



AMERICAN
LEGION

Montana Legionnaire

September



DEPARTMENT COMMANDER

IRENE DICKERSON

CONNECTED FOR MONTANA: BUILDING BELONGING,
STRENGTHENING OUR LEGION

Montana is a big state, but our legion family should never be apart. I want to talk about what I believe is the heart of our organization: connection. We stress membership goals, percentages, renewals, and recruiting, and while those things matter, we are not focusing on what gets us to those goals and membership numbers. It is our connection. I have traveled across Montana, attended District meetings, visited posts, and talked with Legionnaires from communities, large and small. Everywhere I go, I see dedicated people who care deeply about veterans and their communities, and this organization. I also see an opportunity-- an opportunity to connect with our fellow veterans. Buddy Checks are essential. Make that phone call: "Hey, we haven't seen you for a while. How are you doing?" Invite the younger people to your meetings. Make the meetings worthwhile for the newcomers. Have lunch or dinner; invite their families. Bottom line, make it fun and interesting, so they want to come back.

Legionnaires often leave because they no longer feel the connection. Get them involved in your community. As the American Legion population ages, many smaller posts are struggling. Our mission is much more than getting members, new and old, we also need to work in our communities. If your post participates in Memorial Day parades, be proud; share your pictures so everyone knows what you are doing. Strengthen our programs by connecting with your local schools and meeting the kids. Give coloring books out to the younger kids, teach the older kids about flag etiquette, and recruit the high school students for Oratorical and American Legion Boys State and American Legion Auxiliary Girls State. Know the four Pillars of the American Legion and live them. Americanism, Children & Youth, National Security, and Veteran Affairs & Rehabilitation. The four pillars collectively define the American Legion's mission and values.

I know what connection means to me. Moving to Montana and becoming involved in the American Legion has shown me that belonging doesn't happen simply because your name appears on a roster. Belonging happens when people know your name, hear



your voice, value your experience, and stand beside you when you need them. This is what we need to create in every post across Montana. We need to be visible in our communities; support our fellow veterans, support our Legion family, work with our youth, and show our communities what the American Legion really does. When we serve together, we build friendships. When we listen to one another, we build trust. When we include others, we build belonging, and when we build belonging, we build the future of the American Legion. No Montana Veteran or Legionnaire should feel forgotten. This year I ask all of us to get Connected for Montana.



NATIONAL CONVENTION 2026

IRENE DICKERSON

Last week, twenty American Legionnaires and Auxillary members from Montana attended the American Legion National Convention in Louisville, Kentucky. The core message centered on strengthening the future of the organization by empowering younger veterans and actively engaging in Veteran suicide prevention. Medal of Honor recipient Donald "Doc" Ballard delivered the most widely cited message: Legionnaires must welcome, mentor, and integrate younger veterans, educate them all on the Legion's legacy, and ensure they have a community that cares. The newly elected Commander Jay Bowen reinforced Doc Ballard's theme with BE PART OF THE SOLUTION (BPOTS), encouraging community engagement and continued support for "Be The One". We here in Montana need to take it a step further if we want to build a stronger American Legion for the future. We must take a hard look at our programs and ask ourselves a simple question: Are we doing enough to make a difference? Every post has an opportunity to lead its community. Actively working the Legion programs gives them this opportunity. They let us show who we are, what we stand for, and why membership in The American Legion matters. Americanism is one of the four pillars of The American Legion. Posts can participate by running programs that promote patriotism, civic education, respect for the U.S. flag, and responsible citizenship. Flag Education-teach proper flag etiquette, starting with our local elementary school. Host flag retirement ceremonies involving your local Scouts. In 2025, over 4,394 Flag Day activities were held throughout the United States.

Youth Civic Programs—Support the Boys State and American Legion Auxiliary Girls State, Oratorical contest, Junior Shooting Sports, and the Youth Cadet Law Enforcement. Over 14,047 Boys State delegates and 9,370 participate engaged through post-level support

American Legion Baseball: Your post can sponsor teams, recruit coaches, and host tournaments.

Scouting partnerships'your post can charter units, provide meeting space, and support Eagle Scout recognition. Citizenship & Naturalization Support- the post can assist by



hosting citizenship classes, hosting naturalization ceremonies, and supporting legal immigrants. Get out and Vote-provide nonpartisan voter education, registration drives, and election participation reminders. These activities let your local community know that The American Legion is here and cares. Most importantly, be visible in your community. Wear your legion cap with pride. Partner with schools, civic organizations, businesses, first responders, and other veterans' organizations. Tell our story on social media and in local newspapers. We must reach out to your younger veterans, use technology, partner with other organizations, and develop programs that address the needs of today's veterans and communities. Ask yourselves the following questions. What are you doing to be visible in your community? What can you do better? How do you reach out to the younger veterans?

Duane Cunningham

DEPARTMENT ADJUTANT

TCAVA: Understanding the Debate Between The American Legion and the VFW



The debate over the Take Care of America's Veterans Act (TCAVA), H.R. 9237/S. 4744, and the disagreement between The American Legion and the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) cannot be reduced to a 30-second argument. TCAVA combines more than 60 bipartisan veterans' measures addressing combat-disabled retirees, survivors, caregivers, health care, mental health, traumatic brain injury, education, transition assistance and other priorities. The American Legion supports TCAVA as a package. The VFW supports many of the individual provisions but opposes the legislation as currently written, primarily because of **Section 108**, which would change how VA evaluates future disability claims for sleep apnea and tinnitus. Understanding that distinction is critical.

Where The American Legion and VFW Agree

The disagreement is not over whether veterans deserve the programs contained in TCAVA. Both organizations support many of the same priorities, including the Major Richard Star Act, survivor improvements, mental-health initiatives and other veterans' programs. The primary disagreement is **how those programs should be funded**.

Section 108 is particularly controversial because it would change disability-rating criteria for future claims involving sleep apnea and tinnitus. Those changes could reduce projected future federal disability-compensation expenditures, and TCAVA would use those projected savings as part of the funding mechanism for the larger bill.

What Section 108 Does

First, an important clarification: **veterans already receiving disability compensation for sleep apnea or tinnitus would not have their existing ratings reduced simply because TCAVA becomes law**. Section 108 protects compensation already in effect before enactment. The new criteria would apply prospectively to claims filed after enactment.

Sleep Apnea

Under the current rating schedule, a veteran whose service-connected sleep apnea requires a CPAP or similar breathing-assistance device can generally qualify for a 50% disability rating. Section 108 would place greater emphasis on the veteran's remaining impairment after treatment:

Rating Proposed Standard

- 0% – Sleep apnea is asymptomatic, with or without treatment
- 10% – Treatment provides incomplete relief
- 50% – Treatment is ineffective, or prescribed treatment cannot be used because of a qualifying comorbid condition, without end-organ damage
- 100% – The 50% circumstances exist and there is end-organ damage

The significant change is that requiring a CPAP would no longer, by itself, support a 50% evaluation.

A future veteran whose sleep apnea is effectively controlled by CPAP could therefore receive a lower evaluation than a similarly situated veteran under today's schedule.

VA's reasoning is that disability compensation is intended to reflect impairment, not simply the treatment prescribed. Under the proposed approach, the question becomes: How much impairment remains after appropriate treatment?

Veterans' organizations have raised a different concern: successful treatment does not mean the underlying service-connected disability has disappeared. A veteran may still have sleep apnea and need medical equipment every night.

That raises the broader policy question: Should successful treatment reduce compensation for an underlying service-connected disability?

Tinnitus

Under the current schedule, recurrent service-connected tinnitus can receive a standalone 10% rating.

Section 108 would generally eliminate tinnitus as a separately compensable disability. A limited 10% evaluation would remain available when tinnitus is associated with service-connected hearing loss that would otherwise be non-compensable.

In simple terms:

- Current system: Recurrent service-connected tinnitus can receive a standalone 10% rating.
- Under Section 108: Tinnitus could still be recognized as service connected, but generally would not receive separate compensation by itself, except in the qualifying hearing-loss circumstance established by Section 108.

This is one of the reasons the VFW and other opponents have focused heavily on Section 108.

These Changes Did Not Originate With TCAVA

An important fact often lost in the debate is that Congress did not originate the sleep-apnea and tinnitus changes through TCAVA.

VA proposed significant changes to the rating criteria in February 2022 as part of a much larger effort to modernize the VA Schedule for Rating Disabilities (VASRD).

The Government Accountability Office has reported that VA's modernization effort began in 2009 and covers 15 body systems. Some of the methodology underlying disability evaluations is decades old. VA's argument is that the rating schedule needs to better reflect actual impairment and modern medical treatment.



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The American Legion opposed VA's proposed rating changes when they were introduced in 2022.

This creates an important distinction: TCAVA did not create the underlying rating-change proposal. VA was already pursuing similar changes through its regulatory process.

Why the Changes Matter Financially

Sleep apnea and tinnitus are common service-connected disabilities. Changing their evaluation criteria could reduce federal disability-compensation expenditures by billions of dollars over time.

That does not mean VA originally proposed the changes simply to save money. VA presented its 2022 proposal primarily as a modernization effort focused on medical treatment, consistency and impairment of earning capacity.

But once Congress uses projected reductions in future disability compensation as a budgetary offset, the issue becomes both a medical-policy question and a funding question.

That is where Section 108 becomes central to TCAVA.

The projected savings are not an immediate pot of money and do not represent money being taken from current veterans' checks. They are reductions in projected future federal spending.

If future veterans receive lower evaluations for common conditions such as sleep apnea and tinnitus, the difference in future monthly payments can accumulate into billions of dollars over many years. Under congressional budget rules, those projected reductions can be counted as an offset—or "pay-for"—for increased spending elsewhere in the legislation.

Current Veterans vs. Future Veterans

Consider two veterans with essentially identical service-connected obstructive sleep apnea.

Veteran A files under the current system, requires CPAP and receives a 50% evaluation.

Veteran B files after the new criteria take effect and also requires CPAP, but treatment effectively controls the condition.

Veteran A's existing evaluation is protected from reduction solely because of Section 108.

Veteran B could receive a substantially lower evaluation under the new criteria.

That illustrates the central policy disagreement.

The American Legion emphasizes that existing veterans are protected and that VA was already pursuing similar changes independently.

The VFW argues that future veterans could receive substantially less compensation for essentially the same service-connected condition simply because their claims are evaluated under a different schedule.

The Larger TCAVA Package

TCAVA is much broader than Section 108. One of its most significant

provisions is the Major Richard Star Act, which addresses the so-called "wounded warrior tax" affecting certain combat-disabled Chapter 61 military retirees.

Under current law, certain servicemembers medically retired because of combat-related disabilities before reaching 20 years of service cannot simultaneously receive all of their military retired pay and VA disability compensation.

The Star Act would allow qualifying combat-wounded medically retired veterans to receive both forms of compensation. It represents a significant and permanent federal benefit expansion and is one reason a substantial funding offset is required.

TCAVA also includes measures involving:

- Severely disabled veterans and survivors.
- Surviving spouses.
- Veterans' health care and Community Care.
- Mental health, suicide prevention, substance-use treatment and traumatic brain injury.
- Caregiver employment, education and retirement support.
- GI Bill, transition and employment programs.

The accounting is therefore not simply "money in and money out." TCAVA contains provisions that increase projected federal spending and others that reduce projected spending. Section 108 is one of the significant offsets used to make the overall package financially viable under congressional budget rules.

The American Legion's Position

The American Legion supports TCAVA as a package.

The Legion emphasizes that the legislation brings together more than 60 bipartisan veterans' measures, many of which have been pursued for years.

Importantly, The American Legion does not argue that reducing future sleep-apnea or tinnitus compensation is desirable. It opposed VA's proposed rating changes in 2022.

Its current position is instead based on the legislative reality that VA was already moving toward similar changes.

From The American Legion's perspective, if VA ultimately implements comparable changes, the resulting reduction in projected federal spending would occur regardless of TCAVA. Without TCAVA, those savings would not automatically be directed toward veterans' programs.

TCAVA provides an opportunity to use those projected savings as part of the funding mechanism for dozens of other long-sought veterans' priorities.

The VFW's Position

The VFW supports many of the individual programs contained



Duane Cunningham

DEPARTMENT ADJUTANT

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in TCAVA, including the Major Richard Star Act and other veterans' initiatives.

However, it opposes TCAVA as currently structured because of Section 108.

The VFW's objection is both financial and philosophical. It argues that disability compensation represents an earned obligation of the federal government and should not become a funding source for other veterans' benefits.

The VFW also argues that future veterans could receive substantially less compensation for the same service-connected conditions.

Its position is that Congress should remove Section 108, identify another funding mechanism and enact the Star Act and other veterans' priorities without relying on reductions in projected future disability compensation.

The Fundamental Disagreement

The disagreement between The American Legion and VFW is therefore not about which organization cares more about veterans. It is about how Congress should respond to VA's ongoing rating modernization, how projected savings should be accounted for, and whether those savings are an acceptable way to fund other veterans' benefits.

The American Legion's position is essentially that VA was already pursuing these changes, existing compensation is protected, and TCAVA provides an opportunity to direct projected savings toward more than 60 veterans' priorities that have remained stalled for years.

The VFW's position is that Congress should not establish a precedent in which reduced future disability compensation for one group of veterans is used to pay for benefits provided to another group. It wants Congress to find another source of funding and pass the veterans' legislation without Section 108.

Both organizations support many of the same underlying veterans' programs. Their disagreement is over the funding mechanism and the precedent Section 108 could establish.

For veterans evaluating the issue, the most important questions are therefore straightforward:

- What does Section 108 actually change?
- Which veterans' existing benefits are protected?
- How could future claims be affected?
- Where did the proposed rating changes originate?
- How do the projected savings work?
- What veterans' programs would TCAVA fund?
- Should projected reductions in future disability compensation be used to finance other veterans' benefits?

The American Legion supports TCAVA and urges members to contact their Montana legislators through the Grassroots Action Center and ask them to pass the TCAVA Act.

www.votervoice.net/AmericanLegion/home

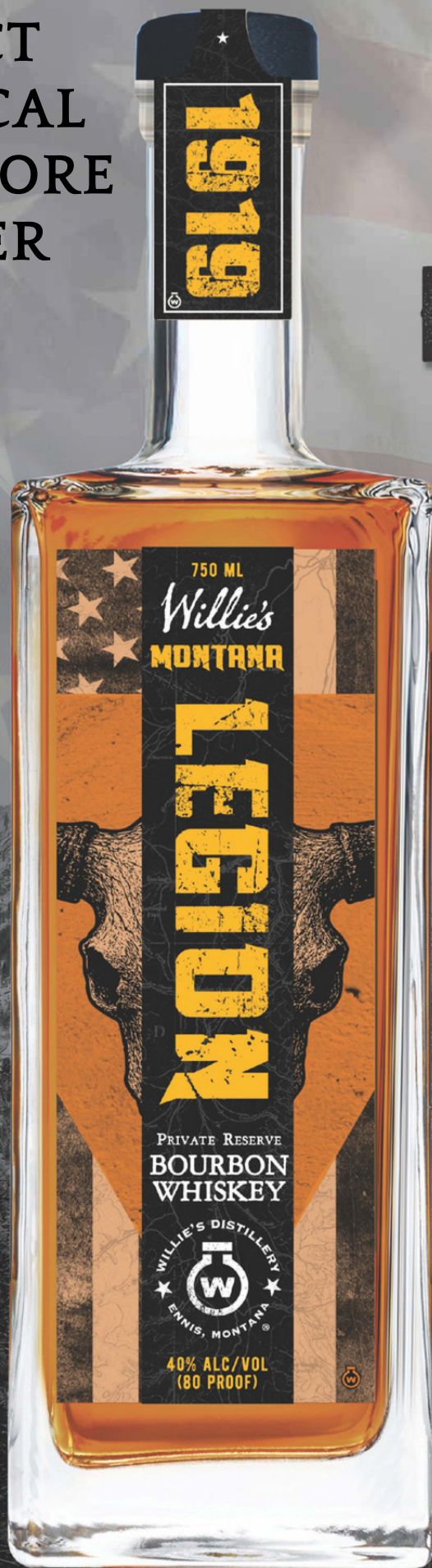


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TOWING





Department Vice Commander

Brian Carpenter

Membership Is More Than a Number



When we gathered our Zone and District Commanders together for our membership Zoom meetings, yes, we had numbers to discuss. We had goals to set, percentages to look at and expectations for the year ahead. But I came away from those conversations thinking about something much bigger than a number on a membership report. I came away thinking about communication. From those leaders who joined us, I heard people who were already talking with their Posts, getting to know their leadership and looking for ways to strengthen the organization in their areas. What stood out even more was what happened after the meetings ended. I told them I was here to help, and they started reaching out. To me, that said a lot. Sometimes our leaders don't need another directive. They need to know somebody is standing beside them. They need encouragement, a reminder that they aren't doing this alone and an open line of communication when they need help working through a problem or developing an idea. That is the kind of membership culture I want us to build in Montana.

Retention Begins With Belonging

We talk a lot about membership numbers in The American Legion. We have goals to reach and milestones to celebrate, and those things are important. I would certainly like to see Montana reach 100 percent membership. But I believe our greatest opportunity for growth is retention. Retention isn't simply getting someone to pay their dues for another year. It is creating a community among veterans and their families that is worth continuing to belong to. Not every member is going to attend a monthly meeting. They shouldn't have to attend one to feel like they matter.

Maybe their connection is a community event. Maybe it is supporting Boys State or another Legion program. Maybe it's riding with the Legion Riders, volunteering on a service project, helping another veteran or showing up once or twice a year when something matters to them. There are a hundred different ways someone can belong. Our job is to help them find theirs. When people find purpose in the organization, they have a reason to stay. When they know what their Post is doing and understand the difference The American Legion is making, they have something they can take pride in. That's retention.

We Have to Tell Our Story

Historically, I think we have sometimes put too much emphasis on chasing new members, reaching the next percentage point or earning the next membership award. Recruiting new members absolutely matters. We need new veterans, new ideas and new generations stepping forward. But we cannot recruit our way out of a retention problem. We also haven't always done a good enough job telling people about the incredible things The American Legion is already doing.

That is especially important in Montana.

A Post's responsibility doesn't end at the walls of its Post home or at the city limits of the community where that building happens to sit. Many of our Posts serve veterans scattered across large rural areas. Those veterans may never walk through the doors of a Post home, but they should still know that The American Legion is there for them. They should know about our programs. They should know about the veterans we're helping. They should know about the young people we're supporting.



They should know when we're serving our communities. Most importantly, they should know they are invited to be part of it.

Programs Are the Cornerstone of Membership

I don't see programs and membership as two separate things. Programs are the cornerstone of membership. They are the reason someone wants to belong. They give our members something to rally around, something to support and something meaningful to do. Our programs put The American Legion into our communities. They introduce families to who we are. They give veterans opportunities to continue serving after their military service has ended. They also give us our story to tell. When a Post supports a youth program, conducts a Buddy Check, helps a veteran, participates in a community event, supports a school, raises money for a cause or finds some entirely new way to serve its community, that is membership work. People want to be part of organizations that are doing something. So let's give them something worth belonging to.

Think Outside the Box



Department Vice Commander

Brian Carpenter

Membership Is More Than a Number



I know some Post leaders look around and wonder where the next generation of members is going to come from. Some of our Posts are small. Some serve very rural communities. Some don't have a Post home or a large group of volunteers. My challenge to them is simple: It's time to start thinking outside the box. Let's look at what we have available to us and figure out what we can do instead of concentrating on what we can't. Every Post doesn't have to look the same. What works in one of our larger communities may not work in a town of 500 people. What works for one generation of veterans may not connect with another. A successful Post doesn't have to have a building full of people at a monthly meeting. It needs veterans who know they belong to something that matters. Communication Starts With Leadership One thing I believe strongly is that communication is a leadership responsibility. One hundred percent of it. Leadership should know what is happening at every level we are responsible for, and we have a duty to carry that information to the people we serve.

Department communicates with Zones. Zones communicate with Districts. Districts communicate with Posts. Posts communicate with their members. And communication needs to travel back up that same line. That is why I plan to continue meeting monthly with our Zone and District Commanders throughout this membership year. Those meetings aren't intended to simply ask, "What's your percentage?" I want to hear what our Posts are doing. I want our District Commanders talking with their Posts between meetings and encouraging them to get active in their communities. Then I want them coming back and telling us what happened.

What worked? What didn't? What did a Post try that another Post might be able to use? Where is somebody struggling? Where can Department help? And where is something happening that deserves to be celebrated? If we keep those conversations going, we begin breaking down the silos that too often exist between our Posts, Districts, Zones and Department. Instead of eleven Districts trying to solve the same problem eleven different ways, we can start learning from one another.

If You Don't Know Where to Start

If a Post Commander sat across from me today and said, "Brian, I don't know how to grow my Post anymore," I wouldn't start by handing them a membership goal. I'd start asking questions. What's the average age of your membership? What have you already tried to recruit new members? What programs are you actively working? Are you involved with youth in your community? Have you looked at opportunities to build or grow a Legion Riders chapter? Have you tried events that don't just invite the veteran, but welcome their spouse, children and family? And maybe most importantly: Who aren't you reaching right now, and why? There isn't going to be one answer that works for every Post in Montana. That's why we have to stop looking for a single membership formula and start looking at the communities we're actually serving. If your membership is getting older, what are you offering that would interest a 35-year-old veteran with kids? If people aren't coming to meetings, maybe the first question shouldn't be, "Why won't they come to our meeting?" Maybe it should be, "What can we do that they would want to come to?" If you don't have a youth program, what opportunity exists in

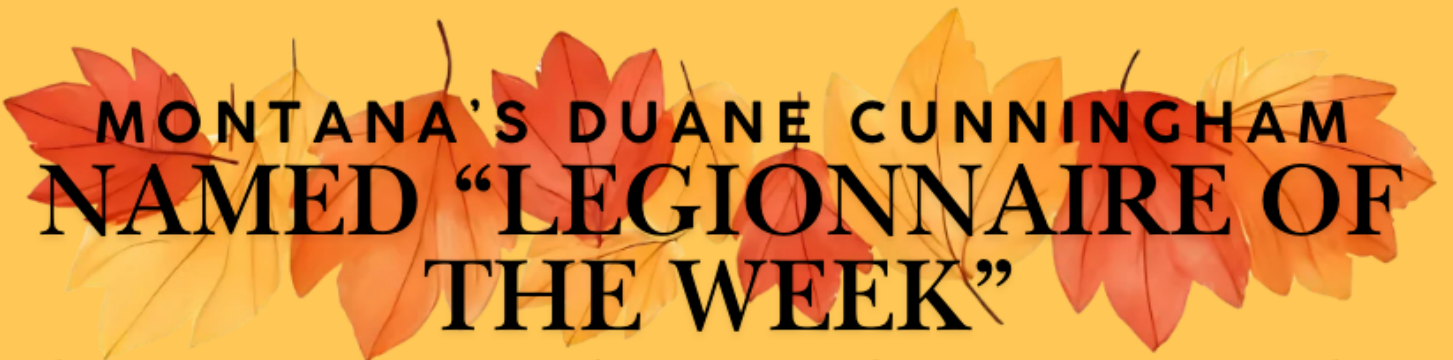
your community to start one or support one? If veterans in your area are interested in motorcycles, outdoor activities, service projects or family events, how can you use those interests to introduce them to the Legion? Growth starts with understanding who is around you, asking what they need and being willing to try something different.

How I Will Measure Success

Would I like Montana to earn 100 percent membership this year? Absolutely. But when this membership year ends, I'm going to look at more than the final percentage. I want to see growth on our charters, but I also want to see growth in communication. I want District Commanders who know their Post Commanders. I want Post Commanders who know their members. I want members who know what their Post is doing. I want to hear District Commanders come into our monthly meetings excited to tell us about something one of their Posts tried.

I want to see a good idea from one corner of Montana picked up and adapted by a Post somewhere else. And I want veterans throughout Montana—even those who live miles away from the nearest Post home—to understand that The American Legion is active in their community and that there is a place for them within it. If we accomplish those things, I believe the membership numbers will follow. Because ultimately, membership isn't about collecting another dues payment or putting another name on a roster. It's about giving veterans and their families a reason to belong, a place to serve and a purpose that keeps them coming back.

That's the growth I'm looking for.



MONTANA'S DUANE CUNNINGHAM NAMED "LEGIONNAIRE OF THE WEEK"

The American Legion Department of Montana is proud to recognize Duane Cunningham, who has been named Legionnaire of the Week for his continued grassroots advocacy on behalf of veterans and The American Legion's legislative priorities.

Duane recently took Montana veterans' concerns directly to Capitol Hill, meeting with staff from the offices of U.S. Rep. Troy Downing and U.S. Sen. Tim Sheehy to discuss the Take Care of America's Veterans Act (TCAVA).

During those conversations, Duane emphasized The American Legion's support for TCAVA and the importance of the legislation to veterans and their families. His outreach also provided an opportunity to hear directly from Montana's congressional offices, including positive feedback regarding Senator Sheehy's support for the legislation.

Grassroots advocacy is one of the most important tools The American Legion has in Washington. When Legionnaires take the time to contact elected officials, meet with congressional staff and speak about the issues affecting veterans in their own communities, they put a Montana voice behind the resolutions and legislative priorities adopted by the organization.

Duane's efforts are an excellent example of that mission in action.

The Department of Montana congratulates Duane on this well-deserved national recognition and thanks him for continuing to ensure that Montana veterans have a voice in the legislative process.

Congratulations, Duane, and thank you for carrying Montana's voice forward.

Your Voice Can Make a Difference, Too

Montana Legionnaires are encouraged to participate in The American Legion's grassroots advocacy efforts. If you contact a member of Congress or their staff regarding a Legion legislative priority, be sure to submit a Congressional Contact Report Form. Your advocacy could also earn recognition as a future "Legionnaire of the Week."

The strength of The American Legion's legislative program begins at the grassroots level — with Legionnaires willing to speak up, make the contact and ensure lawmakers understand the issues facing America's veterans.



AMERICAN LEGION OF MONTANA

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'A LIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL' FOR VETERANS SUFFERING FROM PTSD

By Steven B. Brooks

Juliana Mercer knows firsthand the challenges many veterans face after service. A former U.S. Marine with multiple deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan, Mercer struggled with post-traumatic stress disorder after returning home. Her work with wounded servicemembers at Wounded Warrior Battalion West in San Diego made her determined to help other veterans, but eventually she realized she needed help herself.

That search led Mercer to the Heroic Hearts Project, a nonprofit working to expand access to psychedelic-assisted treatments for veterans with PTSD. After participating in a retreat outside the United States, Mercer said the experience allowed her to process trauma and grief she had carried for years. The experience changed the direction of her life, and she now serves as executive director of Healing Breakthrough, advocating for greater access to emerging treatments.

Mercer spoke Aug. 28 to The American Legion's Be the One Mental Wellness Committee during the organization's National Convention in Louisville, Kentucky. She discussed research involving MDMA and psilocybin and emphasized that these treatments are not simply about taking a drug. Clinical programs combine the medication with therapy, allowing patients to process traumatic experiences in a controlled setting. Mercer said the treatments can promote neuroplasticity, potentially helping patients develop new patterns while addressing long-standing trauma. She also emphasized that research is still developing and that continued advocacy is necessary. The Department of Veterans Affairs is conducting research into MDMA- and psilocybin-assisted treatments for PTSD, while federal regulatory decisions will determine how and when such treatments may become medically available. Mercer urged The American Legion to continue advocating for veterans to have access to emerging evidence-based treatments as research and federal policy develop.

Jason Moore-Brown, Healing Breakthrough's policy director and second vice commander of American Legion Post 426 in Montana, shared his own experience with psychedelic-assisted treatment. After struggling with the effects of his Army service, Moore-Brown sought treatment through the VA but faced a lengthy wait for cognitive behavioral therapy. He eventually participated in a Heroic Hearts retreat in Peru. He said the combination of therapy, preparation and the treatment itself was transformative and changed the trajectory of his life. Moore-Brown has since become an

advocate for emerging therapies and authored two American Legion national resolutions addressing emerging treatments for veteran suicide and opioid treatment research.

The committee also heard from Nate Boyer, a former Army Green Beret and co-founder of Merging Vets & Players (MVP). Boyer and former NFL insider Jay Glazer created MVP to help military veterans and former professional athletes navigate the transition after leaving environments built around service, teamwork and a shared mission.

Boyer explained that leaving the military left him searching for a new sense of purpose. MVP was created to provide that connection through regular gatherings that combine physical activity with peer-to-peer conversation. Veterans and former athletes meet at MVP chapters around the country, but Boyer said the most important part often comes after the workout, when participants gather in a safe environment where they can openly discuss whatever challenges they are facing.

For Boyer, maintaining that sense of connection is essential. Military service and professional sports both create strong communities, clear missions and a sense of responsibility. When those experiences end, veterans and athletes can suddenly find themselves without the structure and purpose they once had. MVP attempts to fill part of that gap by creating a new community built around shared experience and mutual support.

Boyer also discussed his work in the film industry, including D-Day+80, a documentary he co-directed with Laura Kulik. The film chronicles the 80th anniversary of the D-Day invasion through interviews with some of the last surviving veterans who participated in the operation. Boyer said preserving their stories is especially important as the number of World War II veterans continues to decline. The message connecting all three speakers was clear: veterans need more than a single approach to mental health and transition. Traditional therapies remain important, while emerging treatments, peer support and renewed purpose may provide additional tools for veterans struggling after service. The American Legion's Be the One initiative and Mental Wellness Committee continue to examine these approaches as part of the organization's broader effort to prevent veteran suicide and help veterans find connection, purpose and support.

Service, Advocacy and a New Direction: Inside The American Legion's 107th National Convention

By The American Legion Department of Montana



The American Legion Family gathered in Louisville, Kentucky, Aug. 28 through Sept. 3, 2026, for the 107th National Convention, a week that combined service, advocacy, training, remembrance and celebration while setting the organization's direction for the coming year. Legionnaires joined members of the Sons of The American Legion, American Legion Auxiliary and American Legion Riders, along with national staff, government officials, military leaders and veterans advocates at the Kentucky International Convention Center and throughout Louisville.

Louisville's return as a convention city carried special meaning. The city had been scheduled to host The American Legion's 2020 national convention, but that gathering was canceled because of the COVID-19 public-health emergency. Six years later, the Legion Family finally returned. Before the formal business began, about 55 Legion Family volunteers worked at historic Greenwood Cemetery, clearing vegetation and improving the grounds around nearly 900 veterans' graves. The project provided a fitting start to a convention centered on the idea that service continues long after military service ends.

Veterans advocacy remained at the heart of the week. During the National Convention claims clinic, accredited American Legion Veterans Service Officers worked with VA personnel to assist veterans with claims and benefits questions. By the end of the clinic, 263 veterans from 21 states, along with one veteran from Norway, had received assistance. Be the One suicide-prevention training also drew standing-room-only crowds, emphasizing the importance of recognizing warning signs, asking direct questions and connecting veterans with appropriate help. Medal of Honor recipient Donald "Doc" Ballard encouraged posts to strengthen their efforts to prevent veteran suicide and to mentor younger veterans.

One of the biggest policy discussions centered on the Take Care of America's Veterans Act, or TCVA. The legislation includes numerous veterans priorities, including the Major Richard Star Act, Love Lives On Act, VITAL Act, HONOR Act and SAVES Act. Outgoing National Commander Dan K. Wiley emphasized that TCVA would advance portions of 30 existing American Legion national resolutions, making clear that support for the legislation is rooted in policy previously established by Legion delegates and the National Executive Committee. Wiley also highlighted the Legion's broader advocacy efforts, including more than 450,000 messages sent to Congress through the Grassroots Action Center during his year and more than \$29 billion in VA benefits obtained with assistance from American Legion service officers.

Veterans issues received additional attention from VA Secretary Doug Collins, who addressed delegates on changes underway at the Department of Veterans Affairs, suicide prevention and other priorities. Women veterans' health care was discussed during the Veterans Affairs & Rehabilitation Commission meeting, with panelists addressing progress as well as continuing challenges involving access, consistency and navigation of specialized services. The Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency also updated Legionnaires on the continuing effort to account for missing American servicemembers, reinforcing The American Legion's longstanding commitment to the POW/MIA mission.

The convention repeatedly returned to the importance of preparing the next generation. Student Veterans of America President and CEO Cory Boatwright encouraged posts to build stronger relationships with student veterans, while Ballard challenged longtime Legionnaires to mentor younger veterans and eventually give them opportunities to lead. Retired Air Force Lt. Col. Rob "Waldo" Waldman carried the same message into his keynote address, using the concept of a wingman to emphasize leadership, accountability and teamwork. Service and fundraising were also prominent throughout the week. The 20th anniversary American Legion Legacy Run raised more than \$1 million for the Veterans & Children Foundation, which supports Temporary Financial Assistance for eligible military and veteran families and helps fund training for American Legion



service officers. The ride was marked by the tragic death of Kansas American Legion Rider Michael Haas, who died from injuries suffered in a motorcycle accident. Riders continued the mission in his honor. The convention also recognized numerous service members, first responders, employers, journalists and community leaders for their contributions.

Patriotism and remembrance remained woven throughout the convention. The Patriotic Memorial Service honored Legion Family members and veterans who had died during the previous year while also remembering POWs and MIAs. National contests highlighted the talents of Legion Family members, with American Legion Post 347 of Lady Lake, Florida, repeating as National Color Guard champion and Sons of The American Legion Squadron 29 of Lenoir, North Carolina, repeating as Open Class champion. The West Caldwell High School NJROTC unit also won its fourth consecutive national JROTC Color Guard championship.

Behind the ceremonies was the important business of establishing national policy. Convention committees considered resolutions addressing veterans' benefits, health care, suicide prevention, national security and other issues. Resolutions may be approved, amended, consolidated, referred, received and recorded, or rejected. A referral does not necessarily mean defeat; it can indicate that additional work or study is needed before a proposal is ready for final action. The final convention reports and National Convention Digest provide the official record of those decisions.

The most significant leadership change came during the final session when delegates unanimously elected Jay Bowen of Colorado as National Commander for 2026-2027. A retired Army chief warrant officer three and member of Neal Thomas Jr.-Centennial Post 209 in Colorado Springs, Bowen served 20 years in the Army, including Operation Desert Shield. He introduced his theme, "BPOTS — Be Part of The Solution," challenging Legionnaires to take an active role in preventing veteran suicide, caring for veterans and families, mentoring youth, displaying patriotism and advocating for national security. He also announced that his national commander fundraising project will support the Veterans & Children Foundation and pledged to continue making Be the One a central mission of the organization.

Delegates also elected five National Vice Commanders, while the Sons of The American Legion and American Legion Auxiliary conducted their own national conventions and elected new national leaders. The 107th National Convention was more than a week of meetings and ceremonies. Veterans received direct assistance, volunteers restored a veterans cemetery, Legionnaires received suicide-prevention training, more than \$1 million was raised for veterans and children, national policy was debated and new leadership was elected. As Dan Wiley's year concluded and Jay Bowen began his term, the message coming out of Louisville was one of continuity: the mission remains the same, but every Legionnaire has a responsibility to help carry it forward.

"Be Part of The Solution" is not simply a new theme. It is a call to turn the Legion's longstanding commitment to veterans, families, communities and country into action at the post, district and department levels.





AMERICAN LEGION RIDERS



Montana's First Walk Across the National Stage Brian Carpenter

There are moments in The American Legion when you realize you are standing in the middle of something much bigger than yourself. Walking onto the stage at the 107th American Legion National Convention in Louisville to present Montana's donation to The American Legion Veterans & Children Foundation was one of those moments for me. For the first time, Montana was part of the American Legion Riders donation presentation on the National Convention stage. I was fortunate enough to be the one carrying our check — but I want to be very clear:

I was only carrying it. Montana earned it.

For the past three years, we have been working to grow the American Legion Riders program in Montana. It hasn't happened overnight. It has taken miles on motorcycles, conversations around tables, chapters working together, relationships being built and rebuilt, and people willing to believe in what we were trying to accomplish.

Most importantly, we have tried to keep bringing everything back to one thing: Service. This year, that work took another big step forward with our own Montana Legacy Run.

What started as an idea became Riders on the road. Communities welcomed us. Businesses supported us. Posts and chapters stepped up. Legion Family members volunteered. People opened their wallets because they believed in the mission. Then somehow, a few weeks later, I found myself standing backstage in Louisville waiting for Montana's name to be called. When it was, I wasn't walking onto that stage alone. Carol Gruwell and Lowell Long stood behind me as we represented Montana together. I may have been the one who stepped forward to make the presentation, but having Carol and Lowell standing there mattered to me. It was a visible reminder that none of what we accomplished belonged to one person. And, truthfully, there should have been a whole lot more people standing behind us. Every Montana Rider who put miles on the road. Every chapter that helped us grow. Every Post and Legion Family member who supported the vision. Every volunteer who worked an event. Every business that sponsored us. Every person who handed us a donation because they believed in what we were doing. They were represented on that stage too. Standing there with Carol and Lowell, looking out from a National Convention stage where Montana had never made this presentation before, was hard to put into words.

It wasn't my moment. It was Montana's moment.

I was simply humbled to be the person trusted to carry our check across that stage. And then you start watching the other departments come forward. One after another, American Legion Riders from across this country walked onto that same stage carrying the results of the work they had done back home. Some checks were a few thousand dollars. Others were tens of

thousands. Texas alone presented more than \$116,000.

But standing there, you quickly realized nobody was measuring the importance of a department by the size of its check. Every check had a story behind it. Every dollar represented somebody doing the work back home. A Rider putting miles on a motorcycle. A chapter organizing a fundraiser. A Post opening its doors. A business writing a sponsorship check. A volunteer giving up a Saturday. Or somebody simply reaching into their pocket because they wanted to help a veteran or a military family they may never meet. By the time everything was counted, the 2026 Legacy Run effort had raised \$1,011,563 for The American Legion Veterans & Children Foundation.

More than a million dollars.

Standing there and watching that happen changes the way you look at those numbers. Because those aren't just dollars on oversized checks. Those dollars can put food on a table. They can help keep the lights on. They can help keep a veteran's family in their home when an unexpected financial crisis hits. They also help support the training and accreditation of American Legion service officers who fight every day to make sure veterans and their families receive the benefits they have earned. That is the mission we were standing there for. One of the other great honors of Louisville was having the opportunity to meet and spend time with National American Legion Riders Chairman David Heredia Jr. Getting to know David, listening to him and hearing his vision for the Riders reinforced a lot of what we have been trying to build in Montana. The motorcycle may be what brings many of us through the door.

The mission is what keeps us there. Ride with purpose. Serve where you are. Take care of veterans and their families. Strengthen the communities we call home. And never forget that the patch on our backs connects us to something much larger than our own chapter or our own state. Some of the most valuable moments in Louisville didn't happen on a stage at all. They happened in hallways. Over a handshake. Sitting around a table. Talking with Riders from another state about something that worked for them. Comparing challenges. Trading ideas. Meeting people you may have only known by a name, a patch or a Facebook post before Louisville. There is a brotherhood within the American Legion Riders that is difficult to explain until you experience it. You can meet somebody from the other side of the country and within minutes you're talking about your chapters, your veterans, your rides, what you're struggling with and what you're trying to build. That networking matters. Because Montana doesn't have to reinvent the wheel. There are Riders across this country who have spent years building successful programs and who are willing to share what they have learned. We can learn



AMERICAN LEGION RIDERS

Montana's First Walk Across the National Stage Brian Carpenter



from them, bring ideas home and use those relationships to make our own program stronger.

But Louisville reminded me of something else, too.

Montana has something to bring to that brotherhood.

We may still be growing. Our Legacy Run may still be young.

But what is happening here is something we should be proud of. Three years ago, I don't know that I could have imagined Montana walking across that National Convention stage as part of this presentation.

This year, we did.

Not because of one person. Not because of one chapter. And definitely not because of the guy who happened to be holding the check. We were there because Montana's Riders and our Legion Family have spent the last three years building something together. To every Rider who rode, every volunteer who worked, every business that sponsored us, every Post and chapter that supported us, and every person who donated along the way:

You were on that stage with Carol, Lowell and me. We were simply fortunate enough to represent you. And standing there watching department after department come forward until, collectively, the American Legion Riders crossed that \$1 million mark, I couldn't help but think

about what happens when thousands of people decide to move in the same direction.

One Rider can't do that. One chapter can't do that. One department can't do that. But together, we did.

The National Legacy Run celebrated its 20th anniversary this year. What began in 2006 has grown into a nationwide mission that has raised millions of dollars to support the children and families of our nation's veterans.

Now Montana gets to say that we are part of that story. Our chapter in it is still pretty young. In a lot of ways, we're just getting started. But we're in it now.

And I will always be grateful and incredibly humbled that Carol, Lowell and I had the privilege of standing on that stage when Montana took that first walk.

It was an honor to represent our Riders. It was an honor to represent our Legion Family. And it was an honor to represent Montana.

Now we go home. We keep building. We keep riding.

We keep strengthening the brotherhood.

And most importantly, we keep serving.





SONS OF THE AMERICAN LEGION



More Than a Name: Sons of The American Legion Leave Louisville Focused on Legacy, Growth and Service

The 54th National Convention of the Sons of The American Legion (SAL), held Aug. 28–30, 2026, in Louisville, Kentucky, was about more than conducting the annual business of a national organization. Delegates from across the country gathered to recognize achievement, conduct committee business, receive leadership training, remember those who served and elect the national leadership that will guide an organization now exceeding 400,000 members. The convention also offered a clear look at an organization experiencing historic growth while preparing for its second century of service.

The SAL finished the 2025 membership year with a record 404,941 members, its third consecutive membership record. Membership has increased every year since reliable national records began in 1983, with the exceptions of 2020 and 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic. That growth creates a new challenge: turning membership numbers into active participation and meaningful service. Convention training addressed communications, public speaking, relationships between squadrons and American Legion posts, resolutions and networking, emphasizing the importance of developing capable local leaders.

Service remained at the center of the convention. A Children & Youth Academy introduced young members of the Legion Family to flag etiquette, a flag retirement ceremony and American history. The SAL also continued its substantial support of The American Legion Child Well-Being Foundation, which provides grants to organizations serving children. Since 1988, the Sons have contributed more than \$10 million to the foundation, demonstrating how local fundraisers and community activities can become significant national support for children. SAL members also contributed to the larger Legion Family mission supporting veterans, military families and children through programs such as the Veterans & Children Foundation. The convention marked the conclusion of National Commander William “Bill” Clancy III’s year of service. Clancy built his administration around the simple message of “We,” emphasizing that the Sons are strongest when they work as part of the entire American Legion Family. That philosophy was demonstrated throughout the year through participation in events such as the American Legion Legacy Run and efforts supporting veterans and children. His message also emphasized bringing younger generations into patriotic and historical activities so they can experience the meaning of service firsthand.

Delegates elected Thom Skelley of Texas as the 2026–2027 SAL National Commander. A 21-year SAL member and former Detachment of Texas commander, Skelley traces his eligibility to

his father, William M. Skelley Sr., who served in the Pacific Theater during World War II. Skelley carries his father's dog tags and infantry patch, and that connection to his father's service is reflected in his national commander's coin and pin. Skelley's message for the coming year centers on a simple idea: “Every Member Matters.” He encouraged leaders to learn what motivates individual members and find meaningful ways for them to become involved. He also offered another phrase that captures the membership challenge facing the organization: “Sons are born, members are made.” Eligibility may come through a veteran's service, but active membership requires engagement, connection and a reason to serve.

Skelley also announced a national project focused on POW/MIA awareness and remembrance. His initiative encourages SAL squadrons to establish POW/MIA remembrance tables in local restaurants, with a customizable poster available for squadrons that cannot establish a physical table. The goal is to honor those who remain unaccounted for while educating the public about America's continuing commitment to bringing them home.

The convention also highlighted the accomplishments of young SAL members. The color guard from Squadron 29 in Lenoir, North Carolina, repeated as the Open Class champion in The American Legion National Color Guard Contest. The team's success, along with the achievements of young people throughout the Legion Family, demonstrates how the Sons can connect veterans' service with the next generation.

As Louisville's convention came to a close, the message was clear: the Sons of The American Legion is no longer simply defined by its membership eligibility. It is a growing national organization with a significant role in supporting veterans, children, Americanism and the larger Legion Family. The transition from Clancy's “We” to Skelley's “Every Member Matters” reinforces the same fundamental principle—that the strength of the organization depends on individuals finding their place in a larger mission.

The SAL's future will ultimately be measured not only by how many names appear on its membership rolls, but by how many members turn that connection to a veteran's legacy into service in their communities. In Louisville, the Sons left with record membership, new leadership and a renewed focus on making sure every member has an opportunity to carry that legacy forward.



THE AUXILIARY SERVICE STAR



American Legion Auxiliary Eligibility Expands Following National Convention

A significant change adopted at The American Legion's 107th National Convention in Louisville will expand who may be eligible to become a member of the American Legion Auxiliary. On September 2, 2026, delegates to The American Legion National Convention approved an amendment to Article XIII, Section 2 of the National Constitution, changing Auxiliary eligibility language to include qualifying family members regardless of gender. The adopted amendment is now in effect.

What Changed?

For generations, the American Legion Auxiliary has been an important part of the Legion Family, carrying forward a tremendous tradition of service to veterans, military families and communities. The newly adopted language expands the pool of family members who may continue that tradition.

Under the amended language, Auxiliary membership eligibility includes qualifying:

- Grandparents
- Parents
- Siblings
- Spouses
- Direct or adopted descendants within two degrees of consanguinity

Importantly, those categories are no longer limited by gender. That means fathers, grandfathers, brothers, sons and grandsons may now qualify for membership in the American Legion Auxiliary on the same basis as their female counterparts, provided their eligibility is established through a qualifying American Legion member or qualifying veteran. For descendants, the adopted language limits eligibility to two degrees of consanguinity, meaning children and grandchildren, whether by birth or legal adoption. According to the interpretation circulated following the convention, step-relatives, great-grandchildren and relatives beyond the second degree are not included under this provision. Women who are eligible for membership in The American Legion in their own right also remain eligible for membership in the American Legion Auxiliary.

When Does the Change Take Effect?

The amendment passed at the National Convention and is considered effective now. The information circulated to Department leadership explains that Auxiliary eligibility is defined by reference to The American Legion National Constitution; therefore, the change does not require another American Legion National Convention vote. The American Legion Auxiliary also approved similar language during its National Convention. There is, however, an important distinction between eligibility and implementation.

Because the change was adopted only recently, national publications, websites, membership systems and application materials may not yet reflect the new language. Formal guidance regarding how newly eligible members should be processed was still pending when the information was circulated on September 10.

Members and Unit officers should therefore expect additional information as National Headquarters and American Legion Auxiliary National Headquarters update their procedures and materials.

What Does This Mean for the Legion Family?

This change has the potential to bring more military and veteran families directly into the work of the American Legion Auxiliary. A son who grew up attending Legion events with his veteran mother or father may now have an opportunity to serve through the Auxiliary. A brother who wants to honor his sibling's military service may have a place within the organization. Fathers and grandfathers who have watched their families serve may now be able to become active participants themselves.

For Montana, where many Posts and Units depend upon families working together to serve their communities, that could create new opportunities for membership, volunteerism and involvement.

It also gives our Legion Family another reason to have conversations with the people already around us.

Rather than asking only, "Who do we know who might join?" we can begin asking, "Who in our Legion families has wanted to help but previously didn't have a place to belong?"

What Should Units Do Now?

Units should be aware of the eligibility change and should not automatically turn away a potentially eligible male family member simply because existing applications, websites or printed materials still contain the previous language.

The guidance circulated among Department leadership recommends welcoming inquiries and collecting contact information from newly eligible individuals while awaiting updated processing instructions and application materials.

The American Legion Department of Montana will continue to share additional information as official implementation guidance and updated materials become available.

In the meantime, this is an exciting opportunity to start a larger conversation about the future of our Legion Family.

The mission hasn't changed.

Our commitment to veterans hasn't changed.

But the number of family members who may now have the opportunity to stand beside us in carrying that mission forward has grown.



THE AUXILIARY SERVICE STAR



MONTANA RIVER OUTFITTERS

Win a Montana River Outfitters guided float trip, down the White Cliffs on the Missouri River. For 3 days you and a guest can float 47 miles along the Missouri River, taking in the view while exploring this historic waterway.



All proceeds go to the Montana American Legion Auxiliary Girls State Program.

**\$20 per ticket. Drawing to be held
October 24, 2026**

**Any questions please call:
Leona at (406) 788-1967**

Why Accidental Death Insurance Matters for Our Members in 2026 and Beyond

Life moves fast, and none of us expect an accident to change everything in a single moment—but it happens. Across all ages, accidental deaths remain one of the leading causes of loss in the United States, with car crashes consistently among the top contributors. When the unexpected happens, families are often left juggling urgent financial needs like daily living expenses, funeral costs, and the challenges of suddenly losing income.

That's exactly why accidental death insurance continues to be such an important—and practical—option for our Legion Family in 2026 and beyond.

Reliable Protection When Families Need It Most

Accidental death insurance through The Legionnaire Insurance Trust (LIT) provides cash benefits directly to your beneficiaries, regardless of any other insurance you may have. These benefits are designed to help families stay steady during a truly difficult time.

Better yet, this coverage is built with accessibility in mind:

- Guaranteed acceptance for all Legion Family members
- No medical exams or health questions
- 24/7 protection—at home, at work, in your car, or on vacation
- Cash benefits paid directly to your beneficiary

It's a simple way to add an important layer of financial security without jumping through hoops.

Your Coverage Helps Support Veterans, Too

Every time a member enrolls in an LIT program, it does more than protect their family—it strengthens ours. LIT generates valuable non-dues revenue that helps fund critical Department programs and services for veterans. In other words, choosing LIT coverage isn't just a smart personal decision; it directly supports the mission we all care about.

April Spotlight: Accidental Death Insurance

As we highlight this program in April, it's worth taking a moment to review what makes it so impactful:

What It Covers

- Cash benefits paid if a covered accident results in your death
- Guaranteed acceptance for all Legion Family members
- No medical underwriting
- Benefits paid even if you have other insurance

Why It Matters

This is one of the simplest, most flexible ways to strengthen your family's financial safety net. No exams. No complicated applications. Just straightforward, needed protection.

How to Enroll

1. Choose the amount of coverage that fits your family's needs.
2. Enroll easily—no medical questions required.
3. Enjoy quick activation: coverage begins the first day of the month after enrollment and first premium payment.
4. Risk-free review: if you decide within 30 days that the coverage isn't right for you, you can cancel for a full refund (as long as no claims have been made).

American Legion Department of Montana

Merchandise & Fundraising Order Form

Name: _____

Phone: _____

Mailing Address: _____

Order Information

Item	Price	Quantity	Total
Legion Pilsner (Case)	\$45.00	_____	\$_____
2027 Cash Calendar	\$20.00	_____	\$_____
BlackStone Grill	\$50.00	_____	\$_____
1911 Pistol	\$50.00	_____	\$_____

Total Amount Due

Order Total: \$_____

Delivery & Ordering Information

Legion Pilsner

- ☐ Pick up at the Department Office in Helena
- ☐ Deliver through my District Commander (when available)
-

Payment Information

- ☐ Check Enclosed

Make checks payable to:

American Legion Department of Montana

PO Box 155

Fort Harrison, MT 59636

Email: amlegmtsec@gmail.com

Thank you for supporting the programs of The American Legion Department of Montana!