



THE AMERICAN LEGION

A BRIEF HISTORY

The American Legion was founded March 15-17, 1919, by members of the American Expeditionary Forces still stationed in Europe awaiting passage home from World War I. Their experiences in what was called the “war to end all wars” would shape an enduring agenda for what became the nation’s largest organization of veterans.

Many of the Legion’s founders had voluntarily drilled in civilian military camps before the United States entered the war. Trained in the “Preparedness Movement,” several future Legion founders were commissioned as officers in the war and discovered firsthand the nation’s deficiencies in defense, citizenship and education. Soon after the war’s end, they

also realized how poorly prepared the United States was to assist a wave of disabled and unemployed veterans who faced uncertain futures in their communities, states and the nation.

The American Legion’s emergence and rise to prominence was based on a mission to strengthen the nation through programs, services and advocacy that helped millions throughout the organization’s first century.

The American Legion built its legacy with a vision to make the nation prouder, stronger, smarter and more respectful of those who have sacrificed some, or all, in defense of the nation. Following are some The American Legion’s achievements during its first century.

VETERANS



- Formed a network of service officers in 1919 that now exceeds 3,500 to help disabled veterans, free of charge, file for government benefits
- Successfully campaigned to put all veterans services under one federal authority, the Veterans Bureau in 1921, predecessor to the Veterans Administration in 1930 and the Department of Veterans Affairs in 1989
- Assisted millions of veterans in pursuit of rewarding careers; by June 1922 had already placed more than

500,000 veterans in permanent jobs and 200,000 more in temporary positions

- Successfully lobbied Congress to protect veterans benefits, VA hospitals, training programs and services on the federal budget chopping block over the decades
- Developed programs and advanced research into what became post-traumatic stress disorder as early as 1921, when it was mischaracterized as “shell shock”
- Produced studies that led to official diagnosis of PTSD in 1980 and proved that service-connected exposure to Agent Orange and atomic radiation caused diseases that demanded government accountability
- Achieved Veterans Preference Hiring for federal jobs
- Drafted, presented, promoted and pushed to passage the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944, the original GI Bill that transformed U.S. economy and culture in the second half of the 20th century
- Worked to improve the GI Bill for post-9/11 veterans, including the 2017 Harry W. Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act, the “Forever GI Bill”

NATIONAL SECURITY

- Lobbied persistently for a better-funded and more efficient national system of defense
- Called for the establishment of a separate service branch for aeronautics as early as 1919, which helped give birth to the U.S. Air Force in 1947
- Pushed Congress for “universal military training” for decades, culminating in the Reserve Forces Act of 1955
- Conducted thousands of troop-support programs, including deployment ceremonies, welcome-home events and provision of needed items in theater
- Established and staffed thousands of local first-response units and civil patrols during World War II
- Provided financial and volunteer aid for military parents through American Legion Temporary Financial Assistance and Family Support Network programs established during the Gulf War
- Began The American Legion Blood Donor Program in 1942, and became the largest organizational blood donor to the Red Cross in the nation
- Re-established the Blue Star Banner program to recognize military families with deployed loved ones after 9/11
- Launched a program to provide comfort items for U.S. military personnel recovering from wounds in DoD hospitals or transition units, ultimately named Operation



Comfort Warriors in 2008; has distributed millions of dollars of goods, games, books, music, recreational equipment and event passes for troops and their families

- Provided emergency grants for members of the U.S. Coast Guard who had pay delays due to the January 2019 federal government shutdown
- Fought to protect military retirement benefits and TRICARE insurance
- Stood as a national leader in the recovery and repatriation of all U.S. POWs and MIAs
- Passed and reaffirmed national resolutions, beginning in 2005, supporting the troops *and their mission* in the global war on terrorism

AMERICANISM



- Actively promoted responsible U.S. citizenship and patriotic awareness beginning in 1919
- By January 1920, began providing U.S. citizenship and naturalization programs for immigrants, with support from Congress
- Led flag conferences in 1923 and 1924 that established the first standard rules for treatment and respect of the U.S. flag, adopted in 1942 as U.S. Flag Code
- Established official retirement ceremonies for worn-out U.S. flags, most often a joint activity with Boy Scouts of America units
- Began American Legion Boys State in Illinois in 1935 to counter communist-inspired youth camps in the United States and to teach the way government operates in a democracy, a program that went national in 1946 and ultimately became American Legion Boys Nation
- Strongly advocated for active participation in the voting process, conducting thousands of candidate forums and a national Get Out the Vote program
- Assembled the Citizens Flag Alliance after the controversial 1989 Supreme Court ruling defining deliberate flag desecration as free speech and began a campaign to seek a constitutional amendment to return to the states the right to pass laws to protect the flag

CHILDREN & YOUTH

- Urged American Legion support for Boy Scouts of America as the organization's first youth program supported by resolution, in November 1919
- Established an enduring relationship in 1921 with the National Education Association "to cooperate in securing for America a program of education adequate to meet the needs of the 20th century ... which will make all, native or foreign-born, good American citizens."
- Launched American Legion Baseball in 1925 to promote citizenship through sportsmanship, a program that would grow to field thousands of teams over the century
- Developed and operated marksmanship competitions that became the national American Legion Junior Shooting Sports Program in 1991
- Sponsored thousands of Junior ROTC programs across the country and at American schools overseas
- Created and operated a National Oratorical Contest beginning in 1938, continuing today, that requires high school-age orators to speak on the U.S. Constitution
- Established a national network of child-support field representatives in the 1920s and operated orphanages throughout the country to assist kids who needed stable homes and mentorship
- Formed the Child Welfare Foundation in 1954 to provide grants to support organizations and agencies that assist young people facing challenges not of their making



- Provided thousands of scholarships for high school students seeking college educations
- Launched an ongoing program in 1926 that recognizes with School Award Medals young people for their character, service and citizenship.
- Was chosen by Samsung Corp. in 1995 to administer a \$5 million fund to provide scholarships for Boys State or Girls State participants who are descendants of U.S. wartime veterans
- Established an American Legion Legacy Scholarship in 2001 that provides college funds for children of military personnel killed or 50 percent or more disabled

COMMUNITY SERVICE

- Immediately established civil defense as a function of The American Legion and began a century of support in communities wracked by disasters, from mining accidents to tornados, wildfires and hurricanes
- Launched a Community and Civic Betterment Bureau in 1923 to help municipalities build and improve parks, playgrounds, health-care facilities, swimming pools, schools and theaters throughout the United States
- Served meals, provided housing for refugees and searched for survivors of the massive Mississippi and Ohio River floods of 1927 and 1937
- Sponsored soup kitchens at American Legion posts to help destitute citizens during the Depression throughout the country
- Helped establish state highway patrols, and supported them, as they emerged across the country
- Established the National Emergency Fund in 1989 to formalize The American Legion's long program to provide disaster relief
- Delivered millions of dollars in National Emergency Fund grants for relief efforts after Hurricane Katrina, Wilma and Rita on the Gulf Coast, and the flooding that followed in New Orleans
- Conducted dozens of natural disaster relief efforts, following Superstorm Sandy, Hurricanes Irene, Michael, Maria and others, wildfires in California, devastating flooding in the Midwest and other crises

HONOR & REMEMBRANCE

- Took a lead role in 1920 to formally observe Memorial Day at the graves of U.S. military personnel laid to rest in some 2,400 temporary cemeteries in Europe
- Was actively involved in the development of the American Battle Monuments Commission in 1923
- Backed legislation in 1920 to install the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington National Cemetery, dedicated Nov. 11, 1921
- Helped dedicate the towering Liberty Memorial in Kansas City during the third national convention, in 1921
- Raised funds in 1926 to help build the Ossuary at Verdun, France, to remember the cost of World War I
- Pushed for 24-hour guarding for the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in 1937 and purchased lights for the shrine in 1969
- Raised over \$1.2 million, most by any organization, to build the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, dedicated in a Legion-sponsored 1982 "Salute to Vietnam Veterans"
- Passed a resolution in 1985 to open every official American Legion meeting with a prayer for all American POW/MIAs
- Raised funds and provided marketing support for the Korean War Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C.
- Raised more than \$3 million for the construction of the National World War II Memorial, dedicated in 2004
- Pledged funds to help construct a National World War I Memorial in Washington, D.C.
- Conducted thousands of local memorial services a year at funerals, special events and ceremonies honoring those who served their country and lost their lives
- Argued in court, including the U.S. Supreme Court in 2019, to protect veterans and military memorials from removal due to religious symbolism in their design



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