

## **SECTION 6**

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**Washington Office Mission  
National Legislative Service  
National Veterans Service  
VFW Action Corps**

# Your Washington Office Mission

“To Honor the Dead by Helping the Living” by prevailing upon the Congress and Administration to fulfill this nation’s commitment to care and provide for her defenders and their dependents in their time of need, and to ensure that the United States remains ever vigilant, while maintaining a strong national defense.



## Philosophy

In 1919 the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the U.S established an office in Washington, D.C., to ensure the veteran's voice was clearly heard on Capitol Hill. Today, the VFW Washington Office works with Congress, federal agencies and the Administration to create legislation and programs to enhance the quality of life of America's 22.7 million veterans, 2.2 million service members and their families, and to help defeat those proposals that would not be beneficial. Our philosophy is to:

- Ensure veterans are provided all the care, entitlements and compensation they have earned through their honorable service and sacrifice in defense of our nation in a prompt and compassionate manner by the Department of Veterans Affairs and other concerned federal departments and agencies.
- Ensure legislation is advanced in the Congress and signed into law that reflects the VFW’s pro-veteran, pro-military personnel and families, pro-national defense and pro-American goals; and to protect veterans from proposals detrimental to them and the nation.
- Ensure employment opportunities for America’s veterans are supported by lawmakers, the private sector, and all concerned government entities through the enhancement of veterans’ preference legislation, training and education programs.
- And to ensure a firm foreign policy that guarantees our integrity as a nation, promotes our democratic ideals and interests abroad, seeks the fullest possible accounting of our missing comrades, and backs a strong military that provides for the well-being and quality of life of those men and women in uniform.

Since our founding in 1899, the VFW has continuously worked to protect the rights and entitlements of America’s veterans, and to establish programs to meet their needs. With years of experience, the VFW knows that as times change, so do the needs of each generation of veterans.

Consisting of the National Legislative Service, National Veterans Service, and an Action Corps, your Washington Office staff has the experience and resources to stay attuned to those changes affecting veterans, our military, our families, and our national security.

However, in order to be heard, VFW membership must be strong, because in Washington, membership is the measure of influence and organizational strength. When the VFW Commander-in-Chief appears before Congress or meets with the President and other federal officials, it is well understood that he is representing the largest organization of combat veterans in the nation, an organization with a total membership of 2.1 million. Now that’s influence.

But with such authority comes responsibility, and your Washington Office staff is ever mindful of its responsibility to VFW membership and leadership, and is committed to the principles of serving the nation and those who serve her in uniform. The VFW Washington Office is here to serve you.

# National Legislative Service

The VFW National Legislative Service represents the organization before the United States Congress to advance legislation that is beneficial to veterans and our active duty military and to work towards the defeat of legislation that would harm them.

## **In our mission we:**

Testify before Congressional Committees and Subcommittees.

Make recommendations to Legislators and Committees with respect to potential legislation.

Secure the introduction of legislation favorable to our membership.

The issues we advance are derived from the resolutions passed at our National Convention. The National Legislative Committee Chairman and Vice Chairmen take these Resolutions and establish our Priority Goals. These Priority Goals, in turn, become our key issues and let Congress know what we most strongly support. They are our mandates for action.

## **For the 112th Congress, our Priority Goals focus on:**

- Sufficient funding for the Department of Veterans Affairs
- Expand and improve upon the health care programs and services for all generations of veterans
- Improvement of outreach to veterans, especially female and rural veterans to ensure they are fully aware of available health care services
- Strengthen USERRA to protect our Guard and reserve members
- Reduction of the claims backlog, while ensuring complete and accurate claims adjudication, as well as furthering studies to determine quality of life issues in rating decisions
- A truly integrated electronic medical record transfer from DoD to VA to provide seamless transition from military service to veteran status
- Continue to improve upon the Post 9/11 GI Bill to provide equity for all service members
- Protect our retirees from TRICARE increases
- Maintain and improve quality of life for our service members and their families
- Ensure the Department of Defense and Homeland Security are funded to support the troops in their mission, secure our borders and enable the continuation of important weapons programs
- Achieve the fullest accounting of all U.S. military personnel who are missing from our nation's wars
- End homelessness for all veterans by working in partnership with communities and others to provide effective housing, care and services

We encourage all of our members, and ask you to encourage all of your fellow members to become educated on these issues. You have a large influence in Washington, and you should be willing to use it. Understanding the issues and knowing what's going on is the first step.

To help you and your fellow members take that first step, we send out the VFW Washington Weekly e-mail newsletter. Each edition lets you know what we are doing in Washington, what Congress is doing, and different ways you can get involved to ensure that Congress hears the VFW's voice. It is essential that you encourage all your members to subscribe to receive this vital information. The more people we have, the more powerful our influence will be!

To subscribe, visit the VFW in DC section at [www.vfw.org](http://www.vfw.org). For more information on how you and the members of your post can get involved, see the Action Corps section to follow.

# National Veterans Service

## *Philosophy*

The founding principle of the VFW is to ensure the provision of needed services to veterans by a grateful nation. For more than a century our organization has worked tirelessly to guarantee veterans are provided all the health care and entitlements they have earned through their service and sacrifice in defense of our nation in a prompt and compassionate manner by the Department of Veterans Affairs and other federal departments and agencies.

The contents of this section are organized as follows:

### ***VA Health Care***

- A. VA Medical Facility Surveys
- B. Meetings Concerning VA Health Care

### ***VA Benefits Delivery***

- A. VFW Department Service Officers
- B. VFW "Guide for Service Officers"
- C. VFW Benefits Delivery at Discharge Program
- D. VFW Training and Quality Assurance

### ***Post Service Officers***

### ***VAVS & Community Volunteer Programs***

- A. Department of Veterans Affairs Voluntary Service Program (VAVS)
- B. VFW Community Health Care Volunteer Program

### ***National Homeless Veterans Program***

## ***VA Health Care***

**A. VA Medical Facility Surveys:** National Veterans Service staff may survey Department of Veterans Affairs medical facilities in your state or area. We will schedule a survey at your request or when we receive information that warrants further investigation. We notify the Department Commander and other Department officers prior to our arrival and request comments regarding the quality of care or appropriateness of the level of service in those facilities serving his/her membership. Ensuring quality, accessible, timely health care to veterans by VA is our joint responsibility.

**B. Meetings Concerning VA Health Care:** You may have the opportunity to attend high-level briefings or meetings with VA network or hospital directors and their staff during your year as Commander. We are available to help. At your request, NVS staff are prepared to brief you over the telephone about VA health care issues. We can also prepare a list of customized questions for you if you know what topics will be discussed. Questions pertaining to the VFW

position on VA health care issues should be addressed to Michael O'Rourke, Assistant Director, Veterans Health Policy, at (202) 608-8346 or via e-mail at [morourke@vfw.org](mailto:morourke@vfw.org).

### ***Department of Veterans Affairs Benefits Delivery***

The VFW is dedicated to assisting veterans, their dependents and survivors at the community and national level to ensure that our nation never forgets the sacrifices made by its citizen soldiers. The VFW has played a major role in every legislative measure to establish veterans' benefits which have been enacted into law. However, the most tangible way in which we demonstrate this commitment to service is through the daily efforts of your Department Service Officers (DSO).

**A. Department Service Officers:** A VFW DSO is located in every VA regional office and many VA medical centers. These dedicated individuals are VFW-certified and VA-accredited to assure veterans and their families of professional representation in the submission of VA claims and entitlements. These highly trained individuals stand ready and willing to provide whatever assistance is required. Those who serve in leadership positions are encouraged to meet with their Department Service Officer as a demonstration of interest and support. Get to know what the DSO does for you. More importantly, get to know what can be done for others. The National Veterans Service provides support through a comprehensive training program and a modern information communication system that enables the DSOs to provide world-class assistance and representation to those who place their trust in them.

Department Service Officers and their staff will assist any veteran (other than those who are dishonorably discharged) who seeks help regardless of whether they are members of the VFW. Consequently, DSOs are often the first contact veterans have with the VFW. Accordingly, DSOs should be one of the Department's top recruiters. They have access to a veteran's records that indicate if the veteran is eligible for membership. Once a DSO has provided a veteran with assistance in applying for VA benefits and entitlements, he/she should be encouraged to ask the veteran to join and provide him/her with the benefits of membership with the VFW.

(Actively soliciting VFW membership in a VA building is not permitted. However, we will work with your DSO to provide acceptable methods for obtaining memberships.)

Commanders are also encouraged to motivate DSOs to do outreach as an important part of their program. It is imperative that Service Officers visit their local Guard and Reserve units to ensure that they are aware of the benefits and services to which they are entitled. This work can also enhance the Department Service Officer's recruiting efforts.

The DSO is further supported by a National Veterans Service (NVS) staff of seven Appeals Consultants who represent individual veterans and other claimants who appeal VA decisions to the VA Board of Veterans Appeals (BVA) in Washington, DC.

**B. VFW "Guide for Service Officers":** Every VFW member involved in service work, at all levels from Post through Department, should have available the latest edition of the VFW "Guide for Service Officers". This handbook, published biennially by your VFW Washington Office with our motto "Honor the Dead by Helping the Living" prominently displayed on its cover, comprehensively reviews veteran's benefits and entitlement programs provided by the

Department of Veterans Affairs and other federal agencies. It is a handy ready reference useful in assisting and informing veterans of their entitlements under existing law. Questions pertaining to VA benefits should be directed to Jim Wear, Assistant Director, Veterans Benefits Policy, National Veterans Service, at (202) 608-8366 or via e-mail at [jwear@vfw.org](mailto:jwear@vfw.org).

**C. VFW Benefits Delivery at Discharge (BDD):** The VFW, along with the Departments of Defense and Veterans Affairs, participates in a Transition Assistance Program (TAP) which is designed to ensure that separating and retiring military personnel (including deactivating National Guard and Reserve Personnel) and their families receive necessary assistance in qualifying/obtaining VA benefits, VA health care, and VFW membership information. It is our objective to offer personal counseling and assistance to servicemembers so that claims submitted are complete and that physical evaluation examinations are adequate for VA rating purposes prior to separation from active duty. We continue to update the skills of our National Pre-Discharge Claims Representatives which includes giving special attention to symptoms/residuals of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Traumatic Brain Injuries (TBI) suffered by returning troops. Our presence on military installations continues to be well received as witnessed by the numerous acknowledgments regarding the quality and professional assistance we offer. As a result, we have become the service organization of choice by officers and enlisted at the military facilities we cover. It is our inherent goal to increase interest in membership by demonstrating excellence in service work. Currently, we have 14 National Pre-Discharge Representatives located at:

Camp Lejeune, NC	Fort Bragg, NC
Fort Hood, TX	Camp Pendleton, CA
San Diego, CA (Naval Installations)	Military District of Washington, DC (2)
Las Vegas, NV	(Quantico, Andrews, Ft. Belvoir)
San Juan, Puerto Rico (Ft. Buchanan)	Fort Campbell, KY
Salt Lake City, Utah	Winston-Salem, NC
Bethesda Naval Medical Center	Fort Stewart, GA

Questions regarding our participation in the BDD program should be directed to Larry Berman, Assistant Director, Field Operations, at (407) 835-5630 or via e-mail at [Lawrence.berman1@va.gov](mailto:Lawrence.berman1@va.gov).

**D. VFW Training and Quality Assurance:** A separate division has been created in the National Veterans Service for the express purpose of expanding our training initiatives and assessing the true quality and level of skill of VFW accredited service officers. This division is responsible for the design and delivery of all training to VFW-accredited representatives. This division has also accepted a greater role in quality assurance by interacting with your Department Service Office staff and offering advice on the more complicated claims issues. The division will periodically review the quality of the VA regional office decisions and our level of advocacy. A system has been put in place to evaluate and validate the skill level and quality of advocacy for VFW accredited service officers. Testing is a vital element in that system. Our commitment to professionalism and quality has produced a higher standard of quality in the everyday work of your service offices. Questions regarding NVS training and quality assurance should be directed to Rick Hirst, Manager, Training/Quality Assurance at (202) 608-8368 or via e-mail at [rhirst@vfw.org](mailto:rhirst@vfw.org).

## ***Post Service Officers***

VA is making extensive outreach efforts to veterans. Indeed, veterans can now file a claim for disability compensation directly from their home through the Internet. As a result, it is not unusual for veterans to visit local VFW posts with applications for veterans' benefits, asking for advice from anyone at the post. That "anyone", of course, should be the Post Service Officer (PSO).

The Post Service Officer is integral to our mission of veterans' representation. Indicative of this is the mandate in the National Veterans Service *Policy and Procedure* that Department Service Officers must provide a training session for the PSOs in the Department at least once annually. The "Guide for Service Officers" is focused toward educating and providing a handy reference for the Post Service Officer. Additionally, PSOs should always make a report at every official Post meeting.

Post Service Officers should be familiar with the basics of the compensation (for service connected disabilities) and pension (for non-service connected disabilities) program. They should be able to help a veteran complete an application for either benefit and should immediately forward the application to the DSO at the regional office of jurisdiction. If the application is taken after the 21<sup>st</sup> of the month, the PSO should telephone the DSO for instruction. This is necessary because a claim received after the first of the month may result in the loss of one month of benefits.

## ***VA Voluntary Service (VAVS) and Community Health Care Volunteer Programs***

The VFW conducts a multifaceted volunteer program which includes the Department of Veterans Affairs VAVS Program and our Community Health Care Volunteer Program. Our members provide over a million hours of service each year to our nation's veterans in federal, state and community hospitals and nursing homes.

**A. Department of Veterans Affairs Voluntary Service Program (VAVS):** The VAVS program is locally managed by the VFW VAVS Representative who is appointed by the Department Commander for each VA health care facility in your state. They are the cornerstone of our organization's efforts to serve our nation's hospitalized veterans.

Recognition for volunteers is in the form of certificates and/or lapel pins presented to volunteers who have completed the number of hours prescribed for such awards (see the VFW Volunteer Program manual for further details). VFW members who desire to volunteer at a VA health care facility should contact the VFW Representative or Volunteer Service Program Manager at the VA health care facility of their choice. We urge Department Commanders and their leadership team to encourage their members to recruit new volunteers.

A volunteer can be nominated for the VAVS National Advisory Committee (NAC) Volunteer of the Year Award. This award recognizes volunteers who have given extraordinary service to our nation's veterans. Two award recipients, one male and one female, are selected each year by the Executive Committee of the VA Voluntary Service National Advisory Committee.

**B. VFW Community Health Care Volunteer Program:** This program was designed to provide recognition and awards to VFW members who volunteer their time at state, military, or community-based medical care facilities but are not on official VAVS assignments.

The local coordinator of this program, the Post Hospital Chairman, is responsible for the recruitment and placement of volunteers, maintaining records of hours served by each post volunteer and requesting awards from the Director, NVS, through the State Hospital Chairman. This program should not be confused with the VAVS volunteer program. For more information pertaining to awards, see your VFW Volunteer Program manual.

Questions pertaining to VAVS and Volunteer Programs should be directed to Michael O'Rourke, Assistant Director, Veterans Health Policy, National Veterans Service, at (202) 608-8346 or via e-mail at [morourke@vfw.org](mailto:morourke@vfw.org).

### ***National Homeless Veterans Program***

The VFW Homeless Veterans Program focuses on how best to assist homeless veterans break their cycle of homelessness by utilizing joint efforts with various federal and state agencies and other organizations who share the mutual goal of ensuring that those homeless veterans who seek help are given the means to reintegrate themselves into mainstream society. Our intent is to provide information to assist homeless veterans in their community. Programs vary from state to state; therefore, you should work closely with your District and Department Homeless Veterans Chairmen.

The VFW should support the homeless veteran service providers in local communities and become active advocates to make sure veterans receive an appropriate share of the resources available to address and prevent homelessness.

We urge our members to support emergency shelters by donating personal care items, clothing, food, and cash contributions. We encourage them to help homeless veterans locate transitional housing, acquire basic life and social skills, obtain mental health or substance abuse counseling, employment training and placement.

We encourage our members to volunteer at VA stand down programs. These are 1 to 3-day events that give homeless veterans a secure, community-like retreat to receive healthcare and personal hygiene services, food, clothing, housing and employment referrals, and VA benefits counseling all in one location.

To find the date and location of a VA-supported homeless veterans stand down, contact your local VA medical center homeless veterans coordinator or on the VA website at <http://www1.va.gov/homeless/index.asp>. Additional information on stand downs can be found through the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans website at [www.NCHV.org/standdown.cfm](http://www.NCHV.org/standdown.cfm).

# VFW Action Corps

Action Corps is the grassroots-lobbying network of the VFW. Our members are encouraged to contact their legislators on a wide variety of VFW-supported issues, working hand-in-hand with National Legislative Service.

Former Speaker of the House Tip O'Neill said, "All Politics is Local." Your legislators truly care about what you think. They depend upon us for support and votes. It is up to us to educate our legislators so they know what we believe in and what we expect from them.

## What Can We Do For You?

- Action Corps Members receive frequent legislative updates and calls-to-action on key issues needing immediate action via the email system (see **To Get Involved**)
- We assist you, as a VFW Leader, by providing materials to help educate your members as to what the important issues are and how to play a larger, more active role in the political process.
- We provide information and resources on how to effectively communicate the VFW's message to those in Congress.

## How You Can Help Us

- Stay Informed. Know the Issues.
- Be an Instructor to your members. Let all your members know about the issues and Action Corps.
- Be an Educator to your Legislators. Let Congress know what our Priority Issues are and what we want them to do.
- Encourage others to help. Our strength is in the large number of members we have. If we could get every one of our members to email, write or call their legislators, we would be an unstoppable force.

## To Get Involved:

Sign up to receive our Washington Weekly email newsletter by clicking on the VFW in DC section at [www.vfw.org](http://www.vfw.org). You also will be able to directly email your legislators from this site by signing up with your home address - this automatically connects you to your legislators. Please be reminded that the majority of information- Action Alerts, email updates and other breaking news - are sent through email. The speed, with which legislation now moves, requires the kind of instant action that only email can provide.

## What's the Best Way To Communicate With Your Legislators?

- **Personal Visits**- These are the most effective way of communicating our message. Legislators make frequent visits to their district offices. Call their local office and ask for an appointment. When meeting, be organized and concise. Feel free to leave a fact sheet for their future reference.
- **Telephone Calls**- A short phone call—especially to the local district office—gives a clear indication of what our members think. Ask to speak to the person who handles veterans issues and let them know what issue you are calling on, how you feel about it and how it would affect you personally. Five minutes of your time can lead to big results down the road. You can find phone numbers in your local phone book or via the internet.
- **E-Mail Messages**- by using our advocacy site you can send letters and other information directly to your legislators with just a click of the mouse from your computer. We provide sample letters that you can customize and

personalize and because you are sending from our website, the information sent to the congressional offices identifies you as a constituent – critical in today’s high tech world of spam and viruses.

- **Personal Letters-** A brief, clearly organized letter that focuses on one issue and why it’s important to you lets them know how their constituents feel. Always be polite. Be sure to specifically ask for a reply in your letter.

**When Writing Your Representatives Use This Form:**

The Honorable Joe Smith  
United States House of Representatives (or Senate)  
Washington, DC 20515 (or 20510)

Dear Congressman Smith: (or Dear Senator Smith:)

**Working With Congressional Staff**

When you contact a legislator’s office, you will most frequently be working with their staff. Convincing the staff of our arguments is often as, if not more, important as convincing your legislators themselves. Working and developing a personal relationship with the staff member is the key to accomplishing great things in Washington.

**We’re Here To Help**

As always, we’re happy to help you with whatever you need. If you have questions, need information, or need any assistance, just contact us. We’ll help you in any way we can.