



Convention Highlights

Monday, Aug. 11, 2025
Joint Opening Session

VFW Receives Praise and \$175,000 in Donations at Joint Opening Session

During this morning's Joint Opening Session, Director of Ohio Veterans Service John Harris Jr. welcomed VFW to Columbus on behalf of Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine. The retired Army major general encouraged VFW members to tell their stories to inspire future generations of veterans. With four decades of military service, Harris said there is a growing divide between those who serve and those who do not. Specifically, he noted that a recent report showed 57% of young people won't join the military because they fear they will leave the service with emotional scars. "If we don't correct this record, we are putting the future of military recruiting at risk," Harris concluded.

Ohio Secretary of State Frank LaRose welcomed VFW to the Buckeye State and expressed what it means to be a veteran. "It is a lifelong commitment," said LaRose, a retired Army Green Beret and life member of VFW Post 349 in Akron, Ohio. "We should always leave a place better than we found it. If not us, who? Our mission as veterans is to continue to teach patriotism and what it means to uphold our oath to this country." Noting there is no expiration date when taking the oath of duty, LaRose said one way to continue that service is by running for public office. "It is challenging but rewarding," he concluded.

Mayor of Columbus, Ohio, Andrew Ginther welcomed VFW back to Columbus, where the organization traces its roots. Ginther, the son of a Vietnam War veteran, emphasized a lesson passed down from his father: "Service doesn't stop when you return home." He noted the importance of prioritizing veterans at all levels. Ginther also praised the VFW as being a "model of behavior to public service."

Joe Morris with Arrow International presented VFW Commander-in-Chief Al Lipphardt with a \$125,000 check for the organization. Morris, a life member of VFW Post 1503 in Dale City, Va., noted that Arrow is the world's largest full-line manufacturer of charitable gaming products.

Jose Garcia, president of Fiserv, presented Lipphardt with a \$50,000 check. Fiserv employees Meg Hendricks and David Natelson joined Garcia for the check presentation. Prior to the presentation, Garcia said, "Together we make a meaningful impact." Fiserv is a financial technology Fortune 500 company that VFW Posts use for financial transactions.

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Awards and Other Speakers

Lipphardt presented State Farm Marketing Executive Sean Kingsbury with the *VFW Commander-in-Chief Gold Medal of Merit* for his volunteer efforts in modernizing VFW's message and outreach, specifically for his work with VFW's community service-focused #StillServing campaign. "I really do believe that as veterans our service does not end when we take our uniform off," said Kingsbury, a veteran of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars and life member of VFW Post 2503 in Benson, Neb. "This is your story, and I am extremely proud and honored to be able to tell it."

Past VFW Commander-in-Chief Duane Sarmiento accepted the *VFW Distinguished Service Award* for his more than 30 years of service to veterans. In accepting his award on behalf of the 52 Department commanders from his 2023-2024 year, Sarmiento paid tribute to the VFW Auxiliary, calling them "the muscle behind the hustle."

VFW National Auxiliary President Brenda Bryant received the *VFW Commander-in-Chief Gold Medal of Merit* for her devotion to veterans. "For the rest of my life, I will look at this medallion and smile," Bryant said. "It will remind me of all of you, of this incredible year and of the positive difference our members make in the world every day."

Newly appointed President and CEO of USAA, Juan C. Andrade, thanked those in the audience for their military service and commitment to their communities, imparting a brief history of VFW and USAA. "Like VFW, the USAA was formed to support the needs of veterans everywhere," he said. Andrade praised the VFW for all it has accomplished since its inception 126 years ago and added that since their partnership began 15 years ago, both organizations have remained steadfast in their commitment to veterans. Specifically, Andrade highlighted the new nationwide movement "Face the Fight," which aims to prevent veteran suicide. "The veterans community deserves more than words – it deserves action," he said. "Together, we are projected to save enough lives to fill this convention hall. But our work is not done. We have more to give, more to do to support our veterans and this nation."

Cara Brown, director of Key Relationships, Marketpoint, Humana highlighted VFW's Day of Service project that Humana worked on with the VFW Department of Tennessee. The project produced more than 1,000 personal hygiene kits for the homeless. Brown was joined on stage by VFW Chief Lipphardt, who announced the VFW/Humana partnership *Uniting to Combat Hunger* (UTCH) will now be known as the *Uniting for Veterans* program. "This new name reflects the program's expanded focus and our continued dedication to addressing the evolving needs of military and veteran communities," Lipphardt said. Noting that the UTCH campaign has raised funds for more than 6.5 million meals since 2018, Brown said Humana is proud to continue its partnership with the VFW. "The *Uniting for Veterans* program will allow us to collectively address a wider spectrum of needs and increase quality of life for America's military and veteran families," Brown concluded. Headquartered in Louisville, Ky., Humana employs more than 6,000 veterans and military spouses.

Retired Army Maj. General and Senior Vice President of Oracle Health Government Services Patrick Sargent spoke on the advancements in health database systems that could offer streamlined health records for the VA and Department of Defense. Sargent, former commander of the 421st Medical Evacuation Battalion, emphasized the bond between the VFW and Oracle, saying, "Our partnership with the VFW is indispensable. When the VFW speaks, the nation listens." A life member of VFW Post 341 in Lorton, Va., Sargent served in the Persian Gulf and retired after 35 years.

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Military Women's Memorial President Phyllis Wilson provided an overview of the Military Women's Memorial and the need for women vets to continue telling their stories. She said the memorial has three core aims: honor, educate/empower and remember. A life member of VFW Post 6683 in Arlington, Va., Wilson encouraged women servicemembers to share their personal stories to the HerStory national database, on which there are currently 330,000 profiles, including that of VFW Senior Vice Commander-in-Chief Carol Whitmore. VFW Posts are urged to share the HerStory database in communities to reach all women veterans. "The Military Women's Memorial honors and tells the stories of the more than 3 million women who served, all the way back to the Revolutionary War," Wilson concluded.

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

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 *TAP Act* and the *Major Richard Star Act*.

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 Pennsylvania's Yardley Lower Makefield Post 6393 (Eastern Conference); VFW Department of Ohio's Paul C. Ladd Post 1148 (Big 10 Conference); and VFW Department of Florida's Post 10148 (Southern Conference).

Past VFW Commander-in-Chief Tim Borland accepted the *VFW 1,000+ Member Award* for recruiting 1,011 members within the membership year.

Michael Boll of VFW Post 2433 in East Hanover, N.J., was named VFW National Recruiter of the Year for recruiting 539 members. Elite recruiters also were recognized. They are: Ed Stefanak Jr., Lamar Pounds, Dan Fuller, Timothy Qualls, Judy Brown, Laurence Lyons and Stephen Woodward.

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

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