Vol. 26 No. 05

THE AMERICAN LEGION
Dispatch
January 2016 A National Headquarters Publication

LEGION ASSISTANCE

Photo by Brett Flashnick

NEF, TFA READY TO HELP DISASTER VICTIMS

Assistance is available to qualified Legion Family members, posts where tornados and floods have recently struck.

By The American Legion

The American Legion's National Emergency Fund (NEF) provides immediate financial assistance to Legion Family members and posts affected by natural disasters such as tornadoes, hurricanes, wildfires and flooding. The fund provides up to $3,000 for qualified Legion Family members and up to $10,000 for posts.

The NEF covers expenses such as temporary housing, food, water, clothing and other daily household items.

"This is money given to them to cover out-of-pocket expenses," said David Elmore, assistant director of the Legion's Internal Affairs Division. "It's not like a low-interest loan. They don't pay it back."

In order to qualify for an NEF grant, an applicant must:

- Have been displaced from his or her primary residence due to a declared natural disaster.
- Provide copies of receipts of items required to meet immediate needs, such as temporary housing, food, water, clothing, diapers, etc.
- Be an active member of the Legion at the time of the disaster.

When National Commander Dale Barnett was sworn in during the Legion's 2015 national convention in Baltimore, he said the NEF was his primary fundraising campaign and that he hoped to raise $1 million to keep the fund viable as it continues to provide relief for victims around the nation.

More than $8.5 million has been provided

See NEF, TFA ready to help disaster victims on Page 4

NEWS ALERT

Legion Baseball registration

Team registration for the 2016 American Legion Baseball season is now underway. Register online: www.baseball.legion.org

Become a Paid Up For Life member

American Legion members interested in the discounted Paid Up For Life program can easily join online at www.legion.org/pufl. Legionnaires who become a Paid Up For Life member will avoid any future increases to membership dues and will never have to pay annual dues or receive renewal notices.

A Paid Up For Life membership cost quote can be provided online by entering a name and Legion membership ID number. For those who don't have an ID number, one can be obtained by calling customer service at (800) 433-3318.

2016 Eagle Scout of the Year applications online

The American Legion Eagle Scout of the Year will receive a $10,000 scholarship and three runner-up scholarship awards of $2,500 each will be granted. Applications are due to department headquarters by March 1; department nominee submissions must be sent to National Headquarters by April 1.

Download an application online, found under Americanism: www.legion.org/publications

Dale Barnett
National Commander

COMMANDER'S MESSAGE

New year to walk, meet NEF goal

I hope everyone had a happy and healthy Christmas with family and friends, and I look forward to what this new year brings to The American Legion. One thing that will continue on in 2016 from last year is Walk for Veterans events.

December's Walk for Veterans in Hawaii marked the first time the Legion's top three leaders lead an awareness walk together. Auxiliary President Sharon Conatser and Sons of The American Legion National Commander Kevin Collier provided a valuable opportunity for community members to hear how the Legion Family supports veterans, servicemembers and their families. And I know it won't be the last time all three of us walk for those who marched for us.

The purpose of the awareness walks is to let the public know that we are here. It might be a youth program, our support for veterans or something else, but we all have our reasons for joining and that's a good thing. Hoosier Boys State had a huge impact on me and inspired me to attend West Point. These walks are a way to let people know about what The American Legion Family has to offer.

There are awareness walks planned in the upcoming months in several departments. See if there's a walk in your area by visiting ***www.legion.org/walkforveterans/events***. I encourage you to plan a Walk for Veterans event on March 15, the Legion's 97th birthday, or conduct one during your department's convention this summer. Don't let weather hold you back from raising community awareness about the Legion; be creative on where to conduct a walk, such as inside a mall.

And when you're hosting an awareness walk, remember a component of the walk – raising funds for an American Legion program, such as the National Emergency Fund (NEF).

NEF is my primary fundraiser, with a goal of raising $1 million. The NEF has helped American Legion posts recover from major natural disasters such as Superstorm Sandy and Hurricane Katrina while providing temporary financial relief for Legionnaires recovering from tornadoes, floods, wildfires and more.

As of Jan. 1, $85,000 has been raised for the NEF. It's so important, no matter what your donation is - $5, $10 or more - you are helping veterans in need. That's what we do in The American Legion.

MEMBERSHIP

National Commander Honor Ribbon

During the 2015-2016 membership year, American Legion National Commander Dale Barnett will award his National Commander Honor Ribbon to any American Legion Family that achieves 100 percent membership by May 30, 2016.

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

The National Commander Honor Ribbon incentive program will end May 30, 2016, or when supplies are exhausted.

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

THE AMERICAN LEGION FAMILY

MEMBERSHIP

Recruiters to be honored with 'Duty, Honor, Country' pin

During the 2015-2016 membership year, American Legion National Commander Dale Barnett will award his national commander pin to any Legion Family member who obtains three new members into the Legion.

A new member is any eligible person joining for the 2016 membership year who was not a member of The American Legion during the 2015 membership year.

Each member listed must be eligible for membership in The American Legion. Forward names of SAL members or Auxiliary members to your detachment or unit for use in their respective incentive programs.

To maintain the integrity of the national commander's pin incentive program, only one pin will be awarded per individual.

Upon receipt, national membership staff will confirm the names and mail the pin directly to the person who earned it. Commander Barnett's pin incentive program will end June 30, 2016, or when supplies are exhausted.
www.legion.org/commander/pin

NATIONAL ADJUTANT'S MESSAGE

9,000 Illinois veterans remembered by Legionnaires

The Department of Illinois' Gifts to the Yanks program provides blankets, sweat suits and more to veterans in hospitals, nursing homes.

By Daniel S. Wheeler

Although the holiday season has passed, I wanted to share a heartfelt story of how our American Legion members are comforting veterans who are often forgotten about during the holiday season.

Nearly 9,000 Illinois veterans who are either homebound, in VA hospitals or nursing homes received a special gift and visit over the holidays from local American Legion members.

The American Legion Department of Illinois' annual Gifts to the Yanks program has made it possible for Legion members to act like Santa's elves for the past 71 years and hand deliver fleece blankets and cardigans, sweat suits and gift bags filled with everyday necessities to the veterans.

"When I give a gift to a veteran, it's a good feeling," said Ron Umdenstock, chairman of the Gifts to the Yanks program and a member of Post 1115 in Spring Bay, Ill. "Then when I get thank you letters in the mail, I get tears in my eyes. You can't believe how many veterans out there don't have anybody visit them or ever receive a gift."

The program originated in 1942 when Chicago resident Blanch Osborn wrote a newspaper article called "Friends of the Yanks," in which she solicited funds for gifts to disabled veterans. Two years later, she contacted the Department of Illinois to take over the program and Gifts to the Yanks was born. Umdenstock, who has been involved with the program for 27 years, said the program wouldn't happen without the many Legion Family members who raise funds, wrap the gifts and deliver them. Illinois Legion posts raise more than $150,000 every year for the program, which goes directly toward purchasing gifts the following holiday season for the veterans. Umdenstock said about $170,000 was spent on Christmas gifts in 2015.

And there's a competition amongst the post to raise the most in monetary donations.

Legion Post 1084 in Roselle has been the top fundraiser for the past decade, raising more than $10,000 yearly. Post 1084 chaplain Gene Mikulecky raised $1,000 for the cause this past year in only three days.

The 84-year-old Army veteran stood outside a Jewel-Osco store for two days and collected $720.25 for the cause. Wanting to reach $1,000, Mikulecky braved the cold weather on Veterans Day and stood outside a Walgreens for five hours, hoping to collect $280. He had his donations counted at a local bank and discovered he raised $279.69. Only 31 cents short, Mikulecky reached into his pocket and pulled out the correct change to make it an even $280.

"I was so pleased and proud of myself for sticking it out in that cold weather," he said. "It's a good feeling to support our veterans. We start up a conversation and try to make them feel good that someone is thinking about them."

Students at Lake Park High School in Roselle also support Gifts to the Yanks by collecting donations at train stations. Post 1084 provides the students with vests that indicate they are volunteers and a Legionnaire always accompanies them to let possible donors know what Gifts to the Yanks is about. Last year, the students raised $3,000 for the program.

"It really gets emotional sometimes when you see what you're doing is well worth it," Umdenstock said of the visits to veterans in nursing homes and VA hospitals.

Share your post-related success story

Email: *dispatch@legion.org*

Dispatch

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From NEF, TFA ready to help disaster victims on Page 1

to Legion Family members and posts through the NEF since its inception. All contributions made to the NEF are deposited in a special account and used exclusively to meet urgent needs of Legion Family members. Not one donated dollar is used to fund administrative or fundraising costs.

To apply for assistance or to donate to the NEF, visit *www.legion.org/nef*. Or call *(800) 433-3318*.

Also, NEF media brochures are available for download under Internal Affairs on the Legion's publication web page, *www.legion.org/publications*, to help department and post leaders on best practices to follow before, during and after an emergency.

The brochures describe how to set up an NEF response team, locate affected Legion Family members, assist victims in filling out NEF applications and generate good public relations. NEF applications are also included.

While the NEF provides immediate assistance to Legion Family members, qualified children of Legion-eligible veterans may receive up to $2,500 through the Legion's Temporary Financial Assistance (TFA) program.

TFA grants can provide a lifeline to veteran families in need during times like these as they help meet the costs of shelter, food, utilities and health expenses. During disasters where a family has lost a home or it's been severely damaged, TFA could be used to help cover mortgage costs while that family pays for temporary housing.

TFA is limited to minor children (17 years or younger) whose biological parent, or legal guardian, is a veteran and is, or would have been, eligible for American Legion membership. However, Legion membership is not required to receive a TFA grant.

Children 18 to 20 years old will also be considered if a current disability requires special schooling or indefinite in-home care, or they are enrolled in an approved high school and unmarried.

Those wishing to apply for a TFA grant must contact their local Legion post.

More than $800,000 has been provided to children through TFA grants in 2015 alone.

ASK A SERVICE OFFICER

Role of a veterans service officer

Cajun Comeau
Department Service Officer, North Carolina

Q. ***What is the role of a veterans service officer?***

A. A veterans service officer (VSO) is an individual who advocates for veterans benefits. They should never take an action which they believe to have a negative impact on the veteran or family of the veteran. The VSO is also responsible for being proficient in the areas of customer service, technical knowledge of regulation and law as it pertains to VA matters, and proper disposition of claims and appeals. They too should be empathetic, understanding and helpful.

I commonly group misconduct by VSOs into two sections: illegal and unprofessional. It is very rare that a VSO willingly executes an illegal action so I will focus on some issues which may constitute unprofessional conduct. These actions can include not filing a claim in a timely manner, unprofessional conversation with a client, and willfully submitting fraudulent evidence or documentation.

It is very important when seeking a professional VSO that you take several factors into consideration. First, verify that the service officer is accredited by a veterans service organization, such as The American Legion. Second, if a VSO attempts to charge you money for services rendered, either covertly or overtly, they should be reported to the Department of Veterans Affairs. Third, you should make an appointment with the prospective representative to explain your case and get a feel for how well they do their job. If you are not satisfied, find another VSO that you feel comfortable with. The VSO is your lifeline to VA benefits, and you must ensure that they are providing everything you deserve.

It is important to The American Legion that all of its accredited VSOs are competent, capable and professional. One of the many duties of an American Legion department service officer (DSO) is to assure wholesome and professional service to veterans who allow us to represent their interests with the VA. If you experience what you believe to be substandard service, you should contact the DSO for your state and file a written complaint.

Contact a Legion service officer to assist with a VA claim or benefits: *www.legion.org/serviceofficers*

POST ACTIVITIES

'The little post that can'

Over the past eight years, the Fogg-Roberts American Legion Post 78 in Hyde Parke, Mass., has raised and donated $100,000 to programs that support veterans.

"The members of Fogg-Roberts Post 78 are excited that we can assist the men and women of our armed forces and that our service to them is appreciated," said Post 78 Commander Bill Maclver.

Donations have been distributed to veteran assistance programs such as the Legion's Operation Comfort Warriors program and the Massachusetts National Guard Family Readiness Group. The money is raised during Post 78's annual summer fundraiser, which involves food and raffle prizes.

"We will continue to help our brothers and sisters in arms moving forward," Maclver said. "The Fogg-Roberts post has a nickname – the little post that can."

TROOP SUPPORT

Hoosier post delivers a Merry Christmas

At the second annual Spirit of Christmas event, 18 families of veterans and servicemembers had their season made a little brighter as they received more than 600 gifts at the Hendricks County Fairgrounds in Danville, Ind., Dec. 19.

"We came together in a two-month period and raised $15,000 for these families," said Ralph "Zoc" Zoccolillo, a member of Post 145 in Avon, Ind. "The sacrifices that they've made mean so much to all of us. This is to say thank you to them and to say Merry Christmas."

One family was given a new vehicle along with a new-found hope.

"Our old car was on its last limb, and we were scared to drive it because we didn't want to break down," said Indiana National Guard Pvt. Austin Williams. Williams and his wife were both unemployed and the parents of three young girls, all under the age of 2 years old – the youngest of whom was born with a life-threatening condition.

"I was in basic training when (Ava) was born … and I was told she couldn't move the whole left side of her body," he recalled. "They think she had a stroke while she was in the womb."

Williams said when his family found out they were nominated for the Spirit of Christmas event, they requested a front wheel bearing for their car to take Ava to her twice-a-week medical appointments.

"We heard that somebody requested some car parts for Christmas, but we didn't have any extra car parts laying around, but we did have an extra (2002 Chevrolet) TrailBlazer," said Michael Walker, a retired Air Force veteran and representative of Cars 4 Heroes, as he presented Williams with the keys to the vehicle.

Walker said Cars 4 Heroes is a non-profit organization in its 20th year that fixes donated cars and gives them to veterans in need.

Even some of the smallest gifts made a huge impact.

"The Dodd family's little boy, (Mason), was going to open his first box, and before he did he looked at his dad and said all he wanted a pair of Spiderman sneakers," recalled Zoccolillo. "And, what do you think that first gift was? It was a pair of Spiderman sneakers."

Helping veterans and their families in need, whether at Christmas or throughout the year, is what Bruce Curry, Indiana's 6th District commander, said the Legion Family is all about.

"The American Legion is not just a group of guys sitting around at a post – we're out supporting our communities," Curry explained. "If a veteran is in trouble, they can go to The American Legion, sit down with a post service officer and get the help they need."

Zoccolillo added, "This is why you have be a part of The American Legion … your brothers and sisters, your comrades that served, they're still serving. They may not have the uniform on today, but they continue to give, to take care of their community and to make sure these families have everything. It's that Legion Family that brings all of this together."

POST ACTIVITIES

Sale of post home benefits student veterans

American Legion Post 430 in Galloway, N.J., recently gave a gift that will keep on giving to veterans, and others, for years to come.

Post 430 recently gave $25,000 to the Garden State's Stockton University to establish an endowment to help student veterans enrolled in the university's Master of Social Work (MSW) program.

The post generated money for the scholarships from a recent sale of its post home, and the Legionnaires decided to use it to give back to their nation.

In signing the endowment agreement, Stockton University Interim President Harvey Kesselman noted the immediate and long-term benefits of the post's gift.

"The Legion is deeply supportive of what we do here, and we are really honored that you have chosen us," said Kesselman in a Stockton University press release. "To have support for this academic discipline pays double the benefits, as the graduates will be able to help others in need. It is the gift that keeps on giving."

The university said its MSW program is designed to educate social workers for advanced-level practice with diverse individuals, families and communities.

"We were approached by the MSW program to see if we could help the graduate students," Post 430 Commander Russell Konrady said. "This will be one scholarship annually for $1,000 for as long as the program is in existence."

Along with the MSW program endowment, the university is also using funds from the post to establish four additional scholarships, which will each support undergraduate students who are veterans with $2,500 annually for the next decade.

According to Stockton University, the initial awards will be distributed in the 2016-2017 academic year, and recipients will be determined by the university's scholarship selection committee.

While only 4 percent of the university's students are veterans, the Military Times recently ranked Stockton University 6th amongst the best colleges and universities for veterans nationwide in 2016.

Additional contributions to the endowment may be made at any time.

DID YOU KNOW?

- In 2015, Operation Comfort Warriors provided $225,000 in grants to assist wounded veterans in their rehabilitation. www.legion.org/ocw

- There are 1,800 American Legion Rider chapters across the country and 100,000 Riders. Locate a Riders chapter in your area: www.legion.org/riders

- From July 3-8, the National Flight Academy (NFA) in Pensacola, Fla., is hosting an American Legion Week. NFA has helped thousands of seventh- through 12th-graders learn STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) principles while developing an interest in aviation. The 144 students attending the development program will spend six days in a multi-story, 102,000-square-foot facility. They will learn from military instructors, eat in a mess hall, sleep in staterooms, and experience the constant rumble of the ship's engine and aircraft taking off and landing.

  Visit www.nationalflightacademy.com/legion/ to see how Legion members and posts can participate.

- If you missed the airing of "The American Legion Christmas Special" with The Oak Ridge Boys and other performers, CDs of the peformance can be purchased for $14.99 plus shipping and handling at www.legionchristmasdvd.com.

DATELINE: CAPITOL HILL

VA funding for FY 2016

Brett P. Reistad,
Chairman, National Legislative Commission

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) received $162.7 billion for the current fiscal year. Of that total, $71.4 billion goes to discretionary programs, an increase of $6.4 billion over the previous year. These areas include:

- $50 billion for VA medical services. Individual accounts which interest The American Legion include $7.5 billion in mental health-care services; $6.7 billion in homeless veterans treatment, services, housing and job training; $1.5 billion for Hepatitis C treatment; $605 million for family caregivers of seriously injured veterans; $232 million for traumatic brain injury treatments; $270 million in rural health initiatives; and $144 million in suicide prevention activities.
- $165.8 billion in advance appropriations for all veterans programs for FY 2017. Discretionary medical programs will be funded in 2017 at $63.3 billion. In addition, mandatory programs for next fiscal year will be funded at $102.5 billion. This was done to eliminate the possibility that veterans programs would not receive funding in case of a government shutdown.
- $2.7 billion to address the disability claims processing backlog. This funding will support 770 additional staff to tackle claims and appeals work.
- $1.2 billion for major construction. Funds will be used for correcting critical seismic deficiencies, new hospital and clinic construction, and repairing crumbling infrastructure in some of VA's oldest structures. Minor construction received $406 million for various smaller projects.

Funding for other programs include $271 million for the National Cemetery Administration; $120 million for state veterans homes construction grants; $46 million for state veterans cemeteries construction grants; and $32 million for the U.S. Court of Appeals for veterans claims.

The Department of Defense received $514.1 billion for its discretionary programs, with an additional $58.6 billion in Global War on Terror/Overseas Contingency Operations funding. Its various funding amounts include:

- $129.2 billion to provide pay for active-duty troops and reserves. It also funds a 1.3 percent pay raise.
- $32.3 billion for the Defense Health Program to provide care for troops, military families and retirees. It includes an additional $1.1 billion to address research on traumatic brain injury and psychological health, cancer and suicide prevention outreach programs, among others.
- $167.5 billion for operations and maintenance, such as essential readiness programs, training, depot maintenance and base operations. Also included is $263 million for sexual assault prevention and response programs, and an additional $25 million to continue the expansion of the Sexual Assault Victims' Counsel program.
- $69.8 billion for research, development, testing and evaluation of new defense technologies.
- $111 billion for new military equipment and upgrades.

MEMBERSHIP INCENTIVES AND AWARDS

BIG TWELVE COMPETITION

The Big Twelve Competition recognizes departments that meet or exceed their pledged membership goal percentage by the March target date. The percentage does not include members gained through DMS.

The competition is broken down into six categories. The winner in each category will be reimbursed for computer equipment purchases of up to $2,000, while the runners-up in each category will be reimbursed for computer equipment purchases of up to $1,000.

The six categories in the Big Twelve Competition are:

- Category I – departments of 100,000 or more members
- Category II – departments of 70,000-99,999 members
- Category III – departments of 40,000-69,999 members
- Category IV – departments of 25,000-39,999 members
- Category V – departments of 10,000-24,999 members
- Category VI – departments of 9,999 or fewer members

Read more about the Big Twelve Competition by downloading the online National Membership Points Award Manual publication located under Internal Affairs.

www.legion.org/publications

GOLD AND SILVER BRIGADE

Legionnaires who recruit 50 or more new members (transfers do not count as new members) into The American Legion by the May target date qualify for The American Legion's Gold Brigade award.

First-time Gold Brigade members will receive a Gold Brigade patch, a special Gold Brigade cap pin, a Gold Brigade certificate, and a designer jacket or polo shirt or sweater with a Gold Brigade logo. Second time/repeat Gold Brigaders will receive a Gold Brigade patch and certificate, a hash mark for a jacket sleeve, and a designer jacket or polo shirt or sweater with a Gold Brigade logo. A Gold Brigader who has won the award for five consecutive years is eligible for a distinctive Gold Brigade blazer. And a Gold Brigader who has earned the award for at least six consecutive years or more is eligible for a $150 check and a Legion cap with the inscription "Master Recruiter."

A Legionnaire who recruits 25-49 new members (transfers do not count as new members) into The American Legion by the May target date qualify for the Silver Brigade award.

Download the National Membership Points Award Manual: ***www.legion.org/publications***

POST EXCELLENCE AWARD CONTINUES

The Post Excellence Award program honors posts that show excellence in membership participation, youth activities, community service, and support to veterans and U.S. troops.

Criteria

- **Membership.** Post membership must be at least one member more than the previous year. A post officer must attend district meetings.
- **Youth activities.** The post must sponsor and actively participate in at least one primary youth program: Boys State, Legion Baseball, Oratorical Contest, Boy Scouts of America or Junior Shooting Sports.
- **Community service.** The post must organize a community service project that involves members of the Legion, Auxiliary or Sons of The American Legion. A monetary donation may only be one part of a project.
- **Service to troops or veterans.** The post must organize a project supporting troops or veterans (for example, Family Support Network or Operation Comfort Warriors) that involves members of the Legion, Auxiliary or SAL outside the post. A monetary donation may only be one part of a project.

Certification. District commanders must certify posts as having fulfilled the four specified criteria, and submit a list of the post's name, number, address and commander's name to department headquarters. If possible, accompany with copies of press releases submitted to local media that raise awareness for the projects and enhance the Legion's public image.

Awards. Each qualifying post, as well as district commanders whose districts have at least 50 percent of posts reach certification, will receive a certificate of recognition.

www.legion.org/commander/postexcellence

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CAREERS

Legion to help host several hiring fairs

The American Legion is hosting upcoming Hiring Our Heroes job fairs in partnership with the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and professional sports teams to help veterans, servicemembers and their spouses find jobs.

For the following four hiring fairs, an employment workshop will be held from 9:30 a.m. to 11 a.m., and the hiring fair is from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m.

Feb. 3 in San Antonio at the AT&T Center. All registered veterans and military spouses are eligible to receive up to two free tickets to attend that evening's NBA game between the San Antonio Spurs and the New Orleans Pelicans.

Feb. 9 in St. Paul, Minn., at the Xcel Energy Center. All registered veterans and military spouses are eligible to receive up to two free tickets to attend that evening's NHL game between the Minnesota Wild and the Dallas Stars.

March 2 in Houston at the Toyota Center. All registered veterans and military spouses are eligible to receive up to two free tickets to attend that evening's NBA game between the Houston Rockets and the New Orleans Pelicans.

March 17 in Glendale, Ariz., at the Gila River Arena. All registered veterans and military spouses are eligible to receive up to two free tickets to attend that evening's NHL game between the Arizona Coyotes and the San Jose Sharks.

Registration is not necessary; however, registering for the event allows job seekers to upload their résumés to be viewed by employers ahead of time. Attendees should come with résumés in hand.

To register for the upcoming hiring fairs, visit ***www.legion.org/careers/jobfairs***.

PLANNER

February

1	Department submissions due for National Law Enforcement Officer of the Year and National Firefighter of the Year awards
10	85 percent membership target date
16-19	Department Service Officers School, Washington, D.C.
21-24	Washington Conference, Washington, D.C.