



# 2023

VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS

# ANNUAL REPORT

VFW members are #StillServing in communities around the world. They work to help others as they did while in uniform, all while exemplifying the best of the American spirit.

**VFW**  
VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS.





From left, Mathius Carter, Patsey Schreiber, John Reischman, Jerome Washington and Rachael Garcia were among the multitudes of attendees in July at VFW's 124th National Convention in Phoenix. They are representative of today's VFW. More and more Iraq and Afghanistan War veterans are assuming leadership roles within the VFW while being mentored by their predecessors, namely, Vietnam War veterans. *Photo by Dave Seibert*





From left, VFW Accredited Service Officers David Lowe, Mike Raymond, Belinda Baldoe and Sidney Love join VFW National Veterans Service Director Mike Figlioli for a break during the VFW Service Officer training in September in Annapolis, Md. In 2023, VFW's National Veterans Service helped more than 560,000 veterans receive more than \$13 billion of VA disability benefits, including back pay. *Photo by Lauren Goldman/VFW*

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A MESSAGE FROM VFW COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF DUANE SARMIENTO





# VFW is No. 1 Advocate for Veterans, Troops and Their Families

During my tenure as VFW’s Commander-in-Chief, I continue to encourage each of our valuable members to advocate for veterans and their families in any way possible. Our membership has proven time and again that “No One Does More for Veterans.”

The work of our great organization extends to the communities in which our members reside. There is no greater proof of this than by the exciting VFW Day of Service, launched in 2022. The first Saturday of every May kicks off a month-long endeavor dedicated to serving communities around the world. This year’s VFW Day of Service built on the success of its inaugural event, growing its total number of grassroots events by more than 20 percent. VFW Posts in all 50 states, as well as those in Europe, Guam, Asia and Puerto Rico, participated. With the Day of Service hashtag used more than 3.3 million times across social media, word of what the VFW does spread universally, as more than 500 Posts around the world participated.

VFW’s Day of Service was developed from the successful #StillServing campaign, which kicked off in 2020. Using the hashtag #StillServing, veterans share their stories of continued service on social media. I am excited to proclaim that more than 3 million people have engaged in this dynamic campaign. Additionally, more than 750 stories have been written about the campaign’s significance. I encourage all veterans everywhere to share their stories of how they are #StillServing.

One part of VFW’s work in the community is to promote the importance of education. Through its Voice of Democracy audio-essay competition, the VFW awarded more than \$1.3 million in scholarships in 2022-23. Another \$778,000 was awarded to middle-school participants in the Patriot’s Pen writing competition.

The VFW also extends its scholarship generosity through the VFW’s “Sport Clips Help A Hero Scholarship” program. Now in its 10th year, VFW has awarded more than \$12.3 million to about 2,720 veterans and service members wanting to further their education. This program is life-altering for the recipients, and I am so proud of this program’s success.

VFW also offers a hand up to veterans and their families with direct financial assistance. The VFW’s *Unmet Needs* program has distributed \$13.1 million to more than

11,600 military and veterans’ families since 2004. The program provides up to \$2,500 to veterans, active-duty service members and their families during times of financial hardship. I am humbled by the number of lives we touch every day through this invaluable program.

From the VFW office in our nation’s capital, the National Legislative Service department advocates for the care and rightful benefits for our military and veterans. Our incredible staff regularly testifies before Congress to accomplish VFW’s priority goals. The VFW-backed *Not Just a Number Act (S. 928)* is just one of many pieces of legislation the VFW is advocating for. This piece of legislation, which aligns with VFW’s priority goal of fighting against veterans’ suicide, would require VA to take a more comprehensive look at how veterans who die by suicide used VA benefits. Such benefits include disability compensation, education and employment benefits, home loans and foreclosure assistance.

Our Washington Office is also home to VFW’s National Veterans Service (NVS) department. Our team of more than 2,000 VA Accredited veterans service officers is second to none. These men and women stand ready to fight for veterans’ earned benefits. We also staff service officers at 23 Pre-Discharge offices on military installations. Their purpose is to offer VA benefits to help active-duty troops who are soon to be discharged.

In 2023 alone, VFW recovered more than \$13 billion for veterans. Unlike law firms which charge exorbitant rates for the exact same work our service officers are doing, this incredible service offered is free of charge. When I think of the 574,492 claimants represented by the VFW in 2023, I swell with pride.

To further protect our nation’s veterans, VFW launched a campaign in 2023 called Don’t Feed the Sharks. The VFW has been a vocal opponent of predatory “Claim Sharks” — companies who charge veterans illegal fees for sub-par VA benefit claims assistance. The VFW is determined to stop predatory Claim Sharks, and we will prevail.

From our community service work to our scholarship programs and our work on Capitol Hill, VFW remains the most caring and generous organization for veterans and their families. Thank you from the bottom of my heart for everything you do in the name of the Veterans of Foreign Wars.

— Duane



# WE ARE THE VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS

Members of VFW Post 3442 in Custer, S.D., gather outside the Post on a Friday afternoon in October. Located in the heart of the Black Hills, Post 3442 is active in its community, especially when it comes to children and youth. Situated on the historic town's main street, the Post draws visitors from everywhere. *Photo by Janie Dyhouse*





# OF THE UNITED STATES

## OUR CORE VALUES:

- Always put the interests of the members first.
- Promote patriotism.
- Honor military service.
- Ensure the care of veterans and their families.
- Serve our communities.
- Promote a positive image of the VFW.
- Respect the diversity of veteran opinions.
- Treat donors as partners in our cause.

## VFW BY THE NUMBERS

### MORE THAN

**1.4 MILLION:** Number of VFW and Auxiliary members

**5,748:** Number of VFW Posts worldwide

**Six** major wars and nearly **40** military actions since 1945 represented by VFW members.

## VFW TAKES PRIDE IN ITS COMMITMENT TO VETERANS AND TODAY'S MILITARY. OUR PROGRAMS ENSURE NO ONE IS FORGOTTEN.

You've most likely heard of the Veterans of Foreign Wars. The initials "VFW" are emblazoned on many of our 5,748 Posts worldwide. We are the nation's oldest major veterans' group, and we've been a part of the country's social fabric for 124 years.

We are an organization of 1 million veterans who have served overseas in war zones or areas demanding arduous duty, from mountains and deserts to jungles and swamps.

What you might not know about is our continuing commitment to our country and community. Our mission extends to troops serving overseas

today and their families waiting back home.

**Our Mission:** To foster camaraderie among U.S. veterans of overseas conflicts. To serve our veterans, the military and our communities. To advocate on behalf of all veterans.

**Our Vision:** Ensure that veterans are respected for their service, always receive their earned entitlements and are recognized for the sacrifices they and their loved ones have made on behalf of this great country.

## VFW MEMBERS CARE PASSIONATELY ABOUT SERVING THEIR FELLOW CITIZENS. JUST AS WE PLEDGED DURING OUR TIME IN UNIFORM, WE AGAIN VOW TO SUSTAIN A LIFELONG COMMITMENT TO THE NATION AND OUR COMMUNITIES.

### A VENERABLE ORGANIZATION

VFW traces its origins to 1899 when 13 Spanish-American War veterans convened in Columbus, Ohio. By 1914, this group had merged with two other Spanish-American/Philippine War veterans' organizations to become known collectively as the Veterans of Foreign Wars.

VFW's supreme governing body is its National Convention. Each July, thousands of VFW members vote as registered delegates, determining policy by adopting resolutions and making important business decisions.

VFW's National Headquarters is in Kansas City, Mo., where the organization's administration and programs-related efforts are coordinated. Legislative-oriented activities are developed and

implemented in VFW's Washington Office in the nation's capital

### VFW-AFFILIATED ORGANIZATIONS

Joining VFW to accomplish its mission are the VFW Auxiliary, the VFW Foundation, the VFW National Home and the Military Order of the Cootie, which is composed of VFW members dedicated to assisting hospitalized veterans.

### NONPROFIT STATUS

VFW is a tax-exempt organization under section 501(c)(19) of the Internal Revenue Code and contributions are deductible under section 170(c).



## NATIONAL VETERANS SERVICE 2023

National Pre-Discharge Claims Representative Donna Foy, right, helps a service member with his VA claim on Dec. 11 in the Transition Readiness Services Building at Camp Pendleton, Calif. VFW staff service officers at 23 Pre-Discharge offices on military installations. They offer VA benefits assistance to troops soon to be discharged. *Photo courtesy of Donna Foy*

**MORE THAN  
\$13 BILLION  
TOTAL RECOVERED IN 2023**



# VETERANS HELPING VETERANS

Located in the nation's capital, VFW's National Veterans (NVS) has served veterans, military members and families for more than a century. NVS was built on the principle of helping this group acquire their earned VA benefits.

Last year, VFW's National Veterans Service helped more than 560,000 veterans receive more than \$13 billion of VA disability benefits, including back pay. VFW's network of VA-accredited service officers has been helping veterans receive their earned pay.

VFW's NVS Director Michael Figlioli said that VFW is committed to a lifetime of advocacy for all veterans.

"Our accredited representatives are alongside their claimants who do everything from filing the claim, through review of the decision and then any follow-up appeals that may be necessary to achieve the maximum benefit allowed by law," Figlioli said. "But we don't stop there. Our representatives must know about other VA benefits programs, such as the GI Bill, VA home loans, VA health care and National Cemetery Administration benefits."

One of those VA-accredited service officers is Kenneth Deist, a VFW Life member. He is one of VFW's more than 2,000 VA-accredited service officers. As a VFW Department Service Officer for Arizona since 2018, Deist said he sees

between 15 and 20 veterans in person each week. He splits his time between his offices at the VA Regional Office in Phoenix and the VFW Department Headquarters in Tempe.

Deist says that as soon as the *Honoring Our PACT Act* passed, his office was inundated with communication from veterans, particularly Vietnam War veterans.

"They were calling all day, every day," Deist said. "Vietnam War veterans with hypertension [related to Agent Orange exposure] have waited a long time for this."

Deist, an Air Force veteran of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars, said claims for respiratory issues also are on the rise.

"We see a lot of sleep apnea problems," said Deist, a former commander of VFW Post 7401 in Chandler, Ariz. "The VA has not acknowledged sleep apnea as a presumptive condition even though studies have shown a connection."

Deist added that a goal for VA Accredited service officers is to educate veterans about their earned benefits and improve their quality of life.

"It does not matter whether you are a part of the VFW, we just want to take care of veterans," Deist said. "If VFW did not exist, it would be a bad thing."

Another one of VFW's VA-accredited service officers, Allen Barnes, said he is happy that he can continue to work

with the military community even after his service. Barnes is based at the Dwight D. Eisenhower VA Medical Center in Leavenworth, Kan.

"I love my job," said Barnes, a retired Army National Guard veteran. "I truly feel as if I'm doing the job I was meant to do. I'm lucky that I get to help veterans and their family members every day."

Barnes, who served in the Persian Gulf and Iraq wars, said he has seen significantly more veterans after the signing of the *Honoring Our PACT Act* in August. Barnes, a bronze life legacy member of VFW Post 56 in Leavenworth, Kan., recalled a case he handled to help the widow of an Army veteran after the landmark toxic-exposure reform legislation became law in August. He said that the veteran had died from colon cancer, which he said was related to toxic exposure.

"The wife was not receiving any benefits due to her husband's death, and she needed to take care of a special-needs child and her granddaughter," Barnes said.

"Due to the *Honoring Our PACT Act*, the widow was granted VA benefits because her husband passed from colon cancer.

"We did everything we could do for her," Barnes said. "And by the end of January, she started receiving Depen-

"I love my job. I truly feel as if I'm doing the job I was meant to do. I'm lucky that I get to help veterans and their family members every day." — Allen Barnes, VFW Service Officer





Vietnam War veteran and Department of Arizona Adjutant Lewis Gene Wood stands with VA Accredited service officer Kenneth Deist in December 2022. Photo by Patrick Breen

## HOW SERVICE OFFICERS HELP:

- Providing a lifetime of advocacy from the time a veteran files an initial claim, to helping survivors understand their benefits.
- Explaining benefits and helping veterans navigate the often bureaucratic maze of procedures and paperwork.
- Guiding and supporting veterans through months or even years of claims processing.
- Helping veterans prepare necessary documents and evidence, monitoring cases and information claimants of recent development.
- Assisting veterans who can't personally get to VA regional offices.

dency and Indemnity Compensation from VA. She also got back pay from the date the bill was signed.”

Barnes said that the money the widow received was “life-changing” and that the woman only needed to have one job instead of three.

“Without our help, she would not be receiving those earned benefits,” Barnes said.

VFW also has VA Accredited veterans service officers at 23 Benefits Delivery at Discharge at military installations across the United States. VA-accredited service officers at these locations provide pre-discharge representation for separating military service members. One such national pre-discharge claims representative is Donna Foy. A previous VA field examiner and veterans service representative of more than 10 years, Foy has served as a VFW claims rep for two years at Camp Pendleton, Calif.

According to Foy, she sees approximately 40 transitioning service members each week, processing between 20 and 25 claims a week to VA.

“The most common question I receive is, ‘How do I

begin the process? I am totally lost on how to begin the claim or what is needed,’” said Foy, a life member of VFW Post 10276 in Honolulu, Hawaii, with more than 15 years of military service with the Army and Army National Guard. “I begin by saying that they have come to the right place. I understand that separating from the military can be an exciting yet stressful time. I am here to help ease that stress by assisting them with their claims for VA benefits.”

Figlioli said that another job of a VA Accredited veterans service officer is helping veterans navigate through the VA claims process. Especially now that the *Honoring Our PACT Act* is now law, which Figlioli said is the “most important veterans legislation victory” in history.

“Our highly capable network of VFW Service Officers and claims consultants began receiving training on the *Honoring PACT Act* as soon as it was signed into law,” Figlioli said. “It was also incorporated into our formal service officer training curriculum, and we are continuously monitoring VA. If something changes that may affect benefits, we get it to the field staff quickly, so they are up to date with the latest information.”



# UNITING TO COMBAT HUNGER



(From left to right) VFW Department of Kentucky Senior Vice Commander Bruce Ashley and Veteran Community Engagement Executive Andrea Ortiz, a member of VFW Post 7108 in San Antonio, Texas, sort seeds at a Uniting to Combat Hunger Event on July 22, 2023, at the 124th VFW National Convention in Phoenix. Uniting to Combat Hunger is a joint venture of VFW and Humana aimed at helping feed food insecure families across the country. *Photo by Dave Spiva/VFW*

Since 2018, VFW has teamed with Humana to establish the *Uniting to Combat Hunger* campaign. It remains a staple in fighting not only hunger, but also food insecurity across the country.

From the start of the *Uniting to Combat Hunger* initiative, the program has provided more than 4.5 million meals for food insecure families. The U.S. Department of Agriculture in 2021 said more than 34 million people, including 9 million children, experience food insecurity in the U.S. during the year — that is about 1-in-10 households in the country.

At the 124th VFW National Convention in Phoenix this year, many groups of volunteers lined up at tables with bowls of seeds in front of them. They were a part of the *Uniting to Combat Hunger* seed packing event that provided about 30 tons of vegetables for families suffering from food insecurity. Those seeds were sent across the country to provide healthy and fresh produce to those in need.

VFW Foundation Grants Manager Jason Couch said the event at the national convention garnered dozens of volunteers from VFW Posts and Auxiliaries, as well as VFW Departments. Couch added that *Uniting to Combat Hunger* is an “incredibly important endeavor” not only to VFW but also to Humana, a company based in Louisville, Ky., that offers health care coverage.

Feeding America says that about 125,000 active-duty military troops experience food insecurity — about 7 percent of troops in the active military. However, according to the Department of Agriculture, only about 2 percent of active-duty troops qualify for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. Feeding America also says 1-in-4 Afghanistan and Iraq war veterans are affected by food insecurity. VFW and Humana are alarmed at the number of active-duty troops and veterans who suffer from food insecurity. This is the reason why VFW and Humana wanted to give healthy meals to needy Americans as a part of *Uniting to Combat Hunger*.

Since 2021, the VFW Foundation has offered grants to VFW Post and Auxiliaries supporting the *Uniting to Combat Hunger* campaign. For every dollar raised by local VFW Post and Auxiliaries, the VFW Foundation will match the full amount up to \$5,000. Also, for every hour that a VFW Post or Auxiliary member volunteers to address food insecurity in their communities, the VFW Foundation will provide a dollar match in the form of an unrestricted grant. A minimum of 500 hours must be documented to qualify for the volunteerism grant.

For more information about *Uniting to Combat Hunger*, visit [www.vfw.org/UTCH](http://www.vfw.org/UTCH).

**FOOD INSECURITY BY THE NUMBERS** **34 million:** The amount of people in the U.S. who suffer from food insecurity. **9 million:** The number of food insecure children in the country. **125,000:** The approximate number of active-duty armed service members who experience food insecurity. **1-in-4:** The amount of food insecure Afghanistan and Iraq veterans. **2 million:** About the number of meals that have been provided by VFW and Humana’s *Uniting to Combat Hunger* initiative.



VFW National Legislative Service Associate Director Quandrea Patterson testifies on pending legislation before a House Committee on Veterans Affairs Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs legislative hearing at the Cannon House Office Building, Washington, D.C., Nov. 8, 2023. Photo by Brittany Dymond/VFW





# A LEGISLATIVE PLATFORM FOR VETERANS

VFW has played an integral part in almost every piece of veterans' legislation signed into law for more than 124 years.

VFW advocates daily at the nation's capital to improve care and benefits for the military community. The 1.3 million VFW and Auxiliary members' influence helps the organization achieve its legislative goals.

The VFW's National Legislative Service (NLS) monitors all legislation affecting active-duty service members, veterans and their families. The NLS team regularly testifies at congressional committee hearings and directly works alongside Congress and the president's administration to accomplish VFW's priority goals and fight back against bad proposals that would eliminate or cause harm to veterans' earned benefits.

The VFW Action Corps is a grassroots-level newsletter that gives 400,000 VFW members, veterans and supporters a chance to stay informed on issues facing the military community. Newsletter subscribers stand ready to email, write, call or visit our nation's lawmakers to make VFW's voice heard on Capitol Hill.

Through 2023, VFW has advocated for many veterans-related bills, including the *GUARD VA Benefits Act of 2023* (S. 740). If passed by Congress and signed into law by President Joe Biden, S. 740 would reinstate penalties for charging veterans and survivors unauthorized fees related to claims for VA benefits. This is just one way VFW is fighting "claim sharks," which are unscrupulous individuals or companies charging hefty fees to supposedly assist veterans with their VA claims.

VFW also supports the *TAP Promotion Act*, which is legislation that would authorize VA-accredited representatives

to promote enrollment in VA benefit programs as part of the military Transition Assistance Program (TAP). If made law, the *TAP Promotion Act* would direct VA to develop a tailored pre-separation benefits course in which VA-accredited representatives actively participate, and to incorporate representatives into its current TAP presentation would be substantive improvements to the current curriculum.

The VFW-supported *Not Just a Number Act* (S. 928), which is legislation that aligns with VFW's priority goal of fighting against veterans suicide. It would require VA to take a more comprehensive look at how veterans who die by suicide used VA benefits, including disability compensation, education and employment benefits, homes loans and foreclosure assistance. All findings would be publicly published in a report known as the "National Veterans Suicide Prevention Annual Report.

Every year since 1949, Congress has provided VFW the opportunity for the organization's leaders and activists to speak with lawmakers and staff of their respective states.

Alongside VFW's legislative efforts are student veterans. The VFW-Student Veterans of America (SVA) Legislative Fellowship is a semester-long program that involves researching, coordinating, reporting and advocating on behalf of one of four veterans' policy areas, including:

- Student veterans success during and after their



(From left to right) Chet Bennetts; VFW then-National Veterans Service Director Ryan Gallucci; Jordan Quinones; Greg Sanchez; Harry Phillips; VFW National Legislative Service Associate Director, Katherine Cassell; Meghan Fitzgerald; and SVA National President and CEO Jared Lyon are shown at the SVA National Conference in Orlando in January 2023. Five VFW members and student veterans were selected to participate in the annual VFW-SVA Fellowship program for the 2022-23 school year. *VFW Photo*

education

- Veterans' health care and benefits
- Transitioning from military to civilian life
- Challenges service members and military families face every day

Since 2013, members of VFW and SVA have had the opportunity to make their voices heard on Capitol Hill. The fellows of VFW-SVA are given the opportunity to meet lawmakers and administrators responsible for implementing veterans' policy on Capitol Hill.





Backed by about 400 VFW and Auxiliary members, then-VFW Commander-in-Chief Tim Borland testifies before a joint hearing of the House and Senate VA committees on March 8, 2023, in Washington, D.C. At the top of Borland's list was more help for veterans exposed to toxins. Photo by Bob Knudsen

VFW's collaboration with SVA provides students with a semester-long academic experience involving research, action, reporting and advocating for policies affecting military members, veterans and their families. One of the students who participated in this year's program was Harry Phillips.

Phillips, who graduated from Tulane University Law School in May 2023, is a former infantry officer with the Louisiana Army National Guard. Phillips was able to introduce policymakers to the *Servicemember Enrollment and Readmission for Valuable Education Act (SERVE) Act (H.R. 4244)*.

Currently, National Guard and Reserve troops are only guaranteed readmission to their school if they serve at least 30 consecutive days on active duty. If law, the *SERVE Act* would require higher institutions of learning to readmit any Guardsmen or Reservists who had to serve on active duty, regardless of how many days they had to do so.

Phillips, a member of the VFW Department of Louisi-

ana, said that the *SERVE Act* will fix an issue some military members face when they are called to mobilize for things such as natural disasters, border security and civil unrest.

As an Army National Guard officer, Phillips enrolled in Tulane Law School in 2020. He said he remembers thinking: "What would happen if I was activated during my time in school?"

Phillips learned that only National Guard and Reserve members who served more than 30 consecutive days on Active duty while in school were eligible for readmission to their school.

"When I was commissioned into the Mississippi Army National Guard in 2016, I basically came into the beginning of a deployment cycle with my unit," Phillips said. "I was made well aware of the commitment a National Guardsman makes — it's not just one weekend per month and two weeks in the summer. When I started law school, my biggest concern was if I got activated for something, what happens with school?"

During his research, Phillips found "a gap" in *Higher Education Act of 1965*, which states that universities are required to readmit a service member if they had to serve on active duty for at least 30 days. Phillips' proposed legislation would amend the 1965 law to require readmission for any service member activated on the state or federal level.

In September 2021, Phillips, who was in the Louisiana Army National Guard at the time, was activated for full-time service during *Hurricane Ida*, which made landfall in Louisiana. Phillips added that while Tulane was affected by the hurricane, he "couldn't help but think about the student veterans affected" by the activation.

"The whole State of Louisiana was activated for the humanitarian efforts, and I was only on active duty for three weeks," said Phillips, who served in Syria in 2018-19 as platoon leader of 2nd Plt., C Co., 2nd Bn., 198th Armored Regt., 155th Armored BCT. "There were students who had to stop going to school to be a part of it. I thought, 'What will happen to them?'"

Phillips, who in the fall of 2023 became an associate at the law firm Haynes and Boone, said that the *SERVE Act* has been introduced to the House Committee on Education and the Workforce. As of October 2023, Phillips said the plan is for the bill to be a part of the *2024 National Defense Authorization Act*.

Phillips said that before the VFW-SVA Fellowship, he would have never imagined being a part of creating a bill that could help those in the military. He added that he "could not have done it" without the help and support of the VFW Washington Office.

"The fellowship was the top experience for me in law school," Phillips said. "At the time as a law student I had a foundational understanding of how our legal system and Capitol Hill works as a whole, the first-hand experience I got was invaluable. I could not have been prouder to be a VFW member working along with the organization during the whole experience."



“People want to be a part of our Post because of the good things we do. They naturally want to be a part of something successful and good.”

# EMERGING LEADERS

Membership recruiting is vital to the longevity of the VFW. Just as important, though, is the retention of current members.

VFW Post 8273 in Frisco, Texas, works hard to retain its growing membership. Post Commander Shenna Lawless — who served with the 1st Infantry Division in Iraq 2006-2008 — said one of the ways to keep Post members engaged is by hosting guest speakers at the monthly Post meetings.

Lawless said speakers vary in levels of interest. There have been presentations on topics such as gaming, exercise and VA care.

“Being appealing to all veterans is our big thing,” said Lawless who is in her fifth year as Post commander. “There has to be something of interest to keep members involved.”

Another draw for Post 8273 members is quarterly membership drawings. Lawless said when you attend a meeting, your name is entered into a quarterly drawing. If your name is drawn, your membership is upgraded. If the person whose name is drawn is a Gold Legacy Life member, that person chooses another member for upgrade.

Lawless said that being involved in the community is another draw for member engagement. At least once a month, the Post participates in a community event.

“Sometimes, we piggyback events, too,” said Lawless, who also served with the 8th Army in Korea from 2004-2006. “Something as simple as buying popsicles and hand-

ing those out for free. We do not expect anything in return.”

The Frisco Post is made up of more than 50 percent of Gulf War vets or younger. About 25 percent of the membership is female.

“We encourage all of our members to get involved,” Lawless said. “You don’t have to be involved in everything we do, but we like for members to pick one or two things to champion.”

Retention also is as simple as connecting with members, Lawless said. When she first became Post commander, she said it took the better part of a year to work on updating the roster which had a lot of inaccurate contact information.

“I stay in contact with every single member on the roster,” Lawless said. “We also have a social media group. Our Post chaplain also is good about staying in contact with people in the Post.”

Lawless added that if she is unable to reach a member, she or another vet will make a house call to see what is going on. She has found that when someone falls off the radar, there is something going on and the Post is ready to help.

While recruiting is ongoing at Post 8273 as evident in its growing membership number, Lawless said she has found vets are drawn to the Post.

“People want to be a part of our Post because of the good things we do,” she said. “They naturally want to be a part of something successful and good.”



VFW Post 8273 Commander Shenna Lawless, right, administers the oath of membership to three new VFW members in September 2023 at the Post’s monthly meeting in Frisco, Texas. Lawless said that in order to retain its members, Post 8273 tries to offer something for all members and encourages community involvement. *Photo courtesy of Shenna Lawless*



# HELPING WHEN FAMILIES NEED IT MOST



VFW's *Unmet Needs* program provides active-duty service members/Guard/Reserves and their families with a hand up during times of financial stress. *Unmet Needs* grants can pay for a variety of expenses including mortgage/rent payments, childcare, utility bills and groceries, among others. *Bigstock photo*

“Now I can focus more on what has to be done to move forward, not on the past. You guys saved my life from a dark moment that almost happened — thank you.”

Craving a sense of purpose, Joseangel Campos, 37, joined the U.S. Marine Corps in 2009. He served for 10 years as an equipment engineer operator and was stationed in Japan, Afghanistan, North Carolina, New Mexico and California.

Today, Campos lives in El Paso, Texas, with his wife, Carolina, and their four children: Jennal, Caiden, Johannah and Cayson. He continues to battle the effects of service-connected injuries, including some that occurred more than a decade ago.

“While recruiting in my first year, I was in a high-speed motor vehicle accident that changed my whole career,” he said. “I never recovered from my physical and mental injuries, some of which I was either trying to hide or didn’t know I had at first.”

In addition to a traumatic brain injury and hairline fractures in his back and knee, Campos copes with Post Traumatic Stress (PTS). While researching PTS resources, he found the VFW’s *Unmet Needs* program and received assistance to help cover a mortgage payment.

“The support made the mental challenges go away,” he said. “Now I can focus more on what has to be done to move forward, not on the past. You guys saved my life from a dark moment that almost happened — thank you.”

Campos encourages those who are considering donating to the VFW to do so and insisted, “Your generosity could save the life of someone else who sacrificed their mental and physical health to serve and find purpose.”

**UNMET NEEDS BY THE NUMBERS** More than **\$13.1 million:** The amount of financial grants awarded to military families since 2004 to help cover basic needs in times of financial hardship. 11,607: Number of service members/veterans and their families who received assistance through *Unmet Needs* since 2004.



# VETERAN RECEIVES *HELP A HERO* SCHOLARSHIP

A Navy veteran can work toward a degree in physical therapy thanks in part to the VFW's "*Sport Clips Help A Hero Scholarship*" program.

Andrea Arrizon became a student at Samuel Merritt University in Oakland, Calif., following her five years in the Navy as an aviation ordnanceman. While looking for financial help, Arrizon was introduced to the VFW's "*Sport Clips Help A Hero Scholarship*."

"I heard about the '*Sport Clips Help A Hero Scholarship*' through my school's scholarship portal," said Arrizon, who served in the Navy between 2013 and 2018. "I've gotten one check, but I already applied for a second scholarship."

Arrizon's goal is to become a physical therapist. With about a year remaining in the program at Samuel Merritt University, Arrizon hopes her degree can further the opportunity to help her fellow veterans.

"After completing my program, I'd love to either work

for a military hospital or VA medical center," said Arrizon, a San Leandro, Calif. native. "I'd also like to get involved in research to better understand the types of injuries that affect these populations."

Like Arrizon, many veterans in pursuit of higher learning turn to VFW's "*Sport Clips Help A Hero Scholarship*," which provides them with up to \$5,000 in financial assistance. The *Help A Hero* scholarship was established 10 years ago to help student veterans complete their educational goals without incurring excessive student loan debt.

As VFW's official haircutter, Sport Clips began working with VFW in 2005 to raise funds for a former program called *Operation Uplink*. In 2013, Sport Clips became the primary supporter of the "*Help A Hero Scholarship*" program. The VFW's "*Sport Clips Help A Hero Scholarship*" has awarded more than \$10.6 million to about 2,400 veterans and service members wanting to further their education.

"After completing my program, I'd love to either work for a military hospital or VA medical center. I'd also like to get involved in research to better understand the types of injuries that affect these populations."



Andrea Arrizon, a San Leandro, Calif., native and former Navy aviation ordnanceman, applied for VFW's "*Sport Clips Help A Hero Scholarship*" to get help in pursuing a career in physical therapy. She said she has about a year left in the program at Samuel Merritt University in Oakland, Calif. *Photo courtesy of Andrea Arrizon.*

**HELP A HERO BY THE NUMBERS** VFW Sport Clips Help a Hero Scholarship program has awarded 2,729 scholarships worth more than \$12 million since 2013. Visit <https://www.vfw.org/Scholarship> for more information.



# SUPPORTING TROOPS AND THEIR FAMILIES

Long before becoming commander of a VFW Post established on an active-duty U.S. military installation last year, Willie Keller had seen the possibilities with a credulous eye.

Joined by other founding members of Post 12209 on Fort Cavazos (formerly Fort Hood) near Killeen, Texas, Keller set out to serve as an example of how a VFW Post on an active military installation can help troops and their families more effectively.

“I wish I had that for me when I was coming up,” said Keller, a 16-year Army veteran who joined VFW in 1995. “It not only helps with recruitment, but it puts us in a position to shed light on stuff that is not getting lit up.”

Since finding its home at Fort Cavazos’ Building 18000 on Jan. 7, 2022, Post 12209’s membership has more than tripled its roster. The Post boosted its numbers from 48 in July 2022 to more than 153 members as of this August, according to Keller.

“And we haven’t dropped the hammer on membership yet,” said Keller, who served in Afghanistan and Iraq before being medically retired in 2009. “The people we have come to us about joining is because of what they see from us.”

Over the last year, Post 12209 has provided more than \$180,000 worth of assistance to service members and their families by tapping into VFW’s well of programs and services. This includes the Military Assistance Program,

which provides Posts with grants to help active-duty troops, as well as *Unmet Needs* grants for military families with financial difficulties.

Another beacon has been VFW’s Adopt-a-Unit program, which to date has allowed Post 12209 to adopt more than 29 military units comprising thousands of troops at Fort Cavazos. From cookouts to care packages to simply treating families to a free meal, Keller added that being on base to see the impact of the VFW makes it worth the countless hours he puts in every day.

“When you’re in uniform, it’s your job to care,” Keller said. “But we don’t get paid. This is something we do for them. They see this. The highlight for me is seeing them realize that someone really cares. It’s a good feeling to even see generals on base stop to thank us for what we’ve done.”



VFW Post 12209 Commander Willie Keller, left, takes a photo while he and his Post members serve lunch to members of the 115th Brigade Support Battalion, 1st Armored BCT, 1st Cavalry Division on Feb. 10, 2023, at Camp Cavazos near Killeen, Texas.

“The highlight for me is seeing them realize that someone really cares.”



# DISASTER RELIEF

Since the VFW's inception nearly 125 years ago, its members' pursuance to help communities ravaged by natural disasters remains undeterred.

Under the VFW mantle, veterans from across the country annually carry out missions to combat the harsh aftermath of floods, wildfires, typhoons or hurricanes ravaging communities.

Most recently, in early August when wildfires ravaged portions of Maui in the Hawaiian Islands, VFW members worked together to provide relief. Especially impacted by the fires was Lahaina, once the capital of Hawaii.

VFW Post 3850 on Maui quickly mobilized as a distribution point for community members.

Post 3850 Commander Alton Sanders said the VFW team of volunteers have done everything they know to do to help including offering a caring shoulder.

Sanders noted one veteran who got in touch with the Post for assistance. The vet had lost his wife in the fire and was still in shock. In planning her funeral, he realized he had nothing to wear to her funeral. Sanders made sure he had what he needed. Most importantly, Sanders said, was just "being there" for the veteran to talk about his wife.

"Some of these stories are mind blowing," Sanders said. "It is like a war zone here with no bullets."

VFW volunteers have partnered with the local Sea Cadets and their parents in picking up 14-15 pallets of supplies so far. Supplies are delivered to the Post and inventoried.

Then, when people come to the Post home or call, volunteers will know if they have what is needed.

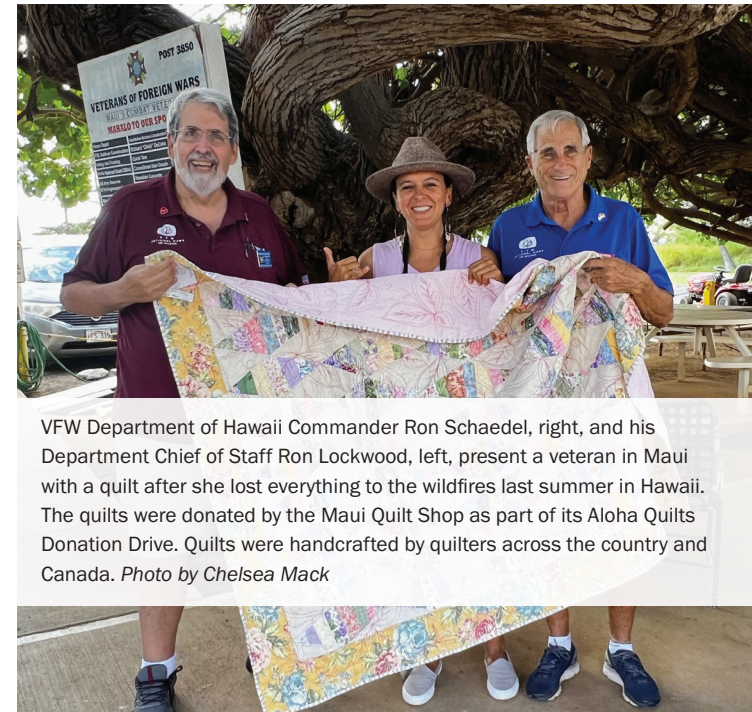
"We are trying to keep this organized because this is going to be a long haul," Sanders said. "If someone is unable to find a ride to the Post to pick up supplies, one of us delivers to wherever they are staying."

In September, VFW officers from the Department of Hawaii and other members from around the state traveled to Maui for a week to provide direct relief. They made the trip a couple of more times in the fall.

"Many VFW Posts around the country donated money to help with our Maui brothers and sisters," said VFW Department of Hawaii Commander Ron Schaedel. "The support has been overwhelming."

Being on the opposite side of the island from where the fires spread, Post 3850 was unscathed. However, one of Post members living in Lahaina lost everything in the fire, according to Sanders.

"Lahaina is the heart of the island," Sanders said. "I have visited 49 of the 50 states, and I have never seen a community come together like Maui has."



VFW Department of Hawaii Commander Ron Schaedel, right, and his Department Chief of Staff Ron Lockwood, left, present a veteran in Maui with a quilt after she lost everything to the wildfires last summer in Hawaii. The quilts were donated by the Maui Quilt Shop as part of its Aloha Quilts Donation Drive. Quilts were handcrafted by quilters across the country and Canada. Photo by Chelsea Mack



VFW Post 3850 Commander Alton Sanders, left, and his fellow VFW volunteers discuss plans in August 2023 to deliver supplies to the people in Maui affected by the wildfires that ravaged communities such as Lahaina. The Post served as a distribution center. Photo courtesy of Alton Sanders

# EDUCATING AMERICA'S YOUTH



Then-VFW Commander-in-Chief Timothy Borland (right) and then-VFW Auxiliary President Jane Reape (left) present Voice of Democracy first-place winner Scotland Stewart his \$35,000 award during the Parade of Winners on March 6, 2023, at the Regency Ballroom in Arlington, Va. *Photo by Bob Knudsen*

“I encourage all VFW Posts to seek out these teachers. Ask the kids — they know who the good ones are.”

## VOICE OF DEMOCRACY

Each year, VFW provides high school students in the United States and certain areas overseas with an opportunity to voice their ideas through a democratic-themed essay.

Through this premiere scholarship program, *Voice of Democracy*, VFW presented Scotland Stewart with its first-place \$35,000 *T.C. Selman Memorial Scholarship* during the Parade of Winners on March 6, 2023, at the Regency Ballroom in Arlington, Va.

Sponsored by VFW Post 1893 and its Auxiliary in Estill Springs, Tenn., Stewart’s winning essay on “Why is the Veteran Important?” paid tribute to his military-rich family. “I have followed their example my whole life, so I’ve always had the foundation and understanding of the importance of veterans and their impact on our country,” Stewart said.

Stewart, a sophomore at Franklin County High School in Winchester, Tenn., began his essay with four powerful words: Honor. Integrity. Loyalty. Service.

“These brave men and women fight the battles abroad so that we do not have to fight here at home,” Stewart wrote. “They provide the very liberty that allows us to enjoy the rights guaranteed in our Constitution, while placing themselves in harm’s way to do so.”

The *Voice of Democracy* contest drew nearly 23,500 participants for the 2022-23 year. The contest received support from VFW partner Twisted X, which donated more than \$130,000.



Then-VFW Commander-in-Chief Timothy Borland (right) and then-VFW Auxiliary President Jane Reape (left) present Patriot’s Pen first-place winner Leighton Peters with her \$5,000 award on March 6 at the Regency Ballroom in Arlington, Va. *Photo by Bob Knudsen*

## PATRIOT’S PEN

Leighton Peters earned top honors in VFW’s 2022-23 *Patriot’s Pen* youth essay contest. Her essay on the theme, “My Pledge to Our Veterans?” earned Peters the \$5,000 *North End Post 144, Paul A. Spera Past Commander-in-Chief Award*.

A seventh-grade student in Rice Lake, Wis., Peters was one of nearly 62,600 students in grades six through eight to compete in the contest. She was sponsored by VFW Post 2204 and its Auxiliary in Rice Lake.

The first-place recipients from each Department in the *Patriot’s Pen* contest shared the \$55,000 in awards, distributed accordingly to each based on placement.

To learn more about the Voice of Democracy and Patriot’s Pen youth programs, visit [www.vfw.org/YouthScholarships](http://www.vfw.org/YouthScholarships).



**SMART/MAHER NATIONAL CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION TEACHER AWARD**

This year's *Smart/Maher National Citizenship Education Teacher Award* winners received rounds of resounding applause from thousands of VFW members at the 124th VFW National Convention on July 25 in Phoenix.

Introduced by then-VFW Commander-in-Chief Timothy Borland, the teachers, representing three categories ranging from elementary to high school, each received a \$1,000 check towards their school and another \$1,000 towards their professional development.

The winners included Kelly Garey for the elementary school category, Susan Allgood for middle school and Javier Martinez for high school, respectively.

Garey, a Navy Reservist and life member of VFW Post 3886 in Caldwell, Idaho, has taught for more than 30 years at Van Buren Elementary School in Caldwell.

Allgood, who was sponsored by VFW Post 4346 in Toccoa, Ga., is an eighth-grade English teacher at Stephens County Middle School in Toccoa who teaches students about the sacrifices of veterans through her class curriculum.

Martinez, a Marine who served on active duty and in the Marine Corps Reserve for more than a decade, earned his master's in education from Aurora University in Illinois and began teaching at Kaneland High School in Maple Park, Ill., in 2007. He was sponsored by Post 5819 in Lemont, Ill.

TOP RIGHT: Marine Corps veteran Javier Martinez speaks following his acceptance of VFW's Smart/ Maher National Citizenship Education Teacher Award during the 124th National Convention on July 25 in Phoenix. Martinez has been teaching at Kaneland High School in Maple Park, Ill., since 2007. *Photo by Nicole Knudsen*

MIDDLE RIGHT: Kelly Garey, a Navy Reservist and life member of VFW Post 3886 in Caldwell, Idaho, speaks after receiving her VFW's Smart/Maher National Citizenship Education Teacher Award during the 124th National Convention on July 25 in Phoenix. For more than 30 years, the retired chief petty officer has split her time between the Navy Operations Support Center in Boise, Idaho, and teaching youths at Van Buren Elementary School in Caldwell. *Photo by Nicole Knudsen*

BOTTOM RIGHT: Susan Allgood, left, accepts her award from then-VFW Commander-in-Chief Timothy Borland during the 124th National Convention on July 25 in Phoenix. *Photo by Bob Knudsen*



**EDUCATION BY THE NUMBERS**

**\$1.3 Million:**

Amount of awards presented at all levels of VFW during the 2022-23 *Voice of Democracy* competition.

**23,454:**

Number of *Voice of Democracy* student participants in 2022-23.

**\$778,000:**

Amount of awards presented at all levels of VFW during the 2022-23 *Patriot's Pen* competition.

**\$59,257:**

Amount of awards distributed at the Post, District and Department levels for the *Smart/Maher* award in 2022-23.

**62,630:**

Number of *Patriot's Pen* student participants in 2022-23.

**67:**

Number of teachers who have been honored since 1999.

# #STILLSERVING



Members of VFW Post 1533 and its Auxiliary in San Antonio sort and pack potatoes in the San Antonio Food Bank's warehouse during their VFW Day of Service in May. VFW's second annual Day of Service grew its total number of grassroots events by more than 20 percent from the first year. VFW Posts in all 50 states, as well as those in Europe, Guam, Asia and Puerto Rico, participated. *Photo Courtesy of VFW Post 1533*

For their VFW Day of Service in May 2023, VFW Post 1533 members in San Antonio split their time into two volunteer sessions at the San Antonio Food Bank.

A cohort of 18 Post members spent more than three hours apiece on May 16 and May 19, respectively, working out of the San Antonio Food Bank's warehouse sorting and packing food for those suffering from food insecurity.

"Our Day of Service was spent in a warehouse working with fellow volunteers from across our community who were equally committed to fighting hunger," VFW Post 1533 Judge Advocate General Suzzie Thomas said. "By luck and good fortune, we were joined by high school students, volunteers from USAA and a large group of Navy chiefs."

VFW Post 1533 also donated \$500 to the Food Bank, helping provide more than 3,500 meals for the community, an additional token of their mission.

"VFW's Day of Service is about perspective and team work," Thomas said. "We can all get caught up in our daily grind and life's challenges, so it is important to make the time and have a reason to come together as a team to make a positive impact."

Despite their efforts during the 2023 Day of Service, Post 1533 members went beyond the month of May and remained involved with the Food Bank throughout the summer. In July, they also hosted a food and pet drive at their Post, donating an additional 1,072 food items to the San Antonio Food Bank.

In April 2023, VFW was awarded a Gold Stevie® Award in the Corporate & Community — Community Engagement Event category for its inaugural VFW Day of Service campaign in the 21st Annual American Business Awards®. The American Business Awards (ABA) is the nation's premier business awards program.

"We can all get caught up in our daily grind and life's challenges, so it is important to make the time and have a reason to come together as a team to make a positive impact."



# REMEMBERING OUR FALLEN



“It is sacred ground for the VFW. The history of the heroes laid to rest here, and the lore of our own Buddy Poppy just surrounds you.”

Thierry Faveere, his son, Onno, and then-VFW Commander-in-Chief Tim Borland gather at the grave of Army Pvt. Raleigh D. Cawein on Sept. 2, 2022, at the Flanders Field American Cemetery and Memorial in Waregem, Belgium. The Faveere family adopted the grave of Cawein, a New Yorker killed in World War I, and Borland met with the father and son while touring the cemetery.  
*VFW Photo*

Among VFW’s core beliefs is the preservation and remembrance of those American soldiers whose sacrifices shall weather the winds of passing time.

During one of his first overseas trips as then-VFW Commander-in-Chief last year, Timothy Borland made it a priority to visit a site that ties directly to one of VFW’s most cherished symbols. The Flanders Field American Cemetery and Memorial in Waregem, Belgium, contains 368 burial sites, the majority of which are the final resting place for U.S. troops who died fighting in the last weeks of World War I.

“I had to see the cemetery,” Borland said. “It is sacred ground for the VFW. The history of the heroes laid to rest here, and the lore of our own Buddy Poppy just surrounds you.”

Flanders Field is the setting for the poem “In Flanders Fields,” written in 1915 by Col. John McCrae, a WWI Canadian soldier who died of illness in a British officers hospital in 1918. The literary work presented a striking image of bright red poppies blooming among the rows of white crosses marking the graves in and around Flanders, the northern portion of Belgium that saw heavy fighting in World War I.

The poem inspired VFW delegates to approve a motion at the 1922 National Convention in Seattle, Wash., declaring the poppy as VFW’s official flower. In May 1924, VFW registered the name “Buddy Poppy” with the U.S. patent office, which gave the VFW all rights to the name.

Borland said he was thankful to have been able to visit such a place with so much world, American and VFW history.

“It really is a beautiful site,” Borland said. “There are hedges and flowers everywhere, with the poppies blooming in April. It is very well maintained with an impressive shrine at the center. It reminded me of a little Arlington. The honor of being there gave me goosebumps. It was humbling.”

# VFW FOUNDATION DONORS

The VFW Foundation wishes to express its gratitude to some of its most magnanimous donors. Such generosity helped fund numerous VFW programs and initiatives from Sept. 1, 2022 through Aug. 31, 2023.

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## Financial Statements

### STATEMENT OF FINANCIAL POSITION AUGUST 31, 2023

#### ASSETS

Cash and cash equivalents	\$9,951,876
Investments	210,285,675
Receivables	6,120,303
Inventory	2,843,278
Property and equipment, net	7,189,195
Pension and postretirement asset	3,364,502
Prepaid expenses	3,521,361
Total assets	<u>\$243,276,190</u>

#### LIABILITIES AND NET ASSETS

Accounts payable and accrued liabilities	\$11,700,395
Life member dues for future distribution – state and posts	75,698,403
Deferred revenue	35,388,389
Total liabilities	<u>122,787,187</u>
Net assets	
Without donor restrictions	112,616,261
With donor restrictions	7,872,742
Total net assets	<u>120,489,003</u>
Total liabilities and net assets	<u>\$243,276,190</u>

### Statement of Activities and Changes in Net Assets Year Ended August 31, 2023

#### SUPPORT AND REVENUE

Contributions and gifts	\$68,148,987
Investment return, net	7,604,086
Membership dues	7,044,978
Supply, Buddy Poppy and other sales	6,589,866
Advertising revenue	2,693,982
Other revenue	3,754,241
Total support and revenue	<u>95,836,140</u>

#### EXPENSES

Program Services:	
Veterans service activities	28,991,930
Fraternal activities and member services	20,433,828
Community service and public awareness	12,805,466
Total program services	<u>62,231,224</u>
Supporting Services:	
Fundraising activities	30,667,588
Management and general	3,960,264
Membership maintenance	1,329,303
Total supporting services	<u>35,957,155</u>
Total expenses	<u>98,188,379</u>
Changes in net assets before pension-related changes other than pension service costs	(2,352,239)
Pension-related changes other than pension service costs	<u>559,655</u>
Change in net assets	(1,792,584)
Net assets, beginning of period	<u>122,281,587</u>
Net assets, end of period	<u>\$120,489,003</u>





# Financial Statements

## Statement of Financial Position August 31, 2023

### ASSETS

Cash and cash equivalents	\$8,887,256
Investments	9,898,512
Receivables	43,351
Furniture, fixtures, and equipment	22,417
Operating lease right of use asset	42,470
Prepaid expenses	<u>9,411</u>
Total assets	<u>\$18,903,417</u>

### LIABILITIES AND NET ASSETS

Accounts payable and accrued liabilities	\$322,761
Operating lease liability	<u>42,470</u>
Total liabilities	365,231
Net assets	
Without donor restrictions	12,984,731
With donor restrictions	<u>5,553,455</u>
Total net assets	<u>18,538,186</u>
Total liabilities and net assets	<u>\$18,903,417</u>

## Statement of Activities and Changes in Net Assets Year Ended August 31, 2023

### SUPPORT AND REVENUE

Contributions and gifts	\$4,797,779
Investment return, net	<u>1,018,252</u>
Total support and revenue	<u>5,816,031</u>

### EXPENSES

Program Services:	
Veterans service activities	2,868,978
Community service and public awareness	777,516
Supporting Services:	
Fundraising activities	666,402
Management and general	<u>482,842</u>
Total expenses	<u>4,795,738</u>

Change in net assets	1,020,293
Net assets, beginning of period	<u>17,517,893</u>
Net assets, end of period	<u>\$18,538,186</u>



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