



2024 NATIONAL CONVENTION

LOUISVILLE, KENTUCKY

Convention Highlights

Tuesday, July 30, 2024
Business Session

VA Secretary Encourages Vets to Enroll in VA

VA Secretary Denis McDonough this morning touted the VA Claims Clinic at the VFW Convention. “Please see them before you leave,” he said. “Veterans have no better advocate than the VFW.” He announced that more than 1 million *PACT Act* claims have been filed since its approval in August 2022, with 75 percent of those being approved. McDonough added that 6 million veterans qualify for *PACT Act* benefits. “We’ve got to keep reaching out to them and tell them to find a VFW accredited service officer and not a claims shark,” he said to rousing applause. He said that 710,000 vets have enrolled in VA healthcare since approval of the *PACT Act*, a 34 percent increase over two years. He then added that “millions” of veterans and their families are still eligible.

The Secretary introduced three local VA employees to provide updates. Bobby Hall, an Air Force veteran and rater at the VA Regional Office in Louisville said that good research leads to better rewards: “It means treating every claim like it was my own.” Jason Broker, a National Cemetery Administration employee, encouraged attendees to visit one of the seven national cemeteries in Kentucky. Darrell Kyle, an Air Force veteran, has worked at the Memphis VA for 14 years. He noted that helping find employment for vets is central to assisting them.

McDonough concluded that VA needs an estimated \$12 billion for medical care and \$3 billion for benefits in next year’s budget. “We’re not going to stop pushing until every vet, family member, caregiver and survivor gets what they deserve,” he said. “The main reason I came back here this year was to be accountable to you. You are who we work for.”

‘VFW is a Family Business’

Medal of Honor recipient David Bellavia roused VFW members while speaking of his love of country and proclaimed: “We are rocking the garrison cap for life.” Bellavia earned the military’s highest honor on Nov. 10, 2004, on his 29th birthday. A staff sergeant with 3rd Plt., A Co., 2nd Bn., 2nd Inf. Regt., 3rd BCT, 1st Inf. Div., Bellavia was a squad leader in Fallujah, Iraq. While clearing a house, a squad became trapped within a room by intense enemy fire coming from under a staircase. With no regard for his personal safety, Bellavia charged the house with an automatic weapon. He ultimately cleared the enemy-filled house, killing four insurgents and wounding a fifth. His actions helped save the lives of his squad.

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As the grandson of a World War II veteran who earned the Bronze Star, Bellavia had a sense of duty instilled in him at a young age. He praised all past generations of veterans, specifically thanking Vietnam War veterans “building this organization, fixing the VA and for making this country better than it was before you.” Bellavia, who was given a standing ovation several times, also reminded VFW members in attendance that they are all two-time volunteers who should never let up in continuing to hold the government accountable on behalf of all veterans. “You served your country in uniform, and you continue to serve your country today,” Bellavia said. “You are the last line of defense. We are not afraid to put a boot on the chest because we know the blood that was shed, and we are here to carry their legacy forward. The VFW is a family business. Everyone should want to serve their country.”

VFW’s Partners

Kelly McKeague, director of the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency, provided an overview of efforts to account for 81,226 missing Americans, of which the DPAA believes 38,957 are recoverable. The DPAA deploys 265 personnel on missions in 12 countries. Over the last year, DPAA accounted for 100 missing Americans from WWII, the Korean War and the Vietnam War. McKeague noted that within two weeks, DPAA will send a team to China. He added that of the 7,400 missing from the Korean War, DPAA believes 5,300 lie in North Korea. There has been no communication with North Korea since it returned 55 sets of remains in 2018. McKeague noted there is “strong interest” in Congress for continuing the mission in North Korea thanks to VFW’s “staunch efforts.” He added that, “VFW’s resolute support enables us to bring closure to many families.”

President and CEO of Student Veterans of America Jared Lyon addressed attendees of the Tuesday business session by highlighting individual student veterans and the success they have found following their military service. A life member of VFW Post 3308 in Tallahassee, Fla., Lyon noted that 75 percent of veterans work while attending school. The VFW and SVA have worked together for more than a decade through the VFW-SVA Legislative Fellowship program, which provides exemplary VFW members who are student veterans the opportunity to make their voices heard on Capitol Hill.

Mike Wilson, executive director of the VFW National Home in Eaton Rapids, Mich., noted the upcoming 100th anniversary of the Home on Jan. 7, 2025. The Home was recently awarded a \$1.5 million grant from the state of Michigan for infrastructure improvements. Wilson added that Guitars for Vets and Hives for Heroes are two of the programs offered for veterans at the Home. Joining Wilson was the 2023-24 Buddy Poppy Girl Layla, whose mother, Lisa, is a Navy veteran. Layla, who is starting the 8th 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. “I am proud of my mom.”

Military Order of the Cootie Supreme Commander Mark Larkin provided an overview of the organization’s year, noting the Cooties recruited 10,428 new VFW members this year. Additionally, Cooties put in more than \$18 million worth of volunteer hours in hospitals.

Award Winners

Past VFW Commander-in-Chief Timothy Borland received the *Distinguished Service Award* for his leadership as VFW Commander-in-Chief in 2022-2023. A Gold Legacy life member at VFW Post 9972 in Sierra Vista, Ariz., Borland has earned the title of Elite Recruiter for 21 consecutive years. “I never stop recruiting because I love the VFW,” Borland said. “I challenge everyone to recruit one member.”

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VFW Department of Kentucky Service Officer Jerry Kayrouz was awarded 2024's *John A. Biedrzycki Accredited Service Representative of the Year Award*. A life member of VFW Post 1170, Kayrouz

worked for 22 years as a service officer. His work has assisted Kentucky veterans in recouping more than \$95 million in VA benefits in the last fiscal year, with nearly \$400,000 in new benefits awarded.

Past Adjutant General Kevin Jones was awarded the *Distinguished Service Award* for his many years of service to VFW, including the four years (2018-22) he served as VFW Adjutant General.

Vietnam veteran James "Gunny" Gregory accepted the Distinguished Service Award for being the creator of the Run for the Wall. His efforts with the motorcycle rally have evolved into four different ride routes heading to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., and the Middle East Conflicts Wall in Marseilles, Ill. Gregory, who was intimately involved in the Mayaguez rescue in May 1975, just after the fall of Saigon, said he started this endeavor to remember the three Marines left behind. "They are not forgotten if we say their names," Gregory said through tears as he repeated the names of those Marines: Hall, Marshall and Hargrove. Gregory led the crowd in chanting their names.

VFW Post 9675 Commander Sarah Lively of Papillion, Neb., earned the 2024 *VFW Member of the Year Award* for exemplifying the values of the organization and serving the needs of her Post and community. An Air Force veteran, Lively, who opened a yoga studio in 2016, offers free yoga classes to support the mental and emotional health of veterans and first responders. She has worked closely with the Veterans Yoga Project since then, donating more than \$25,000 to the project. "Thank you to all my comrades from across the globe and for allowing me to represent the work you all are doing," Lively said. "Not only did I serve for more than 20 years in the Air Force, but it is also an honor and a privilege to continue to serve."

World-renowned chef, restaurateur and TV host Guy Fieri was honored with VFW's Gold Medal of Merit. Fieri's support of veterans and first responders through his Guy Fieri Foundation earned him the honor. Accepting on Fieri's behalf was Brian Daly, executive director of the Guy Fieri Foundation. Fieri appeared via video to offer his thanks.

CEO and founder of the award-winning Uncle Nearest whiskey brand, Fawn Weaver, was honored with VFW's *Distinguished Patriotic Award*. She embarked on a 16-week tour visiting 35 military bases. Her effort coined, "Thank You for Your Service. Thank You for Your Support," aimed to thank those protecting the country. As one of only five black women in the U.S. to build a business worth more than \$5 billion, Weaver noted, "Only in American could that happen ... we have the strongest military in the world."

Leo Holt with Holt Logistics was recognized with the *Commander-in-Chief Gold Medal of Merit*. Accepting on his behalf was past Department of New Jersey Commander Luddie Austin. Holt was chosen for this prestigious award for his work on behalf of veterans and their families. He once retrofitted a Holt facility in order to host thousands of Afghan refugees, ensuring their safety while processing.

Duncan Aviation was named *Employer of the Year*. Accepting the company's award was Tyler Lauer, an Army National Guard veteran and head of Duncan Aviation's veteran employment resource group. Last year alone, Duncan hired 70 veterans. They strive to foster a supportive and welcoming environment for its employees who are veterans.

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Aaliyah Jones of Oxon Hill High School in Oxon Hill, Md., received this year's *JROTC Cadet of the Year* award for her consistent display of skill and ability, which includes leadership as cadet wing commander at her school. Jones also serves as a member of the joint command staff with JROTC members from other schools. "I thank the VFW for inspiring me to pursue a career in the Air Force."

Chief Sarmiento introduced Fiserv Senior Vice President of Government Solutions Jose Garcia during the morning Business Session on Tuesday. Garcia represents VFW's latest partner, Fiserv, a Fortune 500 company and global leader in financial technology. "Our dedicated veterans' program is proud to continue to foster our relationship with the VFW," said Garcia, who concluded his speech by presenting Sarmiento a \$50,000 check donation on behalf of Fiserv.

This year's *VFW Distinguished Citizenship Award* was presented to former NFL defensive end Jared Allen for his commitment to military and veteran communities. Through his nonprofit, Homes for Wounded Warriors, Allen has, since 2009, provided mortgage-free, accessible homes for veterans injured during their service in Iraq and Afghanistan. "Thank you to all 1.5 million VFW members and everyone at VFW for this honor," Allen said via video. "It is the men and women who serve this country that continue to inspire me to do what I do."

Eugene V. Struzik III of Dodge City, Kan., won the *VFW's Smart/Maher National Citizenship Education Teacher Award* for grades K-5. An Air Force veteran with 26 years of service, Struzik began his teaching career in 2019. He has established *Project Mail Call: Honoring Our Veterans*, which allows his students the opportunity to write cards to veterans embarking on Honor Flights from Kansas. Struzik was sponsored by VFW Post 1714 in Dodge City, Kan.

The *VFW's Smart/Maher National Citizenship Education Teacher Award* for grades 6-8 was awarded to Monica Galloway. An Army veteran and sixth-grade math teacher at Dwight D. Eisenhower Middle School in Laurel, Md., Galloway is known for her dedication to increasing participation in her country's Junior Reserve Officers Training Corps. Galloway was sponsored by VFW Post 9376 in Clinton, Md.

Army veteran Edward M. Graf received the *VFW Smart/Maher National Citizenship Education Teacher Award* for grades 9-12. The Social Studies teacher at Somerset County Vocational and Technical High School in Bridgewater, N.J., honors vets and Gold Star families by student-led activities, including his "Proud to be an American Day." Graf was sponsored by VFW Post 7858 in Bernardsville, N.J.

Steven Woodward was named 2024 *VFW National Recruiter of the Year* for recruiting 913 new or reinstated members. Woodward is a life member of VFW Post 2224 in Puyallup, Wash. Also recognized were Elite Recruiters with more than 250 reinstated or new members. Those are Timothy Borland of VFW Post 9972 in Sierra Vista, Ariz.; Judy King of VFW Post 2695 in Shelbyville, Ind.; Ed Stefanak of VFW Post 9539 in Union, N.J.; Dwayne Kilbourne of VFW Post 5408 in Acworth, Ga.; Joseph Allen of VFW Post 3285 in Frederick, Md.; and Lamar Pounds of VFW Post 256 in Lehighton, Ga.

Several Posts were inducted into the Legacy Society: Post 2485 in Angeles City, Philippines, with 175 Legacy Life members. Post 201 in Waterbury, Conn., for having 100 Legacy Life members. Post 21 in Connellsville, Pa., for 75 Legacy Life members. Post 6027 in North East, Md., for 50 Legacy Life members. The following Posts all tallied 25 Legacy Life members: Post 470 in Erie, Pa.; Post 658 in Macon, Ga.; Post 696 in Owensboro, Ky.; Post 2669 in Port Orchard, Wash.; Post 4809 in Norfolk, Va.; Post 4820 in Port Neches, Texas; Post 5138 in Valentine, Neb.; Post 5265 in Spring Grove, Pa.; Post 5820 in Ravenna, Neb.; Post 6018 in Fayetteville, N.C.; Post 6076 in Myerstown, Pa.; Post 6837 in Boaz, Ala.; Post 7108 in Helotes, Texas; Post 8466 in Wake Forest, N.C.; Post 9365 in Wasilla, Alaska; Post 10281 in Vine Grove, Ky.; Post 10692 in Grafenwoehr, Germany.

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