



## 124<sup>TH</sup> NATIONAL CONVENTION VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS

# Convention Highlights

Tuesday, July 25, 2023  
Joint Opening Session

### **VA Secretary Praises VFW for Advocacy of the PACT Act**

VA Secretary Denis McDonough this morning provided an update on five goals that he presented at last year's VFW National Convention. First, on the issue of veterans homelessness, McDonough said that VA had surpassed its goal of permanently housing 38,000 veterans by more than 2,000 for a total of more than 40,000. Second, McDonough said that VA's national suicide prevention hotline (988, press 1) has received more than 1 million calls, texts and messages. He added that of the more than 750,000 calls, the average speed of answer was 9.37 seconds. Third, VA established the Agency Equity Team to investigate, identify and eliminate any racial disparities at VA. McDonough said that VA is concentrating on getting women vets, "our fastest growing cohorts of vets, the care they've earned and deserved." He added that VA has a priority to make sure "that LGBTQ+ vets feel supported – and well served – by every part of VA." Fourth, since the *PACT Act* was signed last August, veterans and survivors have filed more than 2 million claims, 31.9 percent more than the same period last year. Moreover, veterans have filed more than 70,000 claims for toxic exposure-related benefits under the *PACT Act*. Also, VA has awarded more than \$1 billion in earned benefits to veterans, their families and survivors who filed *PACT Act*-related claims. Fifth, VA is hiring at an unprecedented rate. "We are hiring faster and more competitively, while retaining our great staff," the Secretary said. The VBA workforce has grown by 17 percent and the VHA workforce by nearly 5 percent, the highest levels in the past two decades despite nationwide labor and health care shortages.

McDonough also praised VFW service officers' work for representing more than 500,000 vets and delivering more than \$11 billion in benefits over the last year. He also noted that VFW service officers processed more than 10,000 referrals for free accredited VA claims assistance through VFW's *PACTActinfo.org* website.

The Secretary encouraged all vets and their survivors to apply for their toxic exposure benefits now. "We need every single person in this room to help communicate with veterans and families so that every veteran gets the care they need, and the benefits they deserve," McDonough said. He added that those who apply on or before Aug. 9 of this year will have their benefits backdated to Aug. 10 of last year, the date President Joe Biden signed the bill. On the issue of "claim sharks," McDonough said: "There are people out there who'll try to convince vets they need to pay somebody or use a lawyer to apply for their VA benefits. Not true. Working with VA or a VSO like the incredible team here at VFW, it's free and easy to apply."

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## VFW's Partners

Fern Sumpter Winbush, principal deputy director of the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency, provided an overview of efforts to account for 81,409 missing Americans. (72,202 from WWII; 7,496 from Korean War; 1,579 from the Vietnam War; 126 from the Cold War; and six from the Iraq War and other conflicts.) "You all know that when I say a number, that means a family," Sumpter Winbush said. Two Medal of Honor recipients whose remains were recovered were highlighted during the business session. From WWII, Air Force Lt. Col. Addison Baker's remains were accounted for on April 8, 2022, while the remains of Army Cpl. Luther Herschel Story from the Korean War were identified on April 6, 2023. Sumpter Winbush encouraged members to turn in wartime artifacts, which host nations "deeply appreciate."

President and CEO of Student Veterans of America Jared Lyon addressed attendees of the Tuesday business session saying that the VFW has provided him a "sense of belonging and camaraderie" after leaving the Navy. The Global War on Terrorism veteran and member of VFW Post 3308 in Tallahassee, Fla., said VFW helped him navigate life, from being a sailor to being a student veteran and entrepreneur. "Joining your ranks led me to be able to do what I do today," said Lyon, who has finished his coursework to earn a doctorate from New York's Syracuse University. Lyon added: "The bond between VFW and the Student Veterans of America isn't just symbolic – it's a testament to the power, resilience and spirit of service that defines us as veterans."

Mike Wilson, executive director of the VFW National Home in Eaton Rapids, Mich., said 36 of the 42 homes are occupied by families. One home is under construction and three families are waiting for the completion of their assessments to move in. Wilson also invited convention attendees to visit the National Home booth in the exhibit hall to learn more about the home. Joining Wilson was the 2022-23 Buddy Poppy Girl Layla, whose mother, Lisa, is a Navy veteran. Layla, who is starting the 7<sup>th</sup> grade this fall, said she would not have the opportunity to live at the VFW National Home without her mother's nine years of naval service. "She loved serving her country," Layla said of her mother. "I am proud of my mom."

Military Order of the Cootie Supreme Commander Dwight Hora provided an overview of the organization's year, noting the membership is now more than 13,000.

## Award Winners

VFW Commander-in-Chief Timothy Borland received the *VFW Century Award* for recruiting 100 plus members during the membership year. In his 24 years as a member of VFW, Borland has recruited more than 2,690 new and reinstated members.

VFW Department of Oregon Service Officer David Lowe was awarded 2023's *John A. Biedrzycki Accredited Service Representative of the Year Award*. The former Army Reserve field artillery officer and Iraq War veteran, along with the VA Portland Regional Service Office, handles VA disability claims of about 4,000 veterans each year with about 500 to 800 open claims at any one time. During his speech, Lowe asked all VA-accredited veterans service officers to stand, and then thanked them, saying: "They fight the good fight."

Past Quartermaster General Debra Anderson was awarded the 2023 *VFW Distinguished Service Medal* for her 12 years of service to VFW as director of Human Resources and then as VFW's first female Quartermaster General.

VFW Post 3886 member Kelly Garey of Caldwell, Idaho, won the *VFW's Smart/Maher National Citizenship Education Teacher Award* for grades K-5. A Navy Reservist with more than 30 years in the service, Garey provides her experience as a tool for students at Van Buren Elementary School in Caldwell to understand why veterans serve. "This is a great honor that I would like to share with all my former and current students, my VFW comrades in Idaho and all VFW comrades."

The *VFW's Smart/Maher National Citizenship Education Teacher Award* for grades 6-8 was awarded to Susan Allgood. With two sons on active duty, Allgood teaches her students about the importance of understanding the

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sacrifices of military members through a rigorous history class and extra-curricular programs she spearheads each year at Stephens County Middle School in Toccoa, Ga. “It is such an honor and privilege to be here today,” said Allgood, who represented VFW Post 4346 in Toccoa. “This award is the apex of my 27-year career.”

Marine Corps veteran Javier Martinez of Maple Park, Ill., received the *VFW Smart/Maher National Citizenship Education Teacher Award* for grades 9-12. The world history teacher at Kaneland High School in Maple Park was sponsored by VFW Post 5819 in Lemont, Ill., for his passion and innovation towards the development and enrichment of his students’ character through history. “Even though you don’t wear the uniform anymore, you can still serve,” Martinez said. “There ought to be thousands of teachers nominated for this great award each year because there are so many good ones out there doing their jobs quietly like when we were in the service. I encourage all VFW Posts to seek these teachers out. Ask they kids; they’ll let you know who the good ones are.”

Celebrity Chef Robert Irvine accepted the *VFW Distinguished Citizenship Award* for his work with the Robert Irvine Foundation, which he began in 2014. Irvine, who served 10 years in the UK Royal Navy, aims to support service members, veterans and first responders. “There is no shortage of veterans needing help today,” said Irvine, who became an American citizen in 2014. “There is no end to this mission. The ever-changing needs of veterans needs to be adapted to.” Irvine said if everyone were to pay it forward, it could “change the world.”

Borland presented VFW Post 1370 Commander Modesto De la O from Pontiac, Mich., with the *Distinguished Service Award* for his incessant pursuit to help veterans across all facets of life. From his aid and support of incarcerated veterans, local Army National Guardsmen and therapeutic alternatives through his nonprofit, Foxhole, De la O serves as a “beacon of hope” and resources for veterans in his home state. “When I got the call, I did not believe it,” De la O said. “But I would be remiss to not thank VFW Post 1370 because after the Marine Corps, it was the only place that let me find purpose again. The VFW can be whatever you want it to be — it is a reflection of your leadership.”

The *Distinguished Patriotic Award* was presented to 14-year-old Connor Nicol for his “We Will Remember” project. Through his project, Nicol has made more than 40,000 dog tags, each carrying the name of a service member killed in action. Dog tags are “adopted” free-of-charge. The only requisite is that the person with the dog tag say the name of the service member so that he or she is not forgotten. Nicol said he was inspired to do this after watching the movie “Saving Private Ryan.” He mowed lawns and did yard work to pay for the first 500 dog tags. “I wanted to make memorial dog tags to remember those who did not come home,” Nicol said.

Steven Woodward was named 2023 *VFW National Recruiter of the Year* for recruiting 501 new or reinstated members. Woodward is a life member with VFW Post 2224 in Puyallup, Wash. Also recognized were Elite Recruiters who recruited more than 250 reinstated or new members. Those are Larry Gerlt from Post 2704 in Ralston, Neb.; Timothy Borland of VFW Post 9972 in Sierra Vista, Ariz.; and Joseph Young from VFW Post 7108 in Helotes, Texas.

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