

Convention Highlights

Monday, July 27, 2026
Joint Opening Session

Chief Calls on Members to Keep Up the Fight on Capitol Hill

In opening today's Joint Opening Session, VFW Commander-in-Chief Carol Whitmore asked members to keep up the fight on Capitol Hill to ensure Congress rejects *Sect. 108* of the *Take Care of America's Veterans Act (H.R. 9237)*. "Together we will continue this fight for all veterans," she said. "When the going gets tough, that's when the VFW gets going." She praised VFW and Auxiliary members for the work they do behind the scenes, noting that in her travels throughout the past year, she found people in all VFW Posts she visited who stand beside their fellow veterans. "That's the VFW," Whitmore said. "Not a building. Not a logo. Not even the first female Commander-in-Chief."

VFW Washington Office Director Ryan Gallucci applauded VFW's continued efforts to demand the removal of *Sect. 108* from the *Take Care of America's Veterans Act (H.R. 9237)*. "This violates our warrior ethos: to accept defeat and leave behind a fellow comrade," he said. Gallucci then called on everyone in the room to scan the QR displayed on the video screens to urge their congressmen to reject *Sect. 108*. "It is never right to do the wrong thing. We can't solve past injustices by creating greater injustices for our future veterans."

Jason Johns, a Gold Legacy Life member of VFW Post 328 in Stoughton, Wis., received the *Commander-in-Chief Gold Medal & Citation* for his advocacy work on behalf of veterans, specifically as it relates to toxic exposure. Johns said that his efforts are motivated by three principles: faith, family and freedom. He noted that before young people get ready to join the military, they are going to look at how current veterans are treated. "I'm proud as hell to stand by VFW's National Legislative Service and the VFW leadership," he said. Johns then pulled out his phone to capture a video of the audience yelling "Remove 108," repeatedly, in reference to *H.R. 9237*.

Joe Morris, a life member of VFW Post 1503 in Dale City, Va., and director of Veterans and Fraternal Relations with Arrow International, noted that six VFW Departments have partnered with his company, which helps donate more than \$1.5 billion annually through their charitable gaming solutions. "Coming home from a deployment feels pretty good, and standing here today feels like coming home from a deployment," Morris said. "I have had the privilege to work with VFW over the past five years and have seen the potential for continued growth and expansion. To show our deep belief in the work that you all do, it also is my honor to present this organization with a check for \$150,000."

David Natelson, vice president of sales, government education and utilities at Fiserv, which processes digital and credit card payments, presented VFW with a check for \$50,000. He further highlighted the three years of collaboration between the company and the VFW.

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NATIONAL HEADQUARTERS

406 W. 34th Street
Kansas City, MO 64111
Office 816.756.3390
Fax 816.968.1157

WASHINGTON OFFICE

200 Maryland Ave., N.E.
Washington, D.C. 20002
Office 202.543.2239
Fax 202.543.6719

info@vfw.org
www.vfw.org

Twisted X Founder and CEO Prasad Reddy thanked veterans for keeping him and his family safe in this country. “I’m a proud American, and I want to present a small check to the VFW,” Reddy said when presenting Whitmore with a \$75,000 donation. Twisted X is the title sponsor for VFW’s Voice of Democracy and Patriot’s Pen contests. Reddy received the *VFW Distinguished Citizenship Award & Citation* at Sunday night’s National Convention Awards Banquet for his meaningful philanthropic support and for consistently championing veterans and military families.

Nevada Veterans Services Director Mary Devine spoke on behalf of Nevada Gov. Joe Lombardo to welcome VFW to Reno. A life member of VFW Post 3396 in Sparks, Nev., Devine thanked VFW for the protection of benefits all veterans have earned.

Awards and Other Speakers

Past VFW Commander-in-Chief Al Lipphardt accepted the *VFW Distinguished Service Medal & Citation* for his continued service to veterans. In accepting his award, Lipphardt recited the names of five men he served with in Vietnam who were killed – something he said he does whenever the opportunity presents itself. He reminded attendees that as veterans, they have power. “The incoming leadership of VFW needs your voice,” Lipphardt said. “They need your participation. Make it clear, you’re a veteran. You don’t speak for the organization, but you speak for veterans. You’ve earned that right. It is not a privilege. It’s your right. No one is going to silence us.”

Whitmore presented Gundel “Gundy” Metz with the *Commander-in-Chief Gold Medal of Merit & Citation* for her continued support and guidance to veterans. Metz, a former commander of VFW’s Department of Wisconsin, presented a challenge: “We must continue to grow our organization, and I challenge each of you to sign up one new member this year.” Metz also praised Whitmore as the first woman leading the VFW. “Carol, let me tell you how proud your military sisters are of all your accomplishments this year. You are a great example of what women veterans can accomplish.”

VFW National Auxiliary President Lois Callahan received the *VFW Commander-in-Chief Gold Medal of Merit & Citation* for her service. “Though we come from all across the United States and beyond its borders, and despite our many individual dissimilarities, we are truly one family with one common goal: to make a difference in the lives of veterans and their families. And I think it’s safe to say that we’ve done that this year,” she concluded.

Retired Army Lt. Col. David Grossman accepted the *VFW Distinguished Educational Award & Citation* at Sunday’s Convention Awards Banquet for his work in providing education and training to help service members and veterans understand combat stress and moral injury in non-stigmatizing terms.

The *VFW Distinguished Fraternal Award* was presented at Sunday’s National Convention Awards Banquet to Thomas Kopetzky from VFW Post 1119 in Cooleemee, N.C. His efforts to establish his Post’s Honor Wall and his commitment to at-risk veterans are aimed to prevent veterans suicide.

Huong Le and her family were honored at Sunday’s National Convention Awards Banquet with the *VFW Distinguished Patriotic Award*. As Vietnamese immigrants, they work to foster the story of Vietnam veterans, ensuring the names on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial are never forgotten.

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The 2025-2026 Smart/Maher VFW National Citizenship Education Teacher Award winners were honored during Sunday's National Convention Awards Banquet. They are: Elizabeth Lee of Ranson Elementary School in Ranson, W.Va.; Tammy Gipson of St. Joseph Catholic School in McPherson, Kan.; and Jeron Velasco of Dishchii'Bikoh High School in Cibecue, Ariz.

Retired Burger King franchisee owner Mike DeRosa accepted the *VFW Distinguished Service Medal*. DeRosa acknowledged the deep friendship he holds with VFW, particularly in his home state of Wisconsin. "I got motivated because of you, my friends, and I'll never forget you," he said.

Sean Kingsbury, chairman of the VFW Foundation Board of Directors, highlighted the work of the VFW Foundation, noting that last year the foundation secured \$3 million and this year \$1 million has already come in from grant writing. "Think about donating a vehicle or naming the VFW foundation in your will," Kingsbury said. "We have an unwavering commitment to helping veterans, and we are just getting started." He added that in October, he and VFW Senior Vice Commander-in-Chief Cory Geisler will participate in the 7 Devils Invitation sniper challenge in October in Idaho. He said they are doing it so that when fellow Iraq and Afghanistan vets see it, "they will see themselves in VFW."

VFW Adjutant General Dan West recognized convention-goers belonging to the Stars & Stripes Society – VFW's most elite donor group – as well as all others who contribute financially. "Fundraising covers 66 percent of the operational costs of our support programs," West said. "This is funded by patriotic supporters and you, our incredibly dedicated members."

Cara Brown, director of Key Relationships, Marketpoint for Humana Inc., highlighted the partnership between the VFW and Humana. "One of the clearest expressions of VFW's commitment to communities is the annual Day of Service. It sends a powerful message: service continues," Brown said. Additionally, she said, working together, VFW and Humana, have generated 1.6 million meals for veterans this past year. "This work is personal, and it is urgent," Brown concluded.

Retired Navy Master Chief Petty Officer Russell Smith, Military Affairs principal at USAA, discussed the partnership that exists between the VFW and USAA, the United States Automobile Association. Since 2010, Smith said USAA has provided millions of dollars to VFW. "The uniform may come off, but the mission never ends," said Smith, a life member of VFW Post 9342, in Katterbach, Germany.

Dr. James Ellzy, vice president of federal, health executive and market lead for Oracle Health, spoke about Oracle's current relationship with VA to help veterans streamline their healthcare experience through the Federal Electronic Health Record (EHR). "At Oracle Health, our mission is to work closely with VA to provide quality healthcare to support veterans," said Ellzy, who served as a Navy physician and on active duty for 22 years. "Our program gives healthcare providers a secure network with all of a veteran's information, resulting in a more complete picture of a veteran's healthcare history and continuity. Your health record travels with you." Ellzy added that Oracle's goal for full implementation of EHR is slated for 2031.

Military Women's Memorial President Phyllis Wilson opened her speech with a video of the Memorial's opening in October 1997, which provided soundbites of several women veterans expressing what the unveiling of the memorial meant to them. A life member of VFW Post 6683 in Arlington, Va., Wilson, who served as the most senior warrant officer in the Army Reserve, also expressed the

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importance of recording the stories of the more than 3 million women veterans who have served in the U.S. military. "If we who wore the uniform don't know them, why should America?" Wilson said. She also memorialized three young women who were killed in Iraq and Iran as well as the Memorial's efforts to work closely with VFW Posts in those women's hometowns to preserve their memories. "The reason I get choked up is that there are still people who fight to keep us women from serving when we know we are more than willing to give our lives for this country."

The Vice Minister of Taiwan's Veterans Affairs Council Wu Chih-Yang presented Whitmore with the Taiwan Veterans Affairs Council *Gold Medal of Honor*. The vice minister thanked VFW for its support of Taiwan. "Unity and cooperation among democratic partners are more important than ever," he said.

For the fourth year in a row, past VFW Commander-in-Chief Tim Borland accepted the *National Recruiter of the Year Award* for recruiting 669 new and reinstated members. Elite recruiters, those who signed up more than 250 members, also were recognized. They are: Ronald N. McKinnon, Steven L. Woodward, Lamar R. Pounds, Timothy P. Qualls, Laurence L. Lyons, Michael D. Boll, Jack A. Hawley and Martha J. Lain.

The Department of Arizona was recognized for 59 years of consecutive membership growth.

All-American commanders were recognized at the beginning of the afternoon session when each received their All-American caps and citations.

Also recognized were the All-American Triple Crown recipients. They are: Reinhold Yahnka, Laurie Charry, Robert Hunt, Rodney Wood, John Casey III, James Haddox, Edward Beard, Todd Haviland, Charles Cravens, Kevin Hice, Bill Miles, Douglas Hoffman, Charles Pickett, Troy Junier, David Walden, James Prestenback, Charles Magnant, Robert Lovergne Jr., William Pierce, Heath Silcox, Mark Decker, Kenneth Yount and Johnathon Hackett.

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