



2024 NATIONAL CONVENTION

LOUISVILLE, KENTUCKY

Convention Highlights

Monday, July 29, 2024
Joint Opening Session

Suicide Prevention is Topic of Today's Joint Session

During this morning's Joint Opening Session, Sen. Rand Paul (R-Ky.) addressed key issues such as national security and foreign policy. He noted that while there is no authorization for war in Africa, U.S. troops see more combat missions there than anywhere else in the world. Paul said he has a "steadfast belief" that the Constitution allows only Congress to declare war. "War is too grave a choice for Congress to run from or evade," the senator said. "I pledge to you I will vote against any President of either party who tries to send our soldiers abroad without a declaration of war."

Regarding national security, Paul highlighted hostile alliances of countries such as North Korea, Russia, China and Iran. He noted that as battlefields evolve, so, too, must America's policies. "It is time we evolve our strategies to better meet those challenges," Paul said. "While we must be prepared to defend our country and our interests without hesitation, we cannot forget that war must always be a last resort."

The senator spoke about the situation at the southern border. He urged attendees to remind Americans to first concern themselves with the nation's security and less about wars abroad. "We face many problems here at home," Paul said. "Before we send a single soldier overseas to secure another country's borders, Congress needs to fix our borders here at home."

Rep. Morgan McGarvey (D-Ky.), who sits on the House Veterans Affairs Committee welcomed VFW to his hometown of Louisville. He said he considers the House VA committee to be the most bipartisan on Capitol Hill. "There is still work to do," McGarvey said, "but we are always willing to listen and see how we can best serve you with the sacrifices you have made."

Praised for his most famous documentary, *Brothers at War* (2009), filmmaker Jake Rademacher played a trailer to the sequel, *Brothers After War* (2023), which documents what happened to the 12 veterans profiled in the original documentary some 15 years after their time overseas. "We intend to release this film across America in early 2025," he said of his partnership with the Gary Sinise Foundation. "This cause is very personal to me. We desperately want to get this film out to as many veterans as possible to give them hope and to let them know they are not alone."

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Thanking the VFW and its Auxiliary, Kentucky Gov. Andy Beshear said it is important that veterans' service is never politicized. "We have to get back to a place where we are Americans first – not Democrats or Republicans," Beshear said. "We govern best when we don't try to move the country to the right or left." The governor also touted awards earned and the efficiency of Kentucky's VA system.

Charles Djou, secretary of the American Battle Monuments Commission (ABMC) and an Afghanistan War veteran, offered an overview of the Commission's work. ABMC administers, operates and maintains 26 burial grounds as the final resting place for some 124,000 American veterans. It also maintains 31 federal memorials, monuments and markers around the world. Djou encouraged those traveling abroad to visit such places as the Normandy American Cemetery in France. "The world's most powerful weapons system is, was and forever shall be, a free people willing to fight for freedom," Djou said.

Retired Army Maj. Gen. John Richardson IV, USAA's senior vice president, Military Affairs head, addressed several of the challenges the veterans' community is facing, and how USAA is working to fix such challenges. The former two-star colonel also praised VFW for fighting the same challenges as USAA, adding that both are committed to making a difference and saving lives. "The VFW's efforts in advocating for veterans' rights, providing community support and ensuring that our service members receive the recognition they deserve is invaluable," said Richardson, a life member of VFW Post 76 in San Antonio. "Your work resonates deeply with all of us who have worn the uniform. Your commitment to service, patriotism and community sets a standard for others to follow."

Tracy Nolan, Humana's senior vice president of MarketPoint highlighted the 12th anniversary of the VFW-Humana partnership, specifically the Uniting to Combat Hunger campaign. "Together we have provided more than 1 million meals this year alone, exceeding our annual goal for the year," Nolan said. "Since we kicked off this campaign in 2018, together we have provided more than 5.6 million meals to those in need in communities across the country." Headquartered in Louisville, Ky., Humana employs more than 6,000 veterans and military spouses.

In his opening remarks this morning, VFW Commander-in-Chief Duane Sarmiento paid tribute to VFW and Auxiliary members for the many accomplishments this year, including the work of VFW's accredited service officers for recovering \$13 billion for veterans filing claims each year. The Chief also touted VFW's successful year in membership, noting that for the first time in 32 years, VFW has shown growth in membership for two consecutive years. "While we have much to celebrate, our work is never done," Sarmiento said. "Success is a continuous journey, not a destination."

Awards and Other Speakers

Sen. Tom Carper (D-Del.) received the *Commander-in-Chief Medal and Citation* for his exemplary service and unwavering dedication to the welfare of veterans and their families. As the last Vietnam veteran still serving in the Senate, Carper was praised by the Chief for his work in the Senate Veterans Job Caucus, championing veterans' rights, as well as advocacy efforts to improve veterans access to healthcare. "Bipartisan solutions are lasting solutions," said Carper, a life member of VFW Post 3420 in Newark, Del. "Throughout my years in the Senate, I pride myself in having worked to ensure that we equip our servicemembers, veterans, and their families with the benefits they have earned and deserve."

Twisted X CEO Prasad Reddy was awarded the *VFW Commander-in-Chief Gold Medal of Merit* in special recognition and appreciation for his dedication and commitment to supporting VFW through

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programs like Voice of Democracy and Patriot's Pen. Reddy, who surprised Sarmiento by presenting him an unexpected, unrestricted donation of \$70,000 for the VFW Foundation, became emotional. "Most unexpected [is this award]," Reddy said. "Every year I look forward to attending this convention to see the faces of all you heroes, and it always leaves me at a loss for words."

Matt Miller, director of veteran and military family engagement with Oracle Health gave a shout out to the influence the VFW has: "When the VFW talks, people listen." Miller served two tours in Iraq, two civilian tours in Afghanistan and served on Guantanamo Bay not long after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. He is a member of VFW Post 3150 in Arlington, Va.

VFW National Auxiliary President Carla Martinez, the first to hold the title while also being a VFW member of Post 409 in Salt Lake City, received the *VFW Commander-in-Chief Gold Medal of Merit* for her devotion to veterans. She accepted the award on behalf of the more than 470,000 Auxiliary members working with veterans. "Honored and humbled are a few words to describe how I feel about accepting this medallion, which belongs to every Auxiliary member and veteran here today," Martinez said.

National *Voice of Democracy* first-place winner Sophia Lin from Scottsdale, Ariz., delivered her award-winning essay. Sarmiento presented the high-school junior with her \$35,000 *T.C. Selman Memorial Scholarship* awarded in March. Lin represented the Department of Arizona on behalf of VFW Post 3513 and its Auxiliary in Scottsdale.

Four VFW Posts were recognized as Outstanding Community Service Posts of the Year: VFW Department of Montana's Butte VFW Post 1448 (Western Conference); VFW Department of New Jersey's Kelley-Lliveira-Stanton Police Memorial Post 12173 (Eastern Conference); VFW Department of Ohio's Paul C. Ladd Post 1148 (Big 10 Conference); and VFW Department of Oklahoma's Spiro Post 4384 (Southern Conference).

VFW Washington Office Executive Director Ryan Gallucci strongly urged VFW and Auxiliary members and guests to scan a QR code shown on the big screens in the convention hall. The code was created to push lawmakers to pass the *Senator Elizabeth Dole 21st Century Veterans Healthcare and Benefits Improvement Act* or *H.R. 8371*.

The Vice Minister of Taiwan's Veterans Affairs Council Wu Chih-Yang presented Sarmiento with a Gold medal of honor.

"Top Tier" Departments from each conference were announced: Indiana (Big 10), New Jersey (Eastern Conference), Montana (Western Conference) and Arkansas (Southern Conference). The Conference Membership Trophy, which recognizes the VFW conference with the highest percentage of membership, was once again presented to the Southern Conference.

All-American commanders were recognized at the end of this morning's session when each received their All-American caps and citations. Also recognized were the Triple Crown recipients.

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