full name, post and membership number)

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

7.

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