THE AMERICAN LEGION
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FALL MEETINGS

A REPORT FROM D.C.

National Commander Wong briefs NEC on recent meetings with members of Congress.

By Steve B. Brooks

National Commander Fang Wong shares information from his meetings with dozens of lawmakers in Washington during the 2011 Fall Meetings in Indianapolis. Wong said he received mixed messages on veterans benefits being preserved during cost-cutting measures. James V. Carroll

American Legion National Commander Fang A. Wong had just spent several days in Washington, meeting with dozens of members of Congress and VA Secretary Eric Shinseki, when he arrived in Indianapolis for the organization's 2011 Fall Meetings.

The previous week's experience gave him plenty of material to discuss with department commanders, adjutants, members of the National Executive Committee and past national commanders during the Fall Meetings Oct. 10-13 in Indianapolis. Wong shared the Legion's legislative agenda and raised concern about the security of veterans health care and national security as Washington eyes spending cuts to cope with the federal deficit crisis.

Wong told his fellow Legionnaires about meetings he had in Washington with four of the 12 "supercommittee" members who are tasked with finding ways to reduce the federal deficit.

"A lot of them asked ... 'What are you willing to give up?'" Wong told the NEC. "One senator asked me to draw a line in the sand so that they can protect us to that line. My answer was basically, 'Senator, we don't even know what the sandbox looks like.'

"I walked away with mixed feelings. My argument to the senators and congressmen ... is we have 1 percent of Americans willing to serve, protecting us. We have 99 percent that are not serving. We have about 9 percent of the U.S. population who are veterans. So I asked them, 'When you consider cutting ... please let the other 91 or 99 percent go first.' That 1 percent already paid their dues, and they shouldn't pay several times over."

Wong told the NEC that his meeting with Shinseki went well, although the commander was troubled after Shinseki told him that 50 percent of veterans using the Post-9/11 GI Bill for education expenses drop out during the first year. "He said that is totally unacceptable. When they drop out, all of the sudden they are unemployed."

Shinseki explained that many of the young men and women who leave the military for college have difficulty transitioning to a less-structured lifestyle, Wong told the group gathered in Indianapolis. VA has been dedicating more resources, including on-campus counselors, to help reverse the trend. "The young men and women, when they go back to school, they need someone ... to make sure they stay, at least through the first year," Wong said. "After the first year, the

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VETERANS BENEFITS

Potential VA cuts concern Legion

The American Legion is disappointed with the "tepid" stand taken by the leaders of the House and Senate Veterans Affairs' committees against federal budget cuts that would compromise the welfare of military veterans.

On Oct. 18, a letter to the Joint Select Committee on Deficit Reduction (better known as the "supercommittee"), signed by the chairmen and ranking members of the House and Senate panels, was released. It contained provisions that disturbed Legion officials. While the letter opens with the statement, "Never before in times of fiscal crisis have we balanced the budget on the backs of America's veterans, and we should not do so now," attachments to the letter propose a number of budget cuts directed at the Department of Veterans Affairs, some of which, according to the Legion, contradict that statement.

The cuts proposed in the joint letter include the elimination or reduction of a number of benefits, including pensions, disability compensation and education payments. Under pressure from the Legion and other veterans advocates, many of the measures have been defeated in the past. Others, says the Legion, fail to generate enough savings to be worthwhile.

"Everyone appreciates the financial difficulties our nation is enduring and the hard economic choices our lawmakers must make," National Commander Fang Wong said. "However, as I said in congressional testimony on Sept. 21, Congress must also realize that veterans and military benefits must not be the first stop in the search for budget cuts. Surely our nation's defenders deserve a more vigorous defense of the benefits they have earned through their hard service and sacrifice.

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PLANNER

OCTOBER

National Disability Employment Awareness Month

23-28 National Legion College, Indianapolis

NOVEMBER

Membership Retention Month

11 Veterans Day

13-19 American Education Week

16 65-percent membership target date

20-26 National Family Week

24-26 Holiday Donor Blood Drive

DECEMBER

1-31 Holiday Donor Blood Drive

7 Pearl Harbor Day

14 75-percent membership target date

15 Bill of Rights Day

JANUARY

6-7 Membership & Post Activities planning session

13 Deadline for nominations for Employer of Veterans Award, Employ the Older Worker Award, Employment Service Award and National Organization on Disability Award

13 Deadline for Homeless Veteran Task Force reports

16 Martin Luther King Jr. Day

19 80-percent membership target date

COMMANDER'S MESSAGE

A thousand stories of troop support to tell

Passionate, active involvement with U.S. military personnel is so embedded in The American Legion's culture, we don't even think about it any more. Unfortunately, too many others don't think about it, either. When I tell Department of Defense officials and Family Readiness Groups what the Legion does to assist men and women in uniform, their families and their units, too often I hear the response, "I had no idea the Legion did that."

Fang A. Wong
National Commander

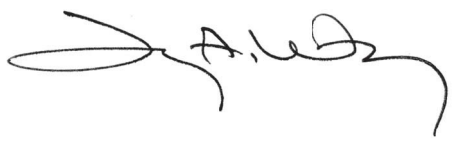
That is why I have directed National Headquarters staff to create a special email account – **troopsupport@legion.org** – for Legion members and supporters to send examples of all they do to support those currently serving. Submissions may be published in Legion national media, or included in reports and testimony in Washington. I am confident we have 1,000 or more stories of Legion troop support to tell.

Across the country, Legionnaires humbly conduct a wide variety of meaningful activities for the military community, from job fairs to demobilization briefings, from Family Support Network volunteerism to the delivery of Temporary Financial Assistance cash grants. The Legion's list of grass-roots military-support initiatives varies from place to place, depending on proximity to bases and the size and composition of the community. Efforts include posts that have adopted National Guard or reserve units, coordination of Heroes to Hometowns programs, and military-funeral security provided by American Legion Riders. With the holidays now upon us, it's a safe bet that at this very minute a Legionnaire near you is filling gift boxes, buying phone cards, planning a welcome-home dinner or baby-sitting for a military spouse. Every gesture matters. We know what we do. Others, however, do not.

A recent Pentagon report identified 13 community-based organizations around the country that collectively represent a "groundswell of support" for those serving in uniform, veterans and their families. The Legion, which has been a leader in troop support worldwide for more than 90 years, was noticeably absent from the list. I asked around about this and discovered that many in DoD, including some top officials, simply are not aware of all that the Legion does.

DoD and VA have an understandable concern, with so many different organizations wanting to help military families or newly discharged veterans: coordination. Former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Adm. Mike Mullen described a "chasm" he says exists between the military and civilian communities. And former Defense Secretary Robert Gates said "DoD cannot do it alone" when military personnel or newly discharged veterans need help.

Transition assistance and military support are among the most important values of the Legion. And, with nearly 14,000 local posts, no organization is better positioned to provide direct assistance or to coordinate community efforts. Modesty may be a virtue, but the effectiveness of Legion troop-support programs is a story we need to tell at the local, state and national levels. The troops and families we seek to serve need to know that the Legion indeed does all of this.



Memoranda

IN YOUR OWN WORDS
The American Legion's website – ***www.legion.org*** – now offers a place for creative work currently coming into the magazine in such volume that it could never all be printed. Poems, songs, fiction, nonfiction, art and photography can be posted at ***www.legion.org/yourwords.*** Submissions are carefully reviewed for appropriateness and may be subject to editing.

"I SERVE WITH PRIDE"
During the 2011-2012 membership year, National Commander Fang Wong will award his "I Serve With PRIDE" pin to any Legion family member who signs up eight members. These can be any combination of new members, members who transfer from their department-headquarters post, or current members who renew. The incentive program will end June 30, 2012, or when supplies are exhausted. Certification forms are online. ***www.legion.org/commander***

FREE BRANCH-OF-SERVICE PIN Those who join the Legion online at ***www.legion.org/join*** will receive a free pewter branch-of-service pin.

Dispatch

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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 & 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

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(202) 861-2700
nsfr@legion.org

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(317) 630-1292
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bwilliams@legion.org

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emblem@legion.org
emblem.legion.org

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(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 & Rehabilitation
(202) 861-2700
var@legion.org

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

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

American Legion Endowment Fund
(317) 630-1202

American Legion Riders
(317) 630-1327
legionriders@legion.org

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

Sons of The American Legion
SAL@legion.org

NATIONAL ADJUTANT'S MESSAGE

A tradition for 60 years ... and going

New Jersey post has achieved all-time high in membership for 60 consecutive years.

By Daniel S. Wheeler

During the recent Fall National Executive Committee (NEC) Meetings, Past National Commander Jake Comer told the NEC about an American Legion post in New Jersey that has managed to put together quite an accomplishment – one now going on 60 years.

Stevenson-D'Alessio American Legion Post 12 in Somerville was chartered in May 1921, at first named for U.S. Army Sgt. John Roland Stevenson, who was killed in action in France in 1918. In the 1940s, the name of Seaman First Class James W. D'Alessio – killed when torpedoes hit the U.S.S. Juneau – was added to the post. Nine years later in 1951, the post had a membership of 121.

And over each of the next 60 years, including 2011, the post has increased its membership. Now at 861 members, the post recently celebrated its accomplishment at an event that also doubled as the post's 90th birthday party. National Commander Fang Wong attended, making a presentation to the post on behalf of immediate Past National Commander Jimmie L. Foster.

Also attending the ceremony was Comer, who has a personal attachment to Post 12. His wife, American Legion Auxiliary Past National President Elsie Bailey-Comer, is a member of the post's auxiliary unit. "I think it's just an amazing accomplishment," Comer said of the all-time high streak. "It's a great group of guys in that post, and they do a good job of getting the younger guys into the post. They just work at it, and they've been working at it for 60 years.. It's really something."

One of those younger guys, 42-year-old Tommy Keller Jr., is a U.S. Army Ranger veteran who brought in more than 60 new members in 2010-2011, earning a Gold Brigade award.

"It was a good mix of ages, but he definitely brought in a lot of younger guys," said Tommy Keller II, the younger Tommy's father and Post 12's historian. "I'm really proud of the job he did signing up guys for our post."

But as in any successful, long-term undertaking, it's a team effort, as Keller II was quick to point out. Legionnaires like Post Commander John Miller and Membership Chairman Albie Wedderman were instrumental in last year's membership drive.

"It's a huge source of pride for our post," Keller II said. "Our guys just work at it, and it takes a lot of work from a lot of different people. It's a team effort. You just need to ask people to join. And we're already looking to next year. We want to keep this going. We started thinking about this year as soon as we finished up last year. That's always how we look at it."

It helps to have a reputation within its community like Post 12 has gained. In addition to providing honor guard ceremonies and hosting an Easter party for children ages 10 and under, the post also allows other service clubs and organizations – such as the Jaycees, Disabled American Veterans, AMVETS and Veterans of Foreign Wars – to use its facility free of charge.

Earlier this month, U.S. Rep. Rodney Frelinghuysen honored Post 12 on the floor of the House of Representatives, praising the post for its service and steady growth.

"There are many who deserve much praise, who over the years have guided this post to prominence – especially its 80-plus Membership chairs and past commanders, all of whom have given of themselves to the post." Frelinghuysen said during his speech. "All have given outstanding service, some have accepted the demanding position of post commander more than once, and all have served with distinction."

There's a tremendous amount of pride, deservedly so, among Post 12's Legionnaires. Its current Legionnaires have taken what the previous generations built, and they've grown it every year. My cap's off to them.

AMERICANISM

Samsung scholarship winners announced

The American Legion National Committee on Education recently selected nine students to receive $20,000 each for the 2011 Samsung American Legion Scholarship. An additional 89 students were awarded $1,100 each.

The nine 2011 Samsung Scholars are:

- **Alex Jolley - Cedar City, Utah**
- **Jessica Ziniel - Iowa City, Iowa**
- **Troy Cunio - Titusville, Fla.**
- **Andrew Lawrence - Ponca City, Okla.**
- **John McCallum - Farmerville, La.**
- **Marie Goerger - Wyndmere, N.D.**
- **Lauren Wheeler - Bridgeport, W.Va.**
- **Steven Spellmon - Fort Leonard Wood, Mo.**
- **Summer Stout - Hurricane, Utah**

The Samsung American Legion Scholarship is available to high-school juniors who participate in and complete the Boys State or Girls State programs, and who are direct descendants (or legally adopted children) of wartime veterans eligible for Legion membership. Students who qualify for and are interested in the scholarship must submit a completed application to program staff upon their arrival to Boys State or Girls State.

Recipients of the scholarship must use the funds for undergraduate studies (e.g., room and board, tuition and books). Each applicant is selected according to his or her school and community activities, academic record and financial need.

On the Web:
www.legion.org/scholarships

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"Frankly, I am shocked by the apparent ease with which our veterans advocates have compromised on the promises they made to me personally during our recent talks," Wong added, referencing recent private meetings he had with House Veterans' Affairs Committee Chairman Jeff Miller and Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee Chairman Patty Murray, both signatories to the letter in question.

"Admittedly, a few of the waste-eliminating proposals make sense; but from our point of view, hard budget cuts or reductions in – or eliminations of current benefits – do not," Wong said.

"The tepid statement that 'we should not balance the budget on the backs of veterans' simply does not square with some of the harsh, cost-cutting measures the House and Senate Veterans' Affairs committee leaders suggest."

Legion leaders say they plan to draft a strong and detailed response to the proposals submitted to the supercommittee. Recently, the Legion's board of directors warned that proposed fiscal cuts to the Department of Defense and VA would not only hurt the economy, but would also do "irreversible and irreparable harm to the military capability of the U.S. to defend the nation ..."

On Oct. 12, the National Executive Committee unanimously passed an official statement that the Legion "encourages Congress and the administration to cease all efforts to reduce the defense budget from its current level."

At the time, Legion officials indicated that they were extremely concerned about the work of the congressional supercommittee, which is charged with identifying $1.2 trillion to $1.5 trillion in overall federal-deficit reductions over 10 years. If the bipartisan group does not agree to a plan by Nov. 23, automatic spending cuts will be triggered, including $1 trillion less in defense spending.

FALL MEETINGS

Fall Meetings resolutions available online

While gathered in Indianapolis for Fall Meetings earlier this month, the National Executive Committee passed a total of 50 resolutions, spanning Legion programs and positions both internally and externally.

The process of rescinding non-legislative policy resolutions (some going all the way back to the 1920s) no longer coinciding with the Legion's mission continued, as divisions and commissions seek to pare down the numbers of resolutions on their books. And numerous resolutions regarding annual Legion awards were presented by the Finance Commission for passage.

One of the biggest topics of discussion during the week was the federal budget, especially as it relates to national defense and military personnel. This was taken up by the National Security Commission. **Resolution No. 1** encourages Washington to keep the defense budget at its current level. This resolution was accompanied by several addendums solidifying the message. **Resolution No. 31** opposes changes to the current military-retirement system that lessen incentives to either enlist or remain in the military. **Resolution No. 33** seeks a law to keep benefit packages agreed upon at enlistment the same, and at the same value, throughout a servicemember's career.

Resolution No. 32, also from the National Security Commission, arose from National Commander Fang Wong's recent discussions in Washington about the Legion's troop-and-family support programs. It calls for the creation of a Family Support Outreach Program that will work with the Department of Defense for greater participation, coordination and public awareness.

Other key resolutions, by commission:

Economic

Resolution No. 37: supporting regulation of for-profit schools and state approving agencies.
Resolution No. 39: supporting an investigation of hiring practices in the federal government.

National Security

Resolution No. 30: identify national interests before committing military forces and assets.
Resolution No. 41: policy to expand burial benefits to all National Guard and reservists who received an honorable discharge, or those whose death occurred during service.

On the Web:
www.legion.org/resolutions

TROOP SUPPORT

Holiday mailing standards released

This year's guidelines for sending holiday cards and packages to servicemembers deployed or based overseas have been released.

- Express Mail Military Service is available at some military post offices. If mailing to an APO/FPO address, check with your local post office to determine whether this service is available.
- Parcel Airlift Mail is a service that provides air transportation for parcels on a space-available basis for items not exceeding 30 pounds in weight, or 60 inches in length and girth combined.
- Space-Available Mail refers to packages, mailed to APO/FPO addresses at parcel post rates, that are transported domestically by surface and overseas by air on a space-available basis. The maximum weight and size limits are 15 pounds, and 60 inches in length and girth combined.
- Packages may not be mailed in boxes that have markings related to hazardous materials, such as bleach, alcohol or cleaning fluids.

REPORT *from Page 1*

retention rate is a lot better."

Wong said Shinseki and he discussed ways Legion posts around college campuses can offer support to student veterans as well.

It was a busy week in Indianapolis, as the NEC passed 50 resolutions, ranging from such topics as the federal budget to troop support and regulations on for-profit schools. The resolution that received the most attention, No. 1, called on Congress and the White House to halt efforts to reduce the national defense budget from its current level.

When the resolution was presented, Past National Commander and Past National Adjutant Robert W. Spanogle made an impassioned plea for support of the resolution.

"Our men and women in the military are the best-equipped, the best-trained in the world," he said. "If our World War II generation was the best and the greatest generation, then the men and women of today - their grandsons and granddaughters - are in my opinion equal to that description.

"The American Legion has insisted ... that they have the best equipment, the best weapons, the best choppers, the best of everything. The best for the best."

Spanogle said when The American Legion was founded in 1919, it was done so with the assumption there wouldn't be any future world wars. "The American Legion, in (its founders') view, was an organization born to die," he said. "They could not comprehend another world war. They called it peace through preparedness. But we know the history."

Spanogle went on to list times in U.S. history when the country was ill-prepared for a war, such as World War II and following the Korean War. "We've seen what we have seen before," Spanogle said. "The war in Iraq is coming to a close. There's much talk about leaving Afghanistan. 'Let's demobilize. Let's cut the DoD budget.' We have already cut the DoD budget, but Congress wants to cut more.

"That means no research and development. No next generation of lift, close air support, IED protection vehicles and personal protection/body armor. This also means no upgrades to tanks, planes and drones. All the tools that we have given our fighting men and women that give them the edge in this War on Terror will be gone.

"By reducing the DoD budget, a massive reduction in force, less battalions, less air wings, less ships, less everything. All of this simultaneously taking place while we're being told the world is a safer place. You and I don't think so. We know so. We have seen it up close. We are veterans."

Spanogle said now is not the time for a reduction in force; the resolution reinforces that sentiment, stating, "The American Legion encourages Congress and the Administration to cease all efforts to reduce the defense budget from its current level."

"If the federal government is looking to cut spending, they can start by eliminating the $16 muffins, the $76-per-person lunches and the $121 million that the Justice Department recently paid to conduct conferences at elite hotels," Wong said. "America must never send our military in harm's way without giving our service people the resources that they need to succeed.

"I believe we should hold the line. If that's the line in the sand, so be it. Make it happen."

Wong said the sacrifices made by individuals serving in the military deserve an exception to the cost-cutting axe.

"Our government seems to forget that TRICARE and military retirement pay are benefits available only to those who have given decades of their lives in service to their country," Wong said. "Many who received these benefits have completed multiple tours in combat zones and all have indicated a willingness to die for their country if called upon ...

Members of the NEC listen to reports during the Fall Meetings in Indianapolis. *James V. Carroll*

"Yet The New York Times recently called military retirement benefits 'Another Big Social Welfare System.' Do you believe that? Well, I have news for The New York Times. These benefits are available to everyone.

"All you have to do is visit your local military recruiter, spend a few months being yelled at by some drill sergeants ... oh, by the way, possibly lose a few limbs or suffer traumatic brain injury, just so you can participate in our social welfare system."

Also during the Fall Meetings:

- Wong told the National Executive Committee that his primary fundraising efforts will focus on the Child Welfare Foundation. "That's a great program, and we need to make sure we support that," he said. "That's one of my projects. The other is (The American Legion Legacy Scholarship Fund). It's for the future. It's to take care of those heroes that gave their lives to protect us. It's our turn to take care of their children.""
- National Economic Commission Chairman Harold Barnett announced that the Legion will sponsor a national credentialing summit early next year. The summit will bring together key stakeholders to identify ways to improve credentialing opportunities for transitioning servicemembers and veterans.
- Ret. Maj. Gen. Jason Kamiya, senior vice president of USAA, presented Wong with a check for $1.24 million to help American Legion programs. USAA, the Legion's preferred provider of financial assistance, donates funds for the organization's programs when they join USAA and purchase insurance or banking products. USAA Bank also contributes to American Legion programs with every new American Legion USAA Rewards World MasterCard account opened and each time Legionnaires make eligible purchases with the card.
- More than $13,000 was raised for the National Emergency Fund and more than $6,400 for The American Legion Legacy Scholarship Fund during the NEC meetings.

PUBLIC RELATIONS

Tools for Legion "communicators"

The National American Legion Press Association can help get the word out to your post members, and beyond.

By Laura Edwards

An active Legion post is a valuable asset to getting members to join the post and stay there. But equally valuable are open and active lines of communication between the post, its members, and all levels of The American Legion Family.

The National American Legion Press Association (NALPA), founded in 1923, seeks to promote those lines of communication, mainly through post newsletters and websites. These serve the dual purpose of letting members know about what both the post and the national organization is doing; and letting the national organization, as well as local and national media, know what the post is doing. NALPA's membership includes over 1,000 members of the Legion, the Auxiliary, the Sons, the Riders and other affiliated groups, who serve their posts as everything from editors to public-relations officers to business managers.

Mike Duggan has been NALPA's executive director since 2007, and has been active since 2001. When he began leading NALPA, it had about 1,200 members, of which about 800 were active. It fell to about 600 active members, but the number is "coming up a little bit now," he says, to 700 and climbing. Duggan's pitch is that NALPA's members are the "communicators" of the Legion, and adds, "The whole organization depends on communication ... if you communicate, you generally have success."

Christine Hayward is a member of Post 18 in Portsmouth, R.I., and has been editor of the post's newsletter (the *Flying InFormation*) since its inception in May 2004, as well as webmistress of the post's website since its inception in 2007. A past NALPA award winner, she offers that "our award-winning formula for the newsletter is 1/3 coverage of past events, 1/3 coverage of what's happening right now, and 1/3 promotion of future events." The website holds a high priority, as well – she comments that "all of us still seem to struggle a bit with getting information out in a timely fashion, which is why websites and email are so important." Of the more than 850 recipients of the *Flying InFormation*, only 200 get it by mail. The rest – as well as the large number of forwarded or "pass-along" readers – receive it electronically.

Legion Public Relations Commission Chairman Bob Morrill says that the PR staff at National Headquarters helps NALPA put its own bulletins together and maintains its database, in what Morrill describes as a "close working relationship." Like Hayward, he sees the importance of online communications into the future: "It's very vital that we use these new tools. PR makes a great effort."

Morrill encourages any member of the Legion Family with an interest in communications to get involved in getting the word out, because "the Legion and NALPA stands ready to assist."

To learn more about NALPA:
nalpa.org

HOMELESSNESS

Stepping up at a critical time

When a transitional housing residence for homeless veterans in New Jersey hit a snag in construction costs, Legion family members in the state sprang into action.

By Andy Romey

Department of Veterans Affairs Secretary Eric Shinseki has asked communities and local governments to join him in the fight to end veteran homelessness, and help shepherd those who have served back into the society they fought to protect.

That call to action resonated with Legionnaires in New Jersey. Rallied by their department leadership's advocacy, Legion family members from the Garden State reached deep into their pockets to fund furnishings for a state homeless-veterans housing center experiencing financial uncertainty amid its expansion. Veterans Haven, which provides transitional housing to veterans who have fallen on hard times, underwent a massive construction project this summer that added a new 44-apartment residential building to its premises. The addition was largely made possible by Legionnaires, Sons and Auxiliary members throughout the state, who donated nearly $165,000 to the project so that the housing wing could be properly furnished. The building will be officially unveiled Oct. 27 at a ribbon-cutting ceremony.

"The American Legion has stepped up hugely," says Sean Van Lew, superintendent of Veterans Haven. "When we began construction, a lot of the money we had set aside for amenities and furniture in rooms was consumed in the construction process.

"With that money from the Legion, we are able to purchase brand-new bedroom furniture for all 44 rooms, computers and computer accessories for our computer room, new office furniture, and equipment for the conference center."

The donation drive was a personal project of Past Department Commander Bob Looby, who learned of Veterans Haven's swelling construction costs and decided to make it a focus of his tenure. Working with officials from the facility, Looby and department leadership devised a system whereby a donation of $2,000, covering the furnishing costs of an entire apartment, would allow that apartment to be named in honor of the person or group that made the donation. Legionnaires and posts are recognized with a plaque at the entrance of the apartment in which their contribution paid for the furnishings.

Past New Jersey Department Commander Bob Looby (left) talks with Veterans Haven Superintendent Sean Van Lew (center) and Legion Deputy Director Mark Walker (right). *Amy C. Elliot*

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CHILDREN & YOUTH

CWF grant recipients announced

The American Legion Child Welfare Foundation, celebrating its 57th year, recently announced its grant recipients, awarding a total of $506,683 to 18 nonprofit organizations. The grants, which were approved during CWF's annual board of directors meeting in Indianapolis on Oct. 9, will support projects that benefit the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual well-being of children.

- **Alström Syndrome International** of Mount Desert, Maine, provides support and information to families and professionals on Alström Syndrome, a rare genetic disease. The organization was awarded $13,125 for its project, "The Alström Syndrome Handbook." This grant will help produce a softcover binder with 12 topic dividers and approximately 40 pages of content (e.g., photographs, figures, graphs, timelines and supporting materials).
- **American Humane Association** of Englewood, Colo., protects children, pets and farm animals from abuse and neglect. The organization was awarded $35,250 for its project, "Family Group Decision Making Docutraining." This grant will fund the production and distribution of 3,500 docutraining workbooks, 100 facilitator guides, DVDs and marketing materials.
- **Angel Flight Soars, Inc.**, of Atlanta provides patients with free air transportation for medical treatments not available locally. The organization was awarded $16,564 for its project, "Angel Flight Soars 'Broadcast Outreach Campaign.'" This grant will fund the production and dissemination of information for pilot recruitment and outreach to the general community, through medical and other facilities.
- **Autism Speaks, Inc.**, of New York is dedicated to raising awareness of autism, and finding a cure. The organization was awarded $22,500 for its project, "100 Day Kit for Newly Diagnosed Families." The kit puts critical information on autism directly in the hands of the people who need it most – parents.
- **Be The Match Foundation** of Minneapolis is dedicated to raising the funds needed for a patient to receive his or her necessary transplant. The organization was awarded $16,050 for its DVD project, "Super Sam vs. the Marrow Monsters: A Guide to Bone Marrow Transplant for Children." This grant will help produce 3,000 copies of the DVD.
- **Birth Defect Research for Children** of Orlando, Fla., provides parents and expectant parents with information about birth defects and support services. The organization was awarded $18,500 for its project, "Birth Defect Research for Children's Accessibility & Outreach Project." This grant will purchase software to allow website visitors to hear content online. The grant will also purchase three ads in the online magazine Healthy Mom & Baby.
- **Children's Institute, Inc.**, of Rochester, N.Y., is focused on strengthening children's social and emotional health. The organization was awarded $9,500 for its DVD project, "Building Strong Military Families Through Play." This grant will help disperse 1,000 DVDs to National Guard and reserve centers nationwide, as well as to other centers serving military children and families.
- **Mercy Medical Airlift** of Virginia Beach, Va., transports patients to distant medical treatment. The organization was awarded $43,400 for its project, "Child Health Program - Info Dissemination Upgrade." This grant will provide for five modernized and upgraded websites, and a full social-media presence, providing information to the public and pediatric-medical world regarding child-patient long-distance medical transportation.
- **National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth** of Minneapolis is the voice for the education of children and youth experiencing homelessness. The organization was awarded $41,000 for its project, "Voices for Homeless Students." This grant will help produce a redesigned website, a new "Advocate's Toolkit" and a PSA.
- **National Center for Missing & Exploited Children** of Alexandria, Va., serves as the nation's resource on the issues of missing and sexually exploited children. The organization was awarded $25,500 for its project, "Child ID App." The grant will fund the development of an iPhone Child ID application.
- **Organization for Autism Research** of Arlington, Va., applies research to the challenges of autism, and offers communicational and educational tools. The organization was awarded $49,355 for its project, "Understanding Autism: A Guide for Secondary Teachers." This grant will help produce a video-based learning module to give educators a better understanding of autism.
- **Second Wind Fund, Inc.**, of Lakewood, Colo., focuses on decreasing teen suicide by providing treatment to at-risk youth. The organization was awarded $23,724 for its project, "Teen Suicide IS Preventable," a campaign to educate school gatekeepers about suicide prevention and how Second Wind Fund can help reduce the teen-suicide rate in their communities. This grant will allow Second Wind Fund to develop a short multimedia presentation, showing the success Second Wind Fund has had in lowering teen-suicide rates, to be used as a practical guide for school mental-health staff.
- **National Institute for Trauma and Loss in Children** of Albion, Mich., creates a healthy environment for traumatized children. The organization was awarded $20,000 for its web-based service project, "Trauma Informed and Resilience Focused Virtual Resource Center for Military Parents."
- **Texas National Guard Family Support Foundation** of Austin, Texas, provides programs to support military families. The organization was awarded $40,000 for its project, "My Parent Is Deploying To Combat." This grant will provide brochures for children currently in school that will explain to their teachers, counselors and administrators what it means to have a parent deployed.
- **The Legion's Department of Kansas**, headquartered in Topeka, was awarded $32,000 for its project, "Drug Free America - Ruler - Bookmark." This grant will help produce a six-inch ruler/bookmark containing an anti-drug message on one side, and the Pledge of Allegiance on the other.
- **ThinkFirst Foundation** of Naperville, Ill., focuses on preventing injury through education, research and policy. The organization was awarded $25,715 for its project, "ThinkFirst Campaign to Prevent Childhood Injuries." This grant will fund 100 ThinkFirst for Kids curricula sets for grade levels 1-8, and will also fund posters and brochures.
- **Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors, Inc.**, of Washington, is a tragedy-assistance resource for anyone who has suffered the loss of a loved one in the military. The organization was awarded $25,000 for its project, "TAPS Grieving Children's Care Kit - 'Klinger: A Story of Hope." This grant will fund a second printing of the care kit, and purchase stuffed horses.
- **The Legion's Department of Arizona and the SAL's Detachment of Arizona**, both headquarted in Phoenix, were awarded $49,500 for the start-up cost of their project, "Deployment Josh Development Program."

On the Web:
www.cwf-inc.org

DATELINE: CAPITOL HILL

Legion charter legislation passes Senate, on to House

The American Legion now provides its members with a service that allows them to renew their membership and pay their dues online. Last year, the Legion's National Convention adopted an amendment to the national constitution to authorize this new service. Previously, all dues payments from members had flowed to the national organization from posts through the departments. Online renewal has raised a concern, however, that because some dues monies now flow from the national organization to the departments and posts, that the national organization has "control" over those departments and posts.

Dan Dellinger
Chairman, National Legislative Commission

In order to resolve this issue, the Legion has sought legislation to change its corporate charter to clarify the autonomous, independent nature of posts and departments. As a congressionally-chartered veterans service organization, Congress must pass, and the president must sign into law, any amendment to the Legion's corporate charter.

This action comes on the heels of National Commander Fang Wong's testimony before a joint session of the House and Senate Veterans' Affairs committees on Sept. 21. In addition to this appearance, Wong spent two weeks in the nation's capital, meeting with dozens of members of Congress. One of his constant talking points was a plea for passage of these measures as expeditiously as possible.

On Oct. 6, the Senate passed **S. 1639**, a bill to make changes to the Legion's congressional charter. The measure passed that body by unanimous consent, sending the measure to the House of Representatives, three days after the bill was introduced. A House companion measure, **H.R. 2369**, is awaiting action by that chamber. It is currently in the House Judiciary Committee, and has 371 co-sponsors. The Legion hopes that final action on these measures can take place later this year, before Congress recesses.

Continuing resolutions keep government running

Legislative gridlock in the 112th Congress resulted in fiscal 2012 appropriations missing the crucial deadline of Oct. 1. As a result, Congress passed two continuing resolutions (CRs) to temporarily fund federal-government operations.

Both chambers of Congress were scheduled to be in recess during the last week of September, but on Sept. 26 the Senate worked some overtime, passing two CRs to avoid another looming federal-government shutdown. During a pro forma session on Sept. 29, the House passed the first CR by unanimous consent.

That first CR, which included $2.65 billion in disaster-relief funding, kept the government functioning until Oct. 4. President Barack Obama signed that measure into law on Sept. 30 as **Public Law 112-33**.

After returning from recess, the House then passed the second CR by a vote of 352-66. This measure will fund the federal government until Nov. 18. It was signed by the president on Oct. 5 as **P.L. 112-36**.

President signs veterans measure

On Oct. 5, the president signed **P.L.112-37**, the "*Veterans Health Care Facilities Capital Improvement Act of 2011.*" The bill passed the House on Sept. 20 by a vote of 412-3, and was approved by the Senate three days later by unanimous consent. Among its many provisions the measure:

- Authorizes VA to carry out certain fiscal 2012 major medical-facility construction projects, including seismic corrections to VA medical facilities in Seattle, West Los Angeles, St. Louis and San Juan, Puerto Rico; major construction at facilities in Palo Alto, Calif., and Fayetteville, Ark.; and the expansion of construction projects in Orlando, Fla.;
- Authorizes leases for outpatient centers and clinics in Columbus, Ga.; Fort Wayne, Ind.; Rochester, N.Y.; Salem, Ore.; San Jose, Calif.; South Bend, Ind.; and Springfield, Mo..;
- Extends to Dec. 31, 2018, specified authority for the treatment, rehabilitation and additional services for seriously mentally ill and homeless veterans, housing assistance for homeless veterans and VA's Advisory Committee on Homeless Veterans.

Senate appropriations panel approves spending bills

In September, the Senate Appropriations Committee set a frantic pace. Trying to make up for lost time, the panel sought to complete work on the 11 spending bills it had not yet approved. The sole exception was the Military Construction/Department of Veterans Affairs bill, which had been passed by the committee on June 30 and by the full Senate on July 20. Between Sept. 7 and Sept. 21, the Senate panel approved 10 of the remaining 11 appropriations measures for fiscal 2012.

On Sept. 21, the Senate Appropriations Committee approved **S. 1599**, the funding bill for the departments of Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies. Funding for DoL's Veterans' Employment and Training Service (VETS) would total $258.6 million, an amount that is $3 million more than fiscal 2011 but $2.4 million less than requested by the Obama administration. During his meetings with members of Congress, Wong stressed the need for federal assistance to combat high unemployment among the nation's veterans.

On the same day, the committee also approved **S. 1601**, the appropriations bill to fund the State Department and Foreign Operations. The measure provides $44.6 billion in total discretionary funding, which is $3.5 billion less than the funding levels for fiscal 2011 and $6.1 billion less than the president's request. Specific areas of interest to the Legion include:

- $7.9 billion in total global assistance to global health programs, including the fight against HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, measles, malaria and a possible influenza pandemic;
- $3.5 billion in economic and security assistance to Afghanistan;
- $3.1 billion in military assistance to Israel;
- $2.2 billion for international narcotics control and law enforcement;
- $1.5 billion in economic and military aid to Egypt;
- $1 billion in border security/anti-terrorism military aid to Pakistan;
- $660 million in economic and military aid to Jordan;
- $627 million in assistance for nations of Europe, Eurasia and Central Asia.

The House Appropriations Committee has yet to approve measures for either DoL or State-Foreign Operations. It is hoped that final funding for federal-government operations can be completed before the end of this year.

House passes veterans measures; Senate next step

On Oct. 11, the House passed a number of veteran-related bills, all by voice votes. These measures now go to the Senate for further action. The bills were:

H.R. 2074, the "*Veterans Sexual Assault Prevention Act.*" Introduced by Rep. Ann Marie Buerkle, chairman of the House Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Health, this measure directs VA to set up a centralized and comprehensive policy on reporting and tracking sexual assaults and other safety incidents at each VA medical facility.

H.R. 2302 directs VA to notify Congress of conferences sponsored by that department. It was introduced by Rep. Marlin Stutzman.

H.R. 2349, the "*Veterans' Benefits Training Improvement Act of 2011.*" This measure, introduced by Rep. Jon Runyan, chairman of the House Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs, directs VA to annually assess the skills of certain employees and managers of the Veterans Benefits Administration.

H.R. 1263, a bill to amend the Servicemembers Civil Relief Act to provide surviving spouses with certain protections relating to mortgages and mortgage foreclosures. It was introduced by House Veterans' Affairs Committee Ranking Member Rep. Bob Filner .

H.R. 1025 recognizes the service in the reserve components of certain persons by honoring them with a status as veterans under law. This measure was introduced by Rep. Tim Walz.

On Oct. 12, the House passed **H.R. 2433**, the "*Veteran Opportunity to Work (VOW) Act of 2011.*" The recorded vote was 418-6. This measure was one of the focal points of Wong's testimony and meetings with members of Congress.

As passed by the House, **H.R. 2433** would:

- Direct DoL, from Jan. 1, 2012, to March 31, 2014, to provide for monthly payments, through VA, of up to 12 months of retraining assistance to certain veterans from 35 to 60 years of age applying by Oct. 1, 2013, who: (1) were last discharged from military active-duty service with an honorable discharge, (2) have been unemployed for a designated period of time, and (3) are ineligible for specified veterans-benefit educational assistance; and also sets forth the maximum number of eligible veterans who may participate in the program and the permitted forms of education and training;
- Revise the guidelines for stationing Transition Assistance Program (TAP) personnel to require DoL to contract with a private entity or entities to provide specified counseling, employment and training services;
- Require the mandatory participation of all armed forces members eligible for employment assistance and other transitional services, unless a documented urgent-operational requirement prevents attendance;
- Modify the demonstration project on credentialing for armed forces active duty servicemembers transitioning to civilian employment by requiring the assistant secretary for Veterans' Employment and Training to: (1) select at least five but not more than 10 (currently, at least 10) military occupational specialties, and (2) enter into a contract with an appropriate entity representing a coalition of state governors to identify credentialing, certification and licensing requirements incorporating the necessary skills for such specialties;
- Create a three-year pilot program requiring DoL to make grants and enter contracts for veterans employment and training services with any of the 10 states with the highest unemployment rates in the nation;
- Prohibit full-time disabled veterans' outreach program specialists (DVOPs) and local veterans' employment representatives (LVERs) from performing non-veteran-related duties and services.

LEGISLATIVE

Wong to Congress: Address veterans employment

By Steve B. Brooks

As the federal government deals with a $1 trillion budget deficit, many difficult spending and reduction decisions will need to be made. And while The American Legion completely understands this predicament, it doesn't want those decisions to strip away or pare down benefits that America's veterans have truly earned.

National Commander Fang A. Wong presented that message Sept. 21 during a hearing in front of a joint session of the House and Senate Veterans' Affairs committees. Wong presented the Legion's legislative priorities during the hearing, focusing on veterans employment, the Department of Veterans Affairs' claims backlog, and the treatment of post-traumatic stress and traumatic brain injuries.

But before he finished, Wong made clear the Legion's stance on dealing with the budget crisis.

"The American Legion understands the financial challenges our nation now faces," he said. "The Legion understands that tough spending decisions are coming. That is why the Legion greatly appreciates the assurances our veterans have been given – from members of Congress, (VA Secretary Eric Shinseki) and the president himself at our national convention – that benefits earned by those who've served our country in uniform won't be sacrificed to achieve budget goals. Our veterans have sacrificed enough. They have paid in full their debt to society. However, the debt society owes them is quite another matter, and it's a matter that The American Legion strongly believes this committee is willing to address."

Wong said Congress needs to pass the Military Construction/VA Appropriations measure by Oct. 1 to assure a seamless transmission of benefits to veterans. "Don't condemn VA to another round of uncertainty through a series of continuing resolutions," Wong said. "You are so close to the finish line. Help start this fiscal year off on the right foot for veterans."

Wong spoke at length about the job crisis facing the country's veterans – more than 1 million veterans without employment, including 632,000 who are 35-60. Congress can pass legislation creating incentives to promote the hiring of veterans, to help reduce those figures. "Civilian licensing agencies must recognize military training, education and experience when a veteran transitions to the civilian work force," Wong said. "A soldier who drives a truck in a convoy through hazardous routes in Iraq can drive a truck to get eggs to market on time in the American Midwest. A Navy corpsman who saved Marines on the battlefields of Afghanistan has the skills to render emergency aid as an EMT back home. Yet the education, training and experience garnered from military service is not recognized by civilian licensing and certification agencies.

"The American Legion urges Congress to work with DoD, the Department of Labor and VA to find a way to translate these skills, and put these veterans to work where they can make an impact."

Wong also addressed a VA claims backlog of more than 1 million that leaves many veterans footing the bill for their medication or treatment. "Some are forced to choose between medication and food on the table" he said. "Some go into massive debt while waiting for VA to rule; even a retroactive settlement can't repair a credit history, or return a home lost through a mortgage default."

Accuracy, Wong said, is the only way to shrink the backlog. "Unfortunately, VA still is using speed as the primary measurement of success," he said. "But as we all know, when we rush, we make errors. Who pays the price when errors are made in this instance? I'll tell you who: the veteran, who may see a claims process go from nine months to five years because of one error.

"VA needs to develop a better mechanism for tracking errors, and it needs to use the knowledge of those errors to make a better training system."

Wong also briefed the committee on the Legion's ad hoc committee on PTS and TBI. "If this American Legion committee has learned one thing, it's that there is no magic bullet for curing post-traumatic stress and traumatic brain injury, and if the treatment works, regardless of what the treatment is, it should be used to help the suffering veteran," Wong said.

On the Web:
www.legion.org/legislative

TAPS

Robert H. Barlow
Portland, Ore.

Robert H. Barlow of Post 1 (Department of Oregon) passed away Aug. 28 at age 59. He was a Vietnam War Army veteran.

Mr. Barlow served as department commander from 1995 to 1996, National Veterans Affairs & Rehabilitation Region 8 chairman from 1995 to 1996, National Veterans Affairs & Rehabilitation Region 8 vice chairman from 1994 to 1995 and National Economic Commission consultant from 1999 to 2001.

He was a member of the National Veterans Affairs & Rehabilitation Region 8 from 1993 to 1994 and 1996 to 1999.

William E. Barr
Lisbon Falls, Maine

William E. Barr of Post 66 (Department of Maine) passed away May 10 at age 84. He was a World War II Navy veteran.

Mr. Barr served as National Children & Youth Region 1 chairman from 1994 to 1995, National Children & Youth Region 1 vice chairman from 1993 to 1994, National Distinguished Guests Committee vice chairman from 2007 to 2008, and National Americanism Council vice chairman from 1986 to 1989, 2001 to 2007 and 2008 to 2011.

He was a regional member of the National Children & Youth Commission.

Vincent E. Blank
Vinton, Iowa

Vincent E. Blank of Post 57 (Department of Iowa) passed away Sept. 8 at age 84. He was a Korean and Vietnam War Navy veteran.

Mr. Blank served as department adjutant from 1987 to 1989, department commander from 1984 to 1985, national commander's aide from 1985 to 1986, national vice commander from 1989 to 1990, National Americanism Council vice chairman from 1981 to 1982 and National Distinguished Guests Committee vice chairman from 2004 to 2008.

He was a member of the National American Legion Magazine Commission from 2001 to 2004 and the National Foreign Relations Commission from 1995 to 1998.

Gary L. Christesen
Idaho Falls, Idaho

Gary L. Christesen of Post 56 (Department of Idaho) passed away Sept. 20 at age 63. He was a Vietnam War Army veteran.

Mr. Christesen served as National Counter-Subversive Activities Committee consultant from 2005 to 2009, National Distinguished Guests Committee vice chairman from 2004 to 2005, and National & Homeland Security Council vice chairman from 2010 to 2011.

Francis M. Dabrowski
Easton, Md.

Francis M. Dabrowski of Post 278 (Department of Maryland) passed away Sept. 8 at age 78. He was a Korean War Coast Guard veteran.

Mr. Dabrowski served as National Americanism Council vice chairman from 1997 to 1999 and National & Homeland Security Council vice chairman from 2000 to 2011.

Clifford T. Gardner Jr.
West Kingston, R.I.

Clifford T. Gardner Jr. of Post 39 (Department of Rhode Island) passed away March 29 at age 81. He was a Korean War Navy veteran.

Mr. Gardner served as National Americanism Council vice chairman from 2003 to 2006.

Joseph W. Grahame
Elkins, W.Va.

Joseph W. Grahame of Post 29 (Department of West Virginia) passed away May 28 at age 75. He was a Vietnam War Army veteran.

Mr. Grahame served as department commander from 2004 to 2005, and National & Homeland Security Council vice chairman from 1986 to 1987 and 1995 to 2011.

Daniel G. Pruitt Sr.
Pascagoula, Miss.

Daniel G. Pruitt Sr. of Post 160 (Department of Mississippi) passed away Aug. 24 at age 84. He was a Korean War Army veteran.

Mr. Pruitt served as National Americanism Council vice chairman from 1996 to 2008. He was a member of the National Legislative Council from 2005 to 2008.

John W. J. Richter
Brenham, Texas

John W. J. Richter of Post 48 (Department of Texas) passed away Sept. 23 at age 85. He was a World War II Army veteran.

Mr. Richter served as department commander from 1986 to 1987, National Executive Committeeman from 1996 to 2000, Alternate National Executive Committeeman from 1992 to 1996, National Americanism Council vice chairman from 1988 to 1990, National Distinguished Guests Committee vice chairman from 2001 to 2005, National Foreign Relations Council vice chairman from 1971 to 1973, National American Legion Magazine Commission consultant from 1992 to 1996, and National & Homeland Security Council vice chairman from 1975 to 1985 and 1991 to 1992.

He was a member of the National Convention Commission Liaison Committee from 1999 to 2000, the National Commission on Children & Youth Liaison Committee from 1996 to 1997, the National Economic Commission Liaison Committee from 1998 to 1999 and the National American Legion Magazine Commission Liaison Committee from 1997 to 1998.

Dennis J. Vogel
Montrose, S.D.

Dennis J. Vogel of Post 154 (Department of South Dakota) passed away Sept. 13 at age 93. He was a World War II Army veteran.

Mr. Vogel served as department commander from 1988 to 1989.

Bob G. Walls
Mineral Springs, Texas

Bob G. Walls of Post 75 (Department of Texas) passed away Aug. 10 at age 78. He was a Korean War Army veteran.

Mr. Walls served as department commander from 2003 to 2004, National Americanism Council vice chairman from 1995 to 2001 and National & Homeland Security Council vice chairman from 2001 to 2006.

Clarence Walton
Cameron, W.Va.

Clarence Walton of Post 18 (Department of West Virginia) passed away May 26 at age 63. He was a Vietnam War Air Force veteran.

Mr. Walton served as National Americanism Council vice chairman from 1998 to 2006.

John L. Yeager
Enid, Okla.

John L. Yeager of Post 4 (Department of Oklahoma) passed away Aug. 23 at age 74. He was a Korean War Navy veteran.

Mr. Yeager served as department commander from 2002 to 2003, Alternate National Executive Committeeman in 2005 and National Distinguished Guests Committee vice chairman from 1994 to 1995.

He was a member of the National Naval Affairs Committee from 1995 to 2007.

D. T. Hargraves Jr.
Helena, Ark.

D. T. Hargraves Jr. of Post 41 (Department of Arkansas) passed away Oct. 5 age 85.He was a World War II Marine Corps veteran.

Mr. Hargraves served as department commander from 1964 to 1965. He was a member of the National Counter-Subversive Activities Committee from 1951 to 1954.

POST ACTIVITIES

A true success story

Post 526 in Asheville, N.C., doubles as a homeless shelter for veterans. And it works.

By Steve B. Brooks

To say the Veterans Restoration Quarters and Transitional Housing facility in Asheville, N.C., saved Ron Kennedy's life might sound a bit dramatic. Unless you ask Kennedy himself.

The son of an abusive father, Kennedy began drinking when he was a teenager. He went into the U.S. Army and served from 1976-1982, got married when he left the military, and eventually got divorced eight years after the marriage started. He battled depression and continued to drink heavily as he traveled across the country, working part-time jobs in the process.

Kennedy was at rock bottom when he settled in North Carolina and eventually was living in the woods just off a state highway. "It was bad," Kennedy said. "I kept praying that I would wake up from this nightmare. I was having suicidal thoughts. I was, in every form, a broken man."

Through a recommendation from a veterans coordinator, Kennedy made his way to the Asheville Buncombe Community Christian Ministry (ABCCM) homeless shelter, was put on a waiting list and eventually got a bed in the shelter. But he continued to drink on and off, violating the rules of the shelter. "They could have told me to hit the road," Kennedy said. "But they didn't, and I was able to get a few clean months under my belt."

Kennedy got a paying job working the front desk at the facility, but his old nemesis – alcohol – made one final attempt to take back control of the veteran's life. Feeling a need to celebrate, Kennedy bought a six pack of beer, walked to a section of woods, sat down and opened the beer. But, "There was nothing happy about this," he said. "I was really sad. I realized I needed to make a choice. I had three or so beers, and on the fourth one I just stopped and started praying to God. I asked him to show me what to do."

Kennedy went back to ABCCM's shelter and that's when his life turned away from alcoholism for good. The facility was in the process of transitioning into a new facility in a former Super 8 motel in Asheville, and the program's director, Michael Reich, asked Kennedy if he wanted to be on the advance team. Kennedy did so, and then took a job at the front desk once the new Veteran's Restoration Quarters and Transitional Housing was opened in December 2007 along Tunnel Road in Asheville. A few months later, Reich asked Kennedy about taking the position of front desk supervisor. Stunned, Kennedy accepted, and he now still holds that position – along with intake specialist – and oversees a staff of 16 men. And he does so in a building not far from the woods where he once nearly drank himself to death.

"This place, the people here, they believed in me," said Kennedy, who still resides in the shelter in a Program Free Room, which means he pays rent and buys his own food. "And I could have moved out of here two, two and a half years ago. But it's not about the money. It's so important for me to have the camaraderie I get here. It's important for me to show other people who come here that this isn't a final outcome."

Kennedy's success story is one of many that have been created through the Veterans Restoration Quarters, which isn't simply a homeless shelter. The facility does have 148 beds through the Department of Veterans Affairs per diem program. Veterans can stay there for up to two years and are provided a cubical with a bed, as well as meals, laundry services and case management. As they go through the program, they can advance to more private rooms within the facility.

The facility offers an employment training track that can include either attending school or being placed in a job-training program. The facility offers training in culinary arts, hospitality, truck driving and health care. And for disabled veterans who cannot work, there is the option to go to school and do volunteer work. And classes are available to the residents that include anger and stress management, chemical dependency, money management and GED/tutoring.

The facility also receives support from the Legion's Department of North Carolina and serves as the home of Post 526. "This is a jewel in our crown when you talk about The American Legion in North Carolina," immediate Past Department Commander Bill Oxford said. "It's really a shining light for veterans."

"The circle wasn't complete until The American Legion became involved," said Scott Rogers, executive of ABCCM, a cooperative ministry of more than 250 churches that was formed to respond to emergency assistance needs in the community. "And Ron is proof that, 'I did it. You can do it too.'"

Kennedy has served as post commander and said the post brings additional camaraderie between the quarters residents. "When you serve in the military, protecting your country, it's an honor," Kennedy said. "That is something that veterans share. The post gives us a chance to share in that bond. When we formed this post, we felt it was about time we started taking some more pride in ourselves.

"This place helps rehabilitate you in so many different ways: your mind, your spirit, your education and your finances. But most of all, it provides you a sort of community, and that's something everyone needs. You can go to school or go to work, but if you're not part of something, you still have those gaps in your life. This place fills in those gaps."

Above: The Veterans Restoration Quarters has a state-of-the-art kitchen that serves as the site for culinary arts training. Left: Ron Kennedy (right), a former resident at Post 126, now doubles as the facility's front desk supervisor and intake specialist. *Adam Taylor*

For more success stories like Ron Kennedy's, go to *www.legion.org/careers/159592/true-success-story.*

STEPPING from Page 5

When the $88,000 mark was reached to cover furniture in each apartment, the Legion family moved on to fund other amenities for the facility, such as computers, recreation equipment and household appliances.

"It grew from bedrooms to us furnishing every piece of furniture in the building," Looby says.

Located in the town of Winslow, Veterans Haven is a public facility funded by state and federal entities, including VA and the Department of Housing and Urban Development. Residents are funneled into its confines by VA, which evaluates veterans and deems them eligible for transitional housing. Veterans who wish to reside in Veterans Haven must agree to adhere to the facility's long-term program.

That commitment entails not only finding steady employment, but also becoming a productive member of society. The facility tries to make that goal as reachable as possible, employing a 24-hour staff that includes both health-care professionals and vocational counselors who can procure jobs for the residents.

"We've had guys who we just got jobs flipping burgers down the street at Checkers," Van Lew says. "Next thing you know, they're a regional manager there."

Veterans Haven has what it deems an about 75-percent success rate in transitioning its residents into society. That transition usually includes some form of recovery, as veterans who live there often have backgrounds with substance-abuse problems, Van Lew says. During their stay, they're randomly drug-tested and expected to remain clean. Eventually, as they find employment, they're given more responsibilities, such as earmarking a portion of their wages as rent, and developing a savings account that facility counselors help them manage.

They leave the facility not only back on their feet, but on a trajectory toward leading a productive life. "Most [of] these guys, all they need is a chance," Van Lew says. Thanks to the new building, the facility will be able to almost double its resident capacity.

Aptly named, Veterans Haven is a refuge of sorts from the "hustle and bustle" atmosphere that encapsulates the tri-state area. It's located in a sparsely populated area of New Jersey, in somewhat rural surroundings. Van Lew says the facility's location has been paramount to its success.

"It's really important to get the guys away from that temptation and out of that environment," he says. "It's good to give the guys an environment where they can focus on what they're here for, away from any triggers that might set them off."

But Veterans Haven wasn't so far off the beaten path that it escaped Looby's radar. During his year as department commander, he stressed raising money for it during every official visit he made to counties in New Jersey. He and his staff used social networking and newsletters to get the word out that construction on a housing project for homeless veterans could potentially be halted because of unanticipated costs.

Legion family members in New Jersey sprang to action, donating what the state's Department of Military and Veterans Affairs says is the highest amount ever raised by a veterans service organization.

"I think homelessness among veterans is something that is always on the minds of all veterans, especially of the Vietnam era," Looby says. "It's at a crisis level now."

A former Army Ranger who deals with homeless veterans on a daily basis, Van Lew can only agree.

"There's a need to help the homeless veteran population," he says. "It's the least we can do for people who laid their lives on the line to protect the freedoms that we all live with every day. The least we can do is to try to help them be successful."