

# American Legion Family Unites in Washington, D.C.

With an eagerness to learn and to add to the number of voices heard, members of The American Legion Family converged on Washington, D.C., for the 59th annual Washington Conference in February.

During their time in the nation's capital, Legion Family members took to Capitol Hill,

meeting with their respective senators and representatives fully prepared to share their thoughts and concerns about the state of our veterans, military, and their families. Members also watched as National Commander Brett P. Reistad went before a Joint House and Senate Committees on Veterans' Affairs, advocating

on behalf of the Legion Family's 3 million veterans and their families.

Overall, the gathering showed a great amount of unity and teamwork between Legion Family members, as they all had one common goal in mind — working to make a positive change for our veterans.



## Legion Family Teamwork

For the second year in a row, The American Legion invited the American Legion Auxiliary's national officers, Past National Presidents, and other ALA national leadership to attend various general sessions aimed at educating on how to better serve our veterans, military, and their families. These breakouts focused on four different areas — Veterans Affairs & Rehabilitation, Veterans Employment & Education, National Security, and Legislation.

During the National Security meeting, Lt. Col. John Prigmore, deputy director of the Selective

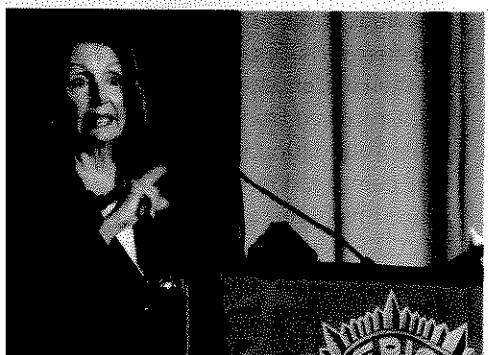
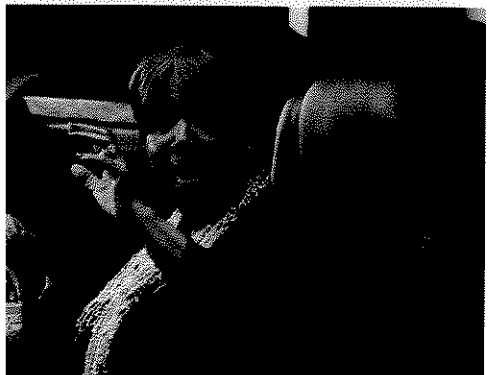
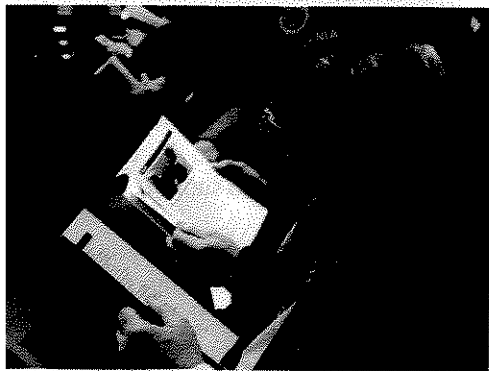
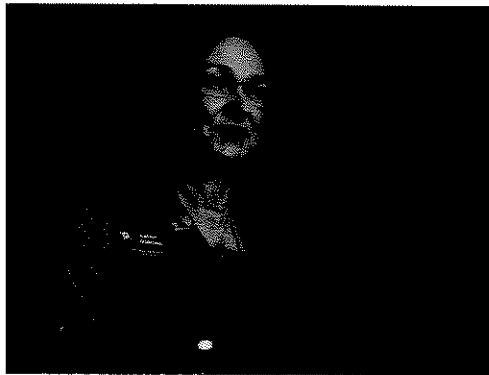
Service System, shared current discussion about women possibly being included in the Selective Service registration process. "I feel this would be an excellent topic for ALA Girls State programs to introduce in their programs for discussion and debate," said ALA National Security Chairman Pam Ray.

At the Legislative Commission meeting, a panel discussion took place, giving commission members the opportunity to share and engage in legislative priorities at the local level. Among the topics discussed: healthcare, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), women veterans,

Gold Star Families, and lobbying tips.

After the sessions ended, chairmen and ranking members of the House and Senate Veterans' Affairs committees participated in a Congressional Fireside Chat to discuss a few key veteran-related issues. During the moderated forum, discussion included the implementation of the VA Mission Act, GI Bills, prevention of veteran suicide, and Appeals Modernization.

"[The American Legion Family], in most of the cases I have seen, have been more powerful than the money forces out there because of your



**ADVOCATING FOR VETERANS** (opposite page): American Legion Family members engage as National Commander Brett Reistad testifies before Congress; (top): Legion Family leadership talk about volunteer trends with representatives from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs; (left, from top): National President Kathy Dungan addresses members during the Commander's Call; Legion Family members read over The American Legion's Legislative Agenda; ALA volunteers meet with Rep. Tom Emmer (Minnesota); Sabrina Clark, director of VA Voluntary Services, meets with Legion Family leaders; Speaker of the House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi addresses the Legion Family during the Commander's Call (photos: Brad Oppenheim/NHQ staff and Lucas Carter/The American Legion).

independence and because of who you are and what you represent," said California Rep. Mark Takano.

Once discussion ended, the floor was opened to a Q&A session.

"I found the [fireside chat] to be very informative and beneficial in hearing members of the Veterans' Affairs Committees reinforce some items we needed to promote and hold the committees' feet to the fire on getting passed," said ALA Past National President Virginia Hobbs.

### Testifying on Capitol Hill

With a delegation of American Legion and Auxiliary national officers by his side, and an abundance of Legion Family members in the audience as support, National Commander Reistad testified before the Joint House and Senate Committees on Veterans' Affairs, urging lawmakers to act on legislative priorities concerning our veterans, military, and their families.

The legislative agenda for the 116th Congress covered a broad range of topics, not limited to but including:

- **Redefining "wartime service" periods:** During its Fall 2018 National Executive Committee meeting, The American Legion

passed Resolution 1, calling on Congress to direct the VA to expand the definition of "wartime veteran" to include all military personnel who honorably served under Title 10 orders for at least one day during this continuous period of armed conflict.

- **Supporting the VA's suicide prevention efforts:** Sadly, an estimated 20 veterans take their lives every day. Most were not receiving the care or support needed through the VA. The American Legion supports the expansion and promotion of mental health treatment for veterans. The Legion urges Congress to provide the VA necessary funds to hire mental health professionals and other staff for its Integrative Health and Wellness Program.

- **Improving health care for women veterans:** The population of female veterans is vastly growing, and the VA must continue to develop and expand health care to accommodate these women. According to surveys, many of these veterans do not enroll for health care through the VA due to reasons such as limited gender-specific treatment services and awareness of VA benefits. This topic has already been discussed by the House VA Committee, and, as a result, a special task force was formed, headed by Rep. Julia Brownley of California to

address issues women veterans face. The House has passed legislation requiring the VA to provide child care to all veterans while they tend to medical care and appointments.

• **Programs to end veteran homelessness:** To fulfill the VA's efforts to eliminate veteran homelessness, Congress must continue making it a priority to invest in affordable housing and programs such as Supportive Services for Veteran Families. The program moves veterans and their families off the streets and into housing with support services.

• **Expanding Agent Orange Benefits:** This issue was discussed during the 115th Congress but failed to extend fairness to Blue Water Navy Vietnam War veterans exposed to the toxic defoliant Agent Orange. The American Legion takes the firm stance that all veterans exposed to Agent Orange deserve service-connected disability benefits for negative health conditions believed to be linked to the exposure.

Commander Reistad concluded his testimony by acknowledging that the Legion Family will continue its efforts to better serve our veterans, military, and their families. "It's tempting to say 'mission accomplished,' but that means our work is done — it's not," Reistad said. "So, I prefer to say mission still being accomplished."

"As a Legion Family, we should remain united in our efforts to advocate for our veterans, military, and their families on Capitol Hill," said ALA National President Kathy Dungan. "Remaining strong and viable is key to success in promoting the Legion's legislative priorities."

On the grassroots level, it can't be stressed enough to make sure your personal opinions and concerns are heard. Take the extra step for our veterans, military, and their families. It's not difficult — all it takes is a phone call, email, or letter to your local representatives and senators. And don't forget about your own community. You can make an impact by reaching out to your local leaders.

To stay updated on the most

current legislation, follow the ALA's Legislative group on Facebook at [www.facebook.com/groups/ALALegislative](http://www.facebook.com/groups/ALALegislative).

To learn more about legislation brought before the 116th Congress, visit [www.legion.org/publications/226187/legislative-agenda-116th-congress-1st-session](http://www.legion.org/publications/226187/legislative-agenda-116th-congress-1st-session).

### **Hiring Our Heroes**

As a way to assist veterans and their spouses in finding employment, The American Legion is collaborating with the U.S. Chamber of Commerce to promote an initiative aimed at providing resources to these individuals seeking employment.

Launched in 2011, Hiring Our Heroes is a program facilitated by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation. Throughout the year, these individuals are encouraged to attend hiring events held around the country. According to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation,

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to date, more than 31,000 veterans and military spouses have been hired through these events.

In addition to hiring events, the program also provides a wide array of different digital resources. Some of these include assistance with resume building, a jobs portal that allows these individuals to search for employment, a 24/7 virtual career fair platform, an interactive employer best practices site, and a virtual mentorship program that connects these individuals with mentors.

In addition, you can help play a part in helping these veterans and their spouses seek employment in your own community. Don't hesitate to reach out to your local Chamber of Commerce to see if it is hosting any hiring events. Also, contact your local American Legion post and American Legion Auxiliary unit to see if there are any plans to host hiring events or provide any assistance in the job

searching process.

To learn more about the Hiring Our Heroes program and events being hosted, visit [www.uschamberfoundation.org/hiring-our-heroes](http://www.uschamberfoundation.org/hiring-our-heroes).

### **ALA Plans for the Future**

After the Washington Conference came to a close, ALA leaders were still hard at work ensuring that our veterans, military, and their families receive the support they so greatly deserve. Leaders gathered with representatives from several organizations to discuss the best approach to support these individuals.

To kick things off, leadership from The American Legion, American Legion Auxiliary, and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs discussed a new initiative known as the Caregiver Pilot Program. The initiative would provide caregiver support coordinators at every VA medical center across the country. These coordinators would provide training for self-care, communications skills, managing stress, and utilizing technology. The program would assist caregivers at events with the National Veterans Sports & Special Events Caregiver Support Program which include the National Veterans Creative Arts Festival, the Wheelchair Games, and the Golden Age Games. More than 2.7 million veterans report that they have a caregiver, according to Meg Kabat, national director of the Caregiver Support Program.

To wrap up the day, Laurel Rodewald, director of programs at the Elizabeth Dole Foundation, discussed the success of the caregiver support activities at the National Veterans Creative Arts Festival funded in part by the Hidden Heroes Grant the ALA received from the Elizabeth Dole Foundation in May 2018.

The conversation turned to future plans involving caregiver support at NVCAF as well as other events held by the Office of National Veterans Sports Program & Special Events. ★

*By Brad Oppenheim, Staff Writer*