



Report of the
Current Conflicts Working Group
Meeting in Kansas City, MO
November 14 – 15, 2008

Veterans of Foreign Wars
of the United States

November 21, 2008

TO: Allen "Gunner" Kent, Adjutant General

Larry Maher, Quartermaster General

Overview: The Current Conflicts Working Group met November 14 - 15, 2008 to draft recommendations for improving retention and recruitment of veterans of the United States' current conflicts into the VFW.

Summary: The Current Conflicts Working Group consisted of 13 VFW members and was assisted by 3 VFW National staff members. All working group members had participated in VFW-eligible deployments within the past 5 years. All but one member had deployed in support of either Operations Iraqi Freedom or Enduring Freedom, in addition to deployments to Korea, Bosnia, Kosovo, Desert Storm, and Somalia. Many had served on multiple deployments and four of the participants were current Active Duty, National Guard, or Reserve military service members.

Members were drawn from a pool of applicants developed at the VFW National Convention in Orlando, FL, in August 2008. Selection was based on conflicts they had served in, their ages, and conferences in which they belonged. They represented all conferences and most hold (or have held) leadership or supporting positions at the VFW Post, District, Department, and/or National levels.

Working Group Members:

Marshall Archer (Marine Corps) Opn Iraqi Freedom (2 deployments)
Jaimie Bahl (Navy) Global War on Terrorism-Expeditionary Medal
Charles Brass (Army) Opn Iraqi Freedom, Somalia, Opn Desert Storm
Justin Brown (Navy) Opn Iraqi Freedom (2), Opn Southern Watch
Chris Clapper (Army) Opn Iraqi Freedom
Adam Kahler (Army) Opn Iraqi Freedom
Adam Lybbert (Marine Corps) Opn Iraqi Freedom
Tim Hopton (Marine Corps) Opn Enduring Freedom (Afghanistan)
Bailey Julian (Army) Opn Iraqi Freedom
Jill Lynch (Navy) Opn Iraqi Freedom, Kosovo
Tashawnya McCullough (Army) Opn Iraqi Freedom
Rebecca Spurlin (Army) Opn Iraqi Freedom, Opn Enduring Freedom (Afg), Korea
Matthew Stewart (Army) Opn Iraqi Freedom, Kosovo

Primary Staff Support:

Debra Anderson (Army) Opn Desert Storm
Matt Claussen (Marine Corps) Opn Desert Storm
Troy Danderson (Army) Opn Enduring Freedom (Afg), Opn Iraqi Freedom, Korea

Members presented six of their recommendations to the VFW Adjutant General, Allen “Gunner” Kent, VFW Quartermaster General, Larry Maher, Assistant AG, John McNeill, and Asst. QMG, Bob Greene on November 15, 2008.

Background: The group began by discussing who the current conflict veteran is and how this member might differ from our traditional members and veterans. Key points included:

- In general, this veteran population is very diverse.
- There are more women than in previous conflicts.
- The group is ethnically and racially diverse and spans all ages (17 and older).
- They served in an all volunteer force with a high proportion being National Guard and Reserve members.
- The typical veteran has served 4-8 years and has had multiple deployments.
- The group tends to be family oriented. Having spent time away from spouses and children, they need for their time now to include family friendly activities as much as possible.
- Veterans of this group are technologically savvy, most having grown up around computers.
- They have a desire to learn, like to join organizations (and on-line social networks), are open to change, and tend to be more informal than older veterans.
- They are action oriented, sometimes impatient, and physically fit and active.

The issues that are important to them include:

- finding a place where they fit in;
- getting help with organizations that are supposed to help them (VA, etc.);
- getting advice on schools, jobs, and transitioning to civilian life;
- reconnecting with their families;
- dealing with service related injuries and/or stress;
- being able to help others and make a difference.

Strengths of the VFW: The working group had a lot of good to say about why they joined and stayed active in the VFW. The number one theme was that the VFW is a place to talk to other veterans and feel a sense of camaraderie. They believed strongly in the mission of the VFW to help veterans and active duty service members. They supported “Adopt a Unit” programs, Unmet Needs, and Operation Uplink. They believed our advocacy on Capitol Hill is important, and the work that our Veteran Services Officers do is critical. In general, they see the VFW as “good people doing good things.” They enjoy the activities at the post level including civic engagement, participation in honor guards, dinners, events, and tournaments/recreational activities. Very often, they had a mentor or friend in the post who got them involved.

Key Opportunities within VFW: They also saw a lot of things that aren’t working right, which discourage them and others who might consider joining. The issues they chose to focus on as most important include:

- Image: The public image of the VFW tends to be older, white, and male-dominated with activities centered around the post bar. Our website, magazine, and clothing items

reinforce this older stereotype. There is a lack of awareness within the general public of many of the things we do.

- Support and mentorship of newer members: At some posts, there is a lack of support of younger members. They don't feel accepted or wanted.
- Appealing activities and benefits: At many posts there is a lack of activities that appeal to them and/or their families. Nationally and locally, we need a better package of benefits or perks that make it worthwhile to join.
- Problem solving avenues: There is no mechanism for solving problems such as racism or unethical behavior.
- Use of technology to facilitate communications: There is a lack of access to information with the website being difficult to navigate. Many things that would be valuable, such as bylaws and activity calendars, are not available on the website. The websites from post, to department, to national do not flow together.

Recommendations: The working group was tasked with making six recommendations that included actions at both National and Post level. Here are those recommendations:

1. **Improving the Image of the VFW.**

- a. Recommendation: Take action to move toward a new VFW image through positive publicity, branding, clothing updates, and advertising. Create a model post for others to emulate.
- b. Importance:
 - The current VFW image is often related to stereotypical images that include: an older membership, bar/alcohol centered, exclusive (non-approachable), smoky, gambling, and "just a bar."
 - To attract members we need a new public image, which must take hold at the community level.
- c. Description/Implementation:
 - Create one or multiple family/service-centric pilot post as a blueprint for positive image change.
 - Sponsor proactive community and national events and teams. This would include 5K races, paintball teams, little league teams, rifle teams, etc.
 - Do more with the SVA (Student Veterans Association).

- Allow competition among vendors to create better products. Clothing items are getting better. Continue to involve younger veterans in selection.
- Do direct benefit advertising, such as providing GI Bill information to students on a low dollar value iTunes gift card with local VFW post information. Distribute promotional products (pens, etc.) at events. Create school supplies with the VFW logo and sell at a discount to veteran students and members.
- Replace the service cap with a boonie hat or make it an option. This hat has an updated look and is more functional. It can also be customized with the same embroidery as the current cap.
- Have an on-line magazine with articles and advertising aimed at a younger demographic.
- Create Public Service Announcements that create a positive image.
- Find partnerships for direct advertisement campaigns.

2. Use of the Internet.

- a. Recommendation: Enhance the ability to communicate and pass information using internet resources.
- b. Importance:
 - Functional
 - Overseas availability – every member can get access
 - User friendly/easily accessible
 - Preparing for future growth – the internet will continue to grow and be an important tool for our members
- c. Description: Enhance and improve the web image and usage of the VFW through vfw.org.
 - Use simple and common interface

- Better searching tools
- Simple template. Add and rearrange tabs for better navigation.
- Organize into 3 parts
- Use for “virtual posts” for members at large

d. Implementation:

- Simple interface: blog like, tools readily available, convenient access
- Better searching tools: Google based, better selection of topics or categories
- Simple template/tabs: Current Conflict veterans, E-Magazine, Benefits. The on-line magazine will have more articles of interest to younger vets. Advertising could also be aimed at a younger demographic. Make the on-line magazine free. Members could specify on their eMembership account whether they prefer the magazine by email (online) or by mail. By providing the magazine on-line, it would be not only convenient for the members, but would save the VFW money for printing and postage. This would also give members incentive to keep their email addresses up to date with the VFW.
- Breaking down/transition of 3 parts:
 - 1) General Public: articles, basic FAQ’s, directions to join
 - 2) Veterans (wanting to join): post locator, FAQ’s, benefits, application
 - 3) Membership/”Members Only”’: connected to eMembership, FAQ, a member can post a blog, article, or story (with permission of commander). Articles can be flagged to pass up to next level with that commander given authority to post. Rights to edit and post given to commander, adjutant, and/or quartermaster. Meeting minutes would be posted to the website and accessible by members only. Email alias or VMail used to notify officers of changes.
- Design websites so that communications easily flows through all levels: Post, District, Dept, and National. Ensure uniformity and consistency between sites. Include publications, by-laws, rituals, etc. available on line. Provide training at convention.

- Virtual posts/members at large. Have a place for members at large to interact.
- Start implementation immediately but keep all information available through hard copy for members who prefer that. Posts will not be required to use the internet but it will be available as a resource. Allow time for growth and production. Start with the national website.

3. **Problem Resolution & Visibility to Newer Member Concerns.** Create a process for fixing problems within the organization. Create a committee or advisory group of current conflict veterans to insure their voice is heard. Address specific current conflict veterans needs and issues, as well as resolve systemic problems that exist within the VFW at all levels.

a. EO

- Recommendation: Incorporate Equal Opportunity (EO)
- Importance: Discrimination is unlawful, but occurs at some posts.
- Description: Recommend a by-law change to address discrimination due to gender, race, religion, national origin. The by-law will state that discrimination will not be tolerated.
- Implementation: Adopt the definition of EO, “The Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States of America is committed equal opportunity and nondiscrimination in all programs, events, and services, regardless of economic or social status and does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, ethnic origin, national origin, creed, religion, political belief, sex, sexual orientation, marital status, age, or physical or mental disability. Establish training programs and incorporate into by-laws. Program would be based on increasing awareness.

b. Hotline

- Recommendation: Establish a whistle-blower hotline/internet link.

- Importance: Needed to address issues, problems, and complaints that have failed to be resolved at lower levels. Sometimes the chain of command is part of the problem, so issues fail to get addressed and resolved.
- Description: A 1-800 number would be established and a link on the VFW website that would be used to file a complaint without fear of reprisal. In addition, it could be used to identify problems and make recommendations. The program would be similar to the Inspector General system used within the military. The process would be to first take the complaint to the post commander and then to the department commander. If not resolved satisfactory, then the comrade could contact the whistleblower hotline. At this point, all issues would be tracked to determine systemic problems. National could task the Dept IG with investigating the complaint, if appropriate. Final adjudication would rest with National.
- Implementation: Publicize through all VFW communications channels (magazine, website, memo's, etc.). Clarify that the program is to be used when all other means have been exhausted at Post, District, and National levels.

c. Current conflict veterans representation at Department and National levels

- Recommendation: Establish a current conflict veterans committee and chairman.
- Importance: Current conflicts veterans are the future of the organization but have little visibility at decision making levels.
- Description: Departments will have a chairman and a 5-10 member committee. National will have a committee made up of Department chairs. This committee will meet twice a year at Mid-Winter Conference and National Convention. The current Working Group will continue to meet to advise National.
- Implementation: The Commander in Chief will direct that these councils be formed. Funds will need to be allocated to conduct meetings. The committee and advisory group will need specific roles and membership criteria to be determined by National. The Current Conflicts Working Group will continue to meet with the next meeting tentatively scheduled for May 2009.

4. A New Member Mentorship Program.

- a. Recommendation: The VFW implements a “New Member Mentorship Program” at the Department levels with oversight and incentives from the National level.
- b. Importance:
 - New members are the future of this organization. Providing these members with the necessary resources and information is essential for them to become involved in this organization. The key to retention is engagement!
 - The program will help bridge the “generational gap” that exists among our members. Bridging this gap will help our new members feel a part of our organization, help our older veterans become accepting of our new members sooner, and make it known to our older members that they are still wanted and appreciated.
 - This program is also important because it gives our older members an opportunity to pass along information that they may otherwise not have passed along.
 - This program also gives our new members someone to look up to, as well gives them goals to strive for.
 - This program will show our older members that new members do care about this organization and want it to succeed.
- c. Description: The “New Member Mentorship Program” should be focused toward the education and motivation of new members. The program should become a “revolving door” of information for all of our members, as well as a motivational tool for member interaction, participation, and success.
- d. Implementation:
 - National would develop a handbook of basic guidelines/ recommendations for the “New Member Mentorship Program.” This would be a basic SOP for mentorship.

- Mentorship Committees should be developed at the Department level in order to help implement the Mentorship Program at the Post level and to assist the posts.
- Implement a “Mentorship Chairman” as an officer at the post level. Based on a list of volunteers at the post level, the Mentorship Chair should select a designated number of mentors which will be at the post discretion. Each new member regardless of age will be assigned a mentor.
- The Mentorship Committee at the Department level and the mentors at the post level should be a combination of older and younger members.
- Incentives for “Program Excellence” should be given from National level based on visibility, retention percentage, and quality of leadership gained.
- Consider making the Mentorship Program participation as a requirement for All State and/or All American.

5. National and Local Benefits and Services.

- a. Recommendation: Attract and retain potential VFW members by showing that the benefits are worth the price. Create a better benefits package and improve services available to members.
- b. Importance: Taking care of our own. Showing the VFW cares.
- c. Description: Service members of today value family, security, health, education, and entertainment. Here are specific suggestions in each area:
 - Family – daycare discounts, tutoring for kids, discounts on clothing (major dept stores), moving/relocation, travel (hotel, airlines, car rentals), job assistance
 - Health – gym memberships, dental care, self improvement (cooking, etc.), marriage counselors, optical
 - Education – Scholarships for VFW member kids only, school supplies, book discounts. The scholarship would be through a competition and only be available to children and grandchildren of members. One or two at \$5,000 would be a good start.

- Entertainment – museums, concerts, races, rodeos, amusement parks, restaurants, outdoors activities (KOA, hunting/fishing supplies, sky diving, bungee jumping).

d. Implementation:

- Decide who we want to work with. Look at veteran friendly companies both nationally and locally – Sears, Bass Pro Shop, Lowes Motor Speedway, etc.
- Evaluate feasibility and overall cost/benefit.
- Pursue agreements at national, department and local levels. Have younger members involved in talking with potential sponsors/benefit providers.
- Create one package of benefits at National and allow departments and posts to pursue companies locally that provide compatible or complementary benefits.
- If unable to attain constant discounts, consider a coupon book that goes to members annually with discount coupons and other benefits.

6. Post Level Activities.

- a. Recommendation: Encourage family friendly and fun activities at the post level.
- b. Importance: These activities will help retain current members with or without families and encourage those with families to join who otherwise would not. Positive activities help to create a sense of belonging and encourage friendships. This is especially important for veterans feeling isolated and suicidal.
- c. Description:
 - Family – holiday events, such as pumpkin carving, costume parties, Valentine’s Day events, patriot parties and events (Veteran’s Day, Independence Day, Memorial Day), Christmas parties (secret Santa). Post officers could “host” the parties. Potlucks reduce expense and clean up. Post without homes could use any local banquet hall. Donations could reduce expense.

- Internet Café/WIFI -- Get used and donated equipment. Computer savvy vets could help others learn. Makes VFW website and forms easily accessible to all. Create a study area for students of all ages.
- Fitness Center – Get donated and used equipment and instructional diagrams. Have a fitness officer and/or fitness class. Great for stress relief and general health.
- Daycare for events – Get the Ladies Auxiliary to help. Use any controlled areas. Allows parents to come to an event and not have to hire a babysitter. Incorporate fun activities for the kids.
- General – Tournaments & Karaoke. Create a fun environment. Give lessons (cards, darts, etc.). Get used and donated equipment. Give prizes. This is another stress reducer.
- Outdoors activities – fishing, hiking, camping, canoeing, rafting, etc. Get used or donated equipment. Plan these activities with other organizations or posts. Consider educational classes for all participants. These are great for team building and stress relief.
- Gaming – 50/50 raffles, casino nights, football pools. Understand the local laws regarding gaming before initiating these. When used appropriately, these can be easy money-makers for the post.