

History of the American Legion



The American Legion was chartered by Congress in 1919 as a patriotic veterans' organization. Focusing on service to veterans, servicemembers and communities, the Legion evolved from a group of war-weary veterans of World War I into one of the most influential nonprofit groups in the United States. Membership swiftly grew to over 1 million, and local posts sprang up across the country. Today, membership stands at nearly 2 million in more than 13,000 posts worldwide. The posts are organized into 55 departments: one each for the 50 states, along with the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, France, Mexico and the Philippines.

Over the years, the Legion has influenced considerable social change in America, won hundreds of benefits for veterans and produced many important programs for children and youth. Following is a chronology of significant dates in Legion history:

1919

March

15-17

Members of the American Expeditionary Force convene in Paris for the first American Legion caucus.

May

8-10

St. Louis Caucus. "The American Legion" is adopted as the organization's official name. The Legion's draft preamble and constitution are approved.

June

9

The National Executive Committee adopts the Legion emblem.

Sept.

16

Congress charters The American Legion.

Nov.

10-12

First Legion convention convenes in Minneapolis. The Constitution and preamble are adopted. Delegates vote 361-323 to locate the Legion's national headquarters in Indianapolis, instead of Washington. A resolution is passed in support of Boy Scouts of America. *Today, the Legion is the chartering agency for more than 1,700 Scouting units made up of approximately 64,000 youths.*

1920s

Aug.

9,

1921

The Legion's efforts result in the creation of the U.S. Veterans Bureau, forerunner of the Veterans Administration. *Today, the Legion continues to lobby for adequate funding to cover medical, disability, education and other benefits for veterans.*

June

15,

1923

The first "Flag Code" is drafted during a Legion conference in Washington. Congress adopts the

code in 1942. *Today, the Legion is at the forefront of efforts to pass a constitutional amendment to protect the U.S. flag from physical desecration.*

July **17,** **1925**

The Legion creates the American Legion Baseball program. *Today, more than 50 percent of Major League Baseball players are graduates of the program. About 82,000 youths play on Legion-sponsored teams each year.*

1930s

September **1932**

The Sons of The American Legion is officially recognized during the 1932 National Convention in Portland, Ore.

June **23,** **1935**

The first American Legion Boys State convenes in Springfield, Ill., to help youths gain an understanding of the structure and operation of the federal government. The first Boys Nation, bringing together youth leadership from all the Boys State programs, convenes in 1946. *Today, more than 19,500 young men participate in Boys State, and 98 in Boys Nation, from 49 of the 50 states.*

June **1,** **1938**

The final round of the Legion's first annual National High School Oratorical Contest is conducted in Norman, Okla. *Today, more than 3,400 high-school students from around the country compete annually in the contest, which promotes a greater understanding of the U.S. Constitution. Winners receive thousands of dollars in college scholarships.*

1940s

Sept. 19-21, 1942: Preamble to the Constitution of The American Legion is changed for the first and only time since it was written in 1919. The word "War" is changed to "Wars."

Dec. **15,** **1943**

Past National Commander Harry W. Colmery starts to write in longhand, on Mayflower Hotel stationery in Washington, the first draft of what will later become the "GI Bill of Rights" – considered the Legion's single greatest legislative achievement.

June **22,** **1944**

President Franklin D. Roosevelt signs into law the original GI Bill, or Servicemen's Readjustment Act, ushering in monumental changes in U.S. society. Higher education becomes democratized after 8 million veterans go to school on the GI Bill, get better jobs, buy houses in the suburbs and raise families. For every dollar spent on educating veterans, the U.S. economy eventually gets \$7 back.

May **29,** **1946**

The Legion and the American Legion Auxiliary present a small, struggling organization called the American Heart Association with a \$50,000 grant. The grant inaugurates a nationwide program for the study, prevention and treatment of rheumatic heart disease.

1950s

May **4,** **1950**

The Legion votes to contribute funds to the field of mental health, thereby playing a key role in launching the National Association for Mental Health.

July **9,** **1954**
The American Legion Child Welfare Foundation is formed. *Today, more than \$11 million has been awarded to youth organizations and projects designed to help America's children.*

1960s

Sept. **1,** **1966**
The Legion voices great concern over the fate of prisoners of war in Vietnam. *Today, the Legion urges a full accounting of all POWs and troops missing in action; and has formed a special group from among the nation's major veterans' organizations to continue pressing for further resolution of this issue.*

Aug. **24,** **1969**
The Legion's National Executive Committee establishes the National Emergency Fund as a result of the effects of Hurricane Camille.

1970s

May **1,** **1972**
The Legion implements a Halloween safety program for children; *it remains the only national program of its kind.*

April **1,** **1975**
The Legion-sponsored Freedom Bell goes aboard the Freedom Train during its tour of the country in celebration of the U.S. Bicentennial. Six years later, the bell is dedicated at its permanent home in Columbus Plaza, opposite Union Station in Washington.

1980s

Aug. **26,** **1982**
The Legion presents a \$1 million check to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund for construction of the Wall in Washington, becoming the largest single contributor to the project.

July **21,** **1983**
The Legion announces its sponsorship of an independent study on the effects of exposure to Agent Orange on Vietnam War veterans. Congress receives the results of the "American Legion-Columbia University Study of Vietnam-era Veterans" in 1989.

Jan. **1,** **1989**
The Veterans Administration is elevated to Cabinet-level status as the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). The Legion fought hard for the change, arguing that veterans deserve representation at the highest levels of government.

Oct. **16,** **1989**
The long-standing objective of the Legion to improve adjudication procedures for veterans' claims is achieved when the U.S. Court of Veterans Appeals becomes operational. Most of the provisions contained in the law creating the court were originally included in the Veterans Reassurance Act, written by the Legion and introduced in Congress in 1988.

1990s

Aug. **2,** **1990**
The Legion files suit against the federal government for failure to conduct a Congress-mandated study about the effects of Agent Orange on veterans who served in Vietnam.

Oct. **11,** **1990**
The Legion creates the Family Support Network to assist families of servicemembers deployed for operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm in the Middle East. Through local posts, the

network offers a wide range of assistance, including financial assistance, mowing lawns, baby-sitting and more. *Today, FSN continues to assist families affected by military activation and deployment.*

June 15, 1991

The Legion hosts its first Junior Shooting Sports National Air Rifle Championships at the Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs, Colo. *Today, more than 2,000 high school students a year enter the contest, which teaches gun safety and marksmanship.*

Aug. 24, 1994

The Legion announces the creation of the Citizens Flag Alliance, a coalition of organizations and individual citizens united to work for a constitutional amendment to protect the U.S. flag from physical desecration. Since 1995, the amendment has passed in the House by a supermajority six times: in 1995, 1997, 1999, 2001, 2003 and 2005. In 2006, the amendment fell one vote short of passage in the Senate.

Sept. 24, 1994: The American Legion announces partnership with the Smithsonian Institute's Air and Space Museum to develop an exhibit for the bomber Enola Gay, which dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima, Japan. Previous museum plans had drawn intense criticism from veterans, scholars and the public.

Jan. 30, 1995: The American Legion announces acceptance of scaled-down exhibit "without political commentary" for the Enola Gay, ending the greatest controversy in the Smithsonian Institute's 149-year history.

Oct. 1, 1995

The Legion forms the Persian Gulf Task Force to enhance service for the newest generation of wartime veterans, thousands of whom suffer from illnesses linked to their service in the region.

Sept. 16, 1996

The Legion awards a \$20,000 college scholarship to each of the 10 inaugural Samsung American Legion high school scholars.

June 11, 1997

The National Emergency Fund surpasses the \$1 million mark in cash grants given to flood victims who belong to the Legion family. Most grant recipients reside in the flood plains of Ohio, Kentucky, Indiana, Minnesota and North Dakota.

Sept. 3, 1997

The Legion presents its first National Law Enforcement Officer of the Year award at the 79th National Convention in Orlando, Fla.

2000s

March 29, 2000

Senate Joint Resolution 14, the constitutional amendment that would return the people's right to protect the U.S. flag from physical desecration, falls four votes short of the necessary 67 to override a presidential veto.

Sept. 5, 2000: The American Legion presents the first "Spirit of Service" Awards to active duty service members for their off-duty volunteer activities.

Aug. 28-30, 2001: The American Legion passes resolution to rekindle Blue Star Service Banner program.

Sept. 12, 2001: The American Legion reactivates the Family Support Network following terrorist attacks in New York City and Washington, D.C.

Oct. 10-11, 2001: The American Legion creates the American Legacy Scholarship Fund for children of military members killed on active duty on or after Sept. 11, 2001.

Sept. 11, 2002: The American Legion takes lead in conducting “A Day To Remember” events to mark the anniversary of the terrorist attacks on the nation.

November

2002

The Legion launches the national "I Am Not A Number" campaign to identify and document the delays veterans face in obtaining medical care from VA.

Oct. 17, 2003: American Legion efforts on Capitol Hill break the deadlock on the Disabled Veterans Tax when Congress creates a 10-year phase-in for service-connected disabled retirees to receive military retired pay and VA disability compensation without subtraction from either. Legion efforts also result in passage of the Military Family Tax Relief Act.

Sept. 3, 2004: American Legion lobbying leads to more progress in elimination of the Disabled Veterans Tax with passage of PL 108-375 that eliminates the 10-year phase-in for 100 percent service-connected retirees, allowing them to immediately begin receiving both retired pay and VA disability payments.

Sept 19, 2004: The American Legion launches a national program, the Blue Star Salute, where posts across the country hold public events to recognize troops, their families and local businesses on Armed Forces Day.

May 7, 2005: The American Legion lobbied successfully to remove from VA funding legislation administration-proposed increases in VA prescription co-payments and institution of user fee for Priority Group 8 veterans using VA health facilities. Efforts focus on legislation to provide mandatory, vice discretionary, funding of VA health care.

August

2005

Delegates at the 87th National Convention in Honolulu unanimously voice their support for the global war on terrorism with Resolution 169.

Oct. 17-18, 2007: The American Legion National Executive Committee passes Resolution 35 and adopts The American Legion Riders as a national program of The American Legion. The first American Legion Riders chapter was established by American Legion Post 396 in Garden City, Mich., in 1993.

June

30,

2008

President George W. Bush signs into law the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act, a next-generation GI Bill strongly supported by the Legion. The bill renews the federal government's commitment to veterans by providing them with substantially better education benefits. The Post-9/11 GI Bill took effect Aug. 1, 2009, and sent an unprecedented number of veterans to college. *Today, as at its formation, the Legion remains at the forefront of efforts to improve education and other benefits for all veterans.*

Oct. 22, 2009: President Obama signs the Veterans Health Care Budget Reform Act of 2009, guaranteeing “advance funding” for VA appropriations, a formula that The American Legion has strongly supported for many years. The new law sets funding for VA one year in advance.

2010s

February

2010

The entire Legion family bands together and wins \$250,000 for Operation Comfort Warriors (OCW) in PepsiCo's Refresh Everything Project, submitting the most votes in an online contest and beating out hundreds of other groups and charities to take first place in the contest's first

month. A big part of getting the word out was the *American Legion Online Update* e-newsletter. This is an early example of the still growing power of online and social media to augment everything the Legion does.

October

2010

Continuing a long-standing tradition of advocating for timely and adequate medical care for veterans, the Legion forms a PTS-TBI Ad Hoc Committee to both examine current methods by VA and the Department of Defense of treating the two conditions, and investigate potential alternatives.

December

2010

The Legion officially begins a relationship with United Services Automobile Association (USAA), making the veteran-founded insurance company "The American Legion's preferred provider of financial services." The purchase of USAA products gains money for Legion programs. USAA representatives often give members helpful financial information and tips through Legion media.

May 5, 2011: The National Executive Committee authorized establishment of The American Legion Amateur Radio Club (TALARC) to promote emergency communications and disaster preparedness, engage youth in math and science and facilitate public communications with our nation's federally licensed amateur radio operators who are veterans. TALARC membership opened free for members of The American Legion, The American Legion Auxiliary and Sons of the American Legion who are FCC licensed ham radio operators.

August

2011

The American Legion Baseball World Series is held for the first time in the tournament's new permanent home, Shelby, N.C. Prior to this, the tournament had rotated to different cities. Total paid attendance at the Shelby contests soars to an all-time high of 86,000 total.

October 2012

VA guarantees its 20 millionth home loan. 1936-1937 National Commander Harry Colmery and 1943-1944 National Commander Warren Atherton escorted the original GI Bill of Rights through Congress in 1944, arguing passionately for veterans educational benefits, government-assured health care and what they called "readjustment allowances." Today Colmery and Atherton are lauded as the "fathers of the GI Bill" and its successors.

Aug. 30, 2013: National Commander James E. Koutz announced that the American Legion family raised more than \$1.1 million for Operation Comfort Warriors during the 2012-2013 fundraising year. It easily surpassed his original goal of \$500,000.

2014: in the midst of a VA waiting-list scandal that reached up to the deaths of veterans waiting for care, The American Legion calls for the resignations of several top officials, including VA Secretary Eric Shinseki. The scandal would ultimately engulf multiple facilities and offices; the Legion kept the issue in front of the public and Congress via articles and testimony.

August 2014: National Commander Michael D. Helm announces that Legion Family members and friends donated more than \$4 million (his goal) to Legion charities and programs during his year in office.

July 2016: The Legacy Scholarship is expanded to children of post-9/11 veterans who have a combined VA disability rating of 50 percent or greater.

June 2017: Created to hold VA employees more accountable, the Department of Veterans Affairs Accountability and Whistleblower Protection Act of 2017 is passed by Congress in concert with The American Legion. A longtime goal of the Legion, this legislation gives the VA secretary the

authority to terminate the employment of VA employees who do not hold the standard of the VA's missions, to help veterans. The American Legion worked hard with Congress, VA and others to create and pass this much needed veteran-centric legislation.

August 2017: The Legion assists in the creation and eventual passage of the Veterans Appeals Improvement and Modernization Act, which modernizes the current appeals process at the Department of Veterans Affairs, forcing VA to render a decision on a veterans claim within one year.

August 2017: The American Legion, in concert with others, creates, advocates for and passes the Harry W. Colmery Veterans Education Assistance Act of 2017. Named after the author of the original GI Bill and Past National Commander of The American Legion, the new GI Bill improves upon the great foundation that already existed, removing the burdensome cap to use the education benefit, along with many other great additions to the legislation aimed at improving the lives of veterans and their families.

August 2017: Denise H. Rohan of Wisconsin is elected national commander, the first woman to hold the role in the Legion's history.