Our Pillars,
Your Platform

2016 Election Issues that Matter Most to the Nation’s Largest Organization of Wartime Veterans

An American Legion Special Report
Preamble

to The American Legion Constitution

FOR GOD AND COUNTRY WE ASSOCIATE OURSELVES TOGETHER FOR THE FOLLOWING PURPOSES:

To uphold and defend the Constitution of the United States of America;

To maintain law and order;

To foster and perpetuate a one hundred percent Americanism;

To preserve the memories and incidents of our associations in the Great Wars;

To inculcate a sense of individual obligation to the community, state and nation;

To combat the autocracy of both the classes and the masses;

To make right the master of might;

To promote peace and goodwill on earth;

To safeguard and transmit to posterity the principles of justice, freedom and democracy;

To consecrate and sanctify our comradeship by our devotion to mutual helpfulness.
A Message From The Legion

The 2016 presidential and congressional elections come at a critical time for the United States, veterans, servicemembers, young people and patriotic Americans. Many issues facing voters directly relate to defense, veterans health care, illegal immigration, the U.S. flag and other vital concerns of The American Legion.

Amid the Islamic State's reign of terror, which has been linked to individual attacks on our soil, national security has risen to the top of the Legion's priority list. The United States must be properly equipped, resourced and prepared to defend our nation's borders in the war against terrorism.

Porous borders present real threats to U.S. national security, and illegal immigration cannot be rewarded with amnesty for those who entered our nation illegally. Furthermore, the population of undocumented migrant workers strips job opportunities from veterans trying to restart their lives after wartime service.

As the nation's largest organization of U.S. military veterans, The American Legion stands strong to support those who are making the adjustment to civilian life. Of course, that means timely, efficient and top-quality health care and fast, accurate adjudication of benefits claims.

“Signature wounds” in the war on terrorism include post-traumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injury and amputated limbs. These conditions require advanced technology and care, as well as research funding to improve treatment programs that will assist afflicted veterans for the rest of their lives. The increasing percentage of women who have proudly served our nation demands an equally increasing ability to provide gender-specific health care, to include appropriate screenings and treatments for Military Sexual Trauma.

A growing number of veterans – 15 percent more than a decade ago – must travel hundreds of miles from their homes in rural communities to see VA doctors. The American Legion urges the new president and Congress to pursue effective strategies to improve the delivery of care for veterans in rural areas.

Veterans need jobs, business opportunities, and education pathways that adequately reward their military service and sacrifice with satisfying civilian opportunities. Today, the Legion vows to continue working with Congress and the White House to help veterans earn college degrees and begin rewarding careers.

The American Legion believes in the flag and everything it symbolizes. All 50 states and 80 percent of Americans agree. A constitutional amendment must be passed giving Congress the power to protect the flag from desecration.

The American Legion was founded nearly a century ago to fulfill four key pillars of service: Veterans Affairs & Rehabilitation, National Security, Americanism and Youth.

This report aims to inform candidates and others wishing to learn about the Legion's positions on key issues. These positions are guided by nearly 100 years of advocacy and resolutions written by our members through their local American Legion posts, representing veterans in every congressional district. The American Legion lobbies with principles, not pocketbooks, to improve our nation and uphold the values veterans swore with their lives to defend and protect.

For God and Country,
Pillar 1
Veterans Affairs & Rehabilitation

The American Legion is the nation’s largest and most influential veterans service organization, recognized as the leading voice to help those who have served in uniform receive proper health care and disability benefits they earned through military service.

Adequate health care for veterans has been a core purpose of The American Legion since the end of World War I. In 1930, the Legion was instrumental in creating the Veterans Administration and strongly supported its rise to Cabinet status when it became the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) in 1989. The American Legion worked tirelessly in the 1990s to improve care quality for veterans and to support the VA health-care system as we know it today. As quality improved in the 1990s, and eligibility for care expanded, timely access soon became an issue. Today, The American Legion and VA work together to find the right balance of quality care and reasonable access to it.

The American Legion’s Veterans Affairs & Rehabilitation program also includes expert advocacy in the areas of health care, disability claims and other benefits as performed nationwide by more than 3,000 accredited service officers. American Legion policy on health care and benefits is largely shaped by that firsthand understanding of the process and its challenges.

Top health-care priorities of the Veterans Affairs & Rehabilitation pillar

- An efficient, properly funded VA health-care system that puts veterans first and delivers high-quality services in a timely and efficient manner
- Adequate funding for the Veterans Health Administration (VHA)
- Electronic medical records that connect DoD and VA
- Support and research dollars targeting alternative forms of treatment for veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and traumatic brain injuries (TBI)
- Reasonable access to care, no matter where a veteran lives or how overcrowded the nearest VA facility might be
- Timely and accurate benefits decisions that do not simply shift a backlog of undecided claims into a backlog of appealed decisions or remanded applications
- Effective transition assistance for military personnel.
Protect VA from budget reductions

The Obama administration has vowed to protect all programs administered by VA, including medical care, from the effects of sequestration. The American Legion is concerned that any shift in that policy could jeopardize VA’s budget and diminish health-care services for veterans. Even the slightest reduction in VA’s budget can adversely affect the care that our veterans earned through their pledge to serve our country. Hundreds of thousands of our men and women who served in Iraq and Afghanistan are now relying on VA for their health care, as are older veterans. The new administration and Congress must make sure VA’s entire budget is protected as demand for care increases and grows more complex.

In recent years, The American Legion has worked closely with VA to reduce the claims backlog. In March 2013, the backlog reached its peak of 611,073. It has since declined to approximately 75,000, as of June 2016. While this represents progress, the downside is that VA significantly emphasized original claims and lost traction on resolving appeals. As a result, some veterans have been waiting years for decisions on their appeals. The American Legion implores the next administration to clear the backlog of original claims and provide appropriate funding to ensure that an effective modernization program is applied at all stages of the VA appellate process.

While VA provides many veterans with world-class, modern medical facilities, some VA clinics are in dire need of upgrades or repairs. At the same time, the federal government has neglected to properly fund VA construction projects in recent years. Right now, VA facilities are experiencing high patient demand. By funding necessary VA construction projects and upgrades, the next administration will save taxpayer money because VA will have to allocate fewer dollars on contracted care.

The American Legion wants to ensure our elected officials are as committed to preserving the infrastructure at VA as they are to ensuring our nation’s veterans have access to quality medicine and service.

Speed up delivery of electronic health records

The American Legion urges the incoming administration and Congress to fast-track implementation of the Integrated Electronic Health Record (iEHR), currently scheduled for completion by 2017. Failure to introduce and use the iEHR has caused significant delays for veterans in transition because VA treatment teams do not have full access to Department of Defense (DoD) health records. One of the longstanding challenges veterans have faced is a lack of communication between DoD and VA. For nearly a decade, the goal of establishing a virtual lifetime electronic record – a single, seamless, interoperable record spanning from induction physical to VA care – has been elusive. In April 2009, President Obama directed VA and DoD to develop such a record, the Virtual Lifetime Electronic Record (VLER). The American Legion endorses the implementation of such a record to be a top priority for both agencies.

Unfortunately, for years, despite billions of dollars in research and spending, neither side appeared closer to developing a single, seamless record. VA and DoD each sought to produce
Pillar 1 Veterans Affairs & Rehabilitation

its own in-house record, with the new goal of compatibility replacing the previous aim of a single system. In the interim, each agency has been utilizing a Joint Legacy Viewer (JLV), with mixed success. Despite some progress with the JLV, particularly in accessing VA medical records, in many locations it is difficult to access military records. Overall, the goal of available electronic military records is not being met.

While tremendous progress has been made with VA’s VistA Evolution, the new generation of medical records software widely lauded throughout the health-care industry, it is not enough to develop a useful platform on just one side. Interoperability of the records is critical. Veterans’ disability claims rely on the ability to prove events or injuries occurred during active-duty service, and this is difficult when records are not easily accessible. One of the longest components of the waiting time in the backlog of veterans benefits is the time spent waiting for access to military records.

A single electronic record could standardize important elements of the disability claims process. Future functionality could go beyond simple transmission of records and include elements that would significantly improve the claims process. For example, injuries and exposures to toxins could be flagged electronically in a servicemember’s record. That would trigger health screenings and inferred claims for disability benefits. It could also anticipate health problems and identify veterans in need of additional care or benefits.

DoD and VA have made little progress before continued funding for these projects was tied to benchmarks and gateway markers by Congress. This kind of budgetary encouragement has been critical to continued progress toward the goal.

Further expansion should extend beyond DoD, the Veterans Benefits Administration and the Veterans Health Administration to include the National Cemetery Administration, the Indian Health Service, the Social Security Administration, the Department of Labor, and other agencies that fulfill benefit responsibilities for veterans. Additionally, National Guard records at the state level must be included in this seamless communication plan. The American Legion calls for creating such a successful implementation of these records and that it becomes the standard by which other governmental communication is judged.

Address unique health-care needs of today’s veterans

America’s veterans have unique health-care needs that must be addressed in a veteran-oriented health-care system. The American Legion routinely advises Congress and the White House on issues concerning the health-care needs of veterans, active-duty and reserve personnel. The Legion has first-hand knowledge of the issues facing the veteran community, based on hundreds of thousands of hours spent evaluating veteran programs, medical services, administrative functions and facilities, along with working on behalf of veterans with health needs every day.

The Legion works every day in Washington and lobbies aggressively on many veteran health-care issues and to procure funding for research to help alleviate service-connected injuries and illnesses.

The Legion offers the following list of concerns for Congress and the new administration to address:
PTSD: Post-traumatic stress disorder is the signature wound of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. It affects entire families, often for decades, and no single treatment program works perfectly for all who suffer with it.

TBI: Traumatic brain injury, in addition to PTSD, is a common ailment from the post-9/11 battlefield, due to the high number of injuries caused by improvised explosive devices.

Suicide: Veteran suicide has grown into what is now commonly perceived as a national epidemic. PTSD and TBI are often contributing factors.

Opioid addiction: Pain, brought on by years of military training and service, is faced by nearly all veterans. Troops who survive with devastating injuries such as limb amputations, burns and traumatic brain injuries require advanced, coordinated treatment. VA pain-management teams often use drugs to ease the pain of their patients. However, the proper balance of opioids – enough to bring relief but not too much to create addiction – is vital to the lives of veterans.

Alternative PTSD treatments: VA, along with public and private health-care professionals, must accelerate research and development of alternative treatments for those suffering from PTSD and TBI. The Food and Drug Administration must review and approve treatments that are proven to be most effective and safe for veterans.

Medical marijuana research: Some believe that medical marijuana can be used as a treatment for certain PTSD patients. The American Legion is currently researching whether to support legislation that seeks to reclassify cannabis in the Drug Enforcement Agency’s schedule of controlled substances, so that clinicians and researchers can study the plant and how derivatives and isolated chemical compounds found in the cannabis plant can be used in controlled medical settings.

PTSD, TBI, veteran suicide, opioid usage, and even medical marijuana, are certainly not the only health issues facing America’s veteran population.

The American Legion, along with its 2.2 million members, encourages Congress and the president to work together and look deeper into issues that can assist servicemembers and veterans with their health-care needs, so that they can lead fuller and healthier lives.

15% Increase in the number of veterans living in rural areas since 2006, according to the Veterans Health Administration

Ensure quality care for veterans in rural areas

Since the inception of The American Legion’s System Worth Saving Task Force in 2003, the Legion has tracked and reported on staffing shortages at every VA medical facility it has visited across the country. There are approximately 22 million veterans living in the United States, and 30 percent of them reside in rural or highly rural areas of the country (as defined by the U.S. Census). Rural veterans make up a disproportionate number of veterans enrolled in VA to receive health care.

Veterans from rural areas of the country also comprise about 30 percent of our nation’s newest veterans: those who have served in Iraq and Afghanistan. The largest rural veteran enrollee populations are from the South and the upper Midwest.

Rural veterans are, on average, older than their urban counterparts. Almost half of rural veterans are between the ages of 55 and 74, and approximately 26 percent are over the age of 85.
Pillar 1 Veterans Affairs & Rehabilitation

75. While women make up a relatively small number of enrolled rural veterans (nearly 200,000 rural women veterans are enrolled in VA), their numbers have increased 31 percent since 2006. The American Legion is calling on the new president and Congress to:

- Create a VA recruitment and retention strategy that incentivizes medical providers to practice in rural communities.
- Improve staffing ensuring Community Based Outreach Clinics meet the needs of the community and communicate directly with the local medical center’s Rural Health Consultants.
- Expand VA Vet Centers to rural areas so veterans suffering from PTSD can receive help more efficiently.

- A clear and concise explanation of the IDES program is provided to the servicemember and immediate family upon consideration of a medical evaluation board.
- The Physical Evaluation Board Liaison adheres to the scope of responsibilities.
- Caregivers of seriously ill or injured servicemembers/veterans are provided single points of contact for any assistance regarding the patient’s health and welfare.

Stop denying VA health care

Veterans with certain demographic characteristics are now denied VA health care. The continued budget-driven suspension of Priority Group 8 veterans from new enrollment in the VA health-care system defies the spirit and intention of the Veterans Health Care Eligibility Reform Act of 1996. The Legion believes that any eligible veteran should be able to enroll in the VA health-care system.

Expand veterans treatment courts

Today, there are more than 90 veterans treatment courts in the U.S., with more being added. The Legion urges Congress to continue to fund the establishment and expansion of these courts. VA representatives would be working alongside more than 3,000 American Legion service officers to help veterans gain access to health care and file for their benefits.

Increase funding for National Cemetery Administration

The National Cemetery Administration consists of 134 final resting places. NCA has a plan to address the decreasing space available at current cemeteries and also intends to expand into new locations, so that families will not have to drive more than 75 miles to visit their loved ones. The American Legion urges Congress to fully fund NCA for major and minor construction at the national and state levels.

Reduce delays in Integrated Disability Evaluation System

The American Legion has a Medical Evaluation Board/Physical Evaluation Board (MEB/PEB) coordinator on staff, responsible for assisting servicemembers at the Military District of Washington, D.C. The Legion also has a MEB/PEB representative at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, in the state of Washington, who is supervised by the MEB/PEB coordinator.

The Legion recommends:

- DoD adhere to VA ratings, rather than use them only as guidelines.
- The program is implemented uniformly across services and geographic regions.

Photo by Timothy L. Hale

200 Average number of days it takes to process a servicemember through the IDES program.
Members of the U.S. Armed Forces delay career advancements and college educations to serve our country. Often, those same men and women return to civilian life as veterans with physical disabilities or personal problems and face daunting transitions into the workforce or higher education. In 2016, for example, more than 400,000 U.S. military veterans were unemployed, and many encountered great difficulties finding employment that matched their skills, training, experience and financial needs as they became civilians once again.

The American Legion works relentlessly on behalf of transitioning servicemembers, helping them find rewarding employment, launch their own businesses and advance their educations. The Legion participates in hundreds of career fairs with the U.S. Chamber of Commerce’s Hiring our Heroes program and other events across the country.

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The Legion’s Small Business Task Force is engaged with the veterans hiring community, and staff members work with agencies such as U.S. VETS connecting homeless veterans with skills training and job placements.

At the same time, The American Legion understands the private sector must be engaged, educated and encouraged to improve their hiring practices.

The federal government must also continue to push its veterans-hiring initiative to achieve meaningful results at all levels. In addition, the executive branch must direct effective improvements in hiring practices at all federal agencies. The legislative branch must continue its efforts to improve laws that significantly affect veteran employment while providing adequate funding for employment programs and services that assist veterans and their families.

Top economic and education priorities of the Veterans Affairs & Rehabilitation pillar:

- Rewarding career opportunities, including full compliance with Veterans Preference Hiring provisions, laws mandating that some federal contracts be awarded to businesses owned by service-disabled veterans, acceptance of military training and experience for licenses and credentials in specialized fields, and access to GI Bill funds for small-business capitalization.

- Full funding of the SBA Office of Veterans Business Development’s programs, such as Boots 2 Business and Veterans Business Outreach Centers.

- Congress should assess the performance of federal agencies in achieving the mandate to make no less than 3 percent of federal contracts available to service-disabled veteran-owned businesses.

- The allocation of funding and appropriations across government programs, not solely through VA. Agencies such as the Department of Housing and Urban Development and other ancillary services like the Department of Labor’s Veterans Employment and Training Services require proper funding to address the needs of homeless veterans.

- The continuation of Work Opportunity Tax Credits for employers under the VOW Act of 2011, which has provided incentives for bringing veterans into the civilian workforce.
Adequately fund and support Labor’s VETS program

The Department of Labor’s VETS program offers employment and training services to eligible veterans through its Jobs for Veterans state grants program. The mission of VETS is to promote the economic security of America’s veterans. The Legion is eager to see this program grow, and would like to see greater expansion of entrepreneurial, self-employment opportunity training. Such services will continue to be crucial as today’s generation of veterans transitions into the civilian workforce. Adequate funding will allow the programs to increase staffing to provide comprehensive case-management job assistance to disabled and other eligible veterans. The American Legion believes that for the VETS program to assist veterans in achieving their goals, it needs to:

- Implement recent reforms to the Transition Assistance Program (TAP), so that veterans can be better informed on education, employment and business opportunities as they transition into the civilian workforce.
- Expand outreach efforts with creative initiatives designed to improve employment and training services for veterans.
- Provide information on identifying military occupations that provide qualifying training for required licenses, certificates or other credentials at the local, state or national levels.

Deliver the promises of the GI Bill to today’s veterans

Since the Post-9/11 GI Bill went into effect in August 2009, there has been dramatic growth in the number of beneficiaries and benefits payments at post-secondary institutions. VA supports more than 800,000 students through its education benefits programs, and the Department of Defense assisted nearly 400,000 through its Tuition Assistance Program. Lawmakers should recognize the need to educate prospective student-veterans and their families about what to look for when choosing a college or university. Policymakers should also review and re-address the creation of relevant and useful data collection points in
the federal Higher Education Opportunity Act when the law is reviewed for reauthorization. The GI Bill is an important investment which, if squandered due to unscrupulous practices on the part of some institutions, could leave servicemembers, veterans and their families with diminished hopes of obtaining gainful employment once they leave the military.

The American Legion is seeking:

■ Expansion, enhancement, and better integration of Transition Assistance Program services from DoD, introduced far in advance of discharge to better prepare personnel for the shift to civilian life.

■ A true commitment to better performance across the government, with clear data to back it up, of Veterans Preference Hiring Act compliance throughout the whole federal workforce.

Helping homeless veterans get off the street and into jobs, homes

Positive steps have been taken toward the reduction of veteran homelessness. The Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Point-In-Time count of homelessness in America, conducted in January 2015, showed about 47,000 homeless veterans across the country. That’s a substantial drop from the nearly 75,000 homeless veterans in 2010.

Through daily work with homeless veterans and their families, The American Legion understands the need for continued, and most importantly, sustained efforts to provide secure housing and nutritious meals, essential physical and mental health care, and substance abuse counseling, as well as personal development and empowerment. Veterans also need job assessment, training and placement assistance.

The American Legion is seeking:

■ Continued support for critical housing programs such as the HUD-VASH voucher program and the Grant and Per Diem (GPD) transitional housing program.

Expand GI Bill to help launch small businesses

The American Legion views small business as the backbone of the American economy. Among The American Legion’s greatest achievements is passage of the GI Bill in 1944, which paved the way for World War II veterans – and future generations – to have greater access to college educations, low-cost mortgages and low-interest loans to launch small businesses.
Modern upgrades of the original legislation, including the Post-9/11 GI Bill, have helped more recent generations of veterans fulfill their own visions of the American Dream. For many of those veterans, that dream includes starting and running their own businesses.

The American Legion wants this legacy of successful veterans to continue. That is why the Legion strongly supports legislation to expand the availability of GI Bill benefits to help veterans with access to small-business capital.

Additionally, the Legion urges Congress to:

- Establish a direct lending program through the Small Business Administration (SBA). This effort would offer low-interest loans to otherwise healthy veteran-owned and service-disabled veteran-owned businesses that are having trouble obtaining the credit they need for necessary operating expenses or expansion.

- Approve legislation to require a 5 percent goal, with set asides and sole-source authority for federal procurements and contracts for businesses owned and operated by service-disabled veterans and businesses owned by veterans. This includes small businesses owned by reservists and National Guard members who have been or may be called to active duty, or may be affected by base closings and other military reductions.

- Embrace and promote development of stronger policy and legislative language that champions the use of veteran-owned small business joint-venturing as a ready solution to the small business spending requirements of the stimulus spending initiative.

- Hold the leadership of federal agencies responsible for meeting the congressionally mandated goal of assigning annually 3 percent of federal contracting dollars to SDVOSBs.

- Thoroughly fund the three-year Veterans Entrepreneurial Transition Act of 2015 that allows veterans to use their GI Bill education benefits as a grant toward start-up costs.

Ensure military members receive credentialing credits

The American Legion led the way at the national, state and local levels to ensure veterans are getting proper credentials for critical job skills they learned in the military. If a veteran drives a truck in a convoy in Afghanistan, he or she should be recognized as a commercial driver back home; similarly, if a veteran has served as a combat medic it should be easier to receive the proper credentials to work as an emergency medical technician as a civilian. When civilian credentialing boards fail to fully recognize the military education, training and experience, veterans face reduced chances obtaining jobs that match their skill sets, and the civilian workforce cannot take full advantage of the extensive training in which our nation has so greatly invested.

The American Legion:

- Encourages Congress to eliminate the requirement that Post-9/11 GI Bill recipients use an entire month’s worth of entitlement for a certification or licensing test fee – even when the fee amounts to far less than the full month’s entitlement.

- Recommends that VA’s credential program approval process be reviewed by the Government Accountability Office to ensure that the credentials approved meet legislative and other standards for legitimate credentialing programs.
The number of women veterans receiving VA health care has surpassed 337,000, more than doubling since 2000.

That surge and the specific care they need prompted The American Legion to pass Resolution 18 in October 2015, a comprehensive statement to amplify its position that all servicemembers deserve quality health care, including gender-specific care.

Additionally, Resolution 18 called for increased availability of female therapists/female group therapy options to improve treatment options for post-traumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injury and military sexual trauma.

In 2016, The American Legion conducted a women veterans survey to pinpoint major areas of concern. In the meantime, the Legion is encouraging VA to work with the Departments of Defense and Labor to develop a customized women veterans health-care track for the Transition Goals, Plans and Success program.

**The American Legion’s priorities related to health care and services for women veterans**

- Pass legislation to better facilitate the needs of VA to obtain gender-specific care that includes clinicians, mental health care providers and prosthetics
- Ensure that all VA medical facilities employ MST professionals to conduct professional screening and treatment referrals
- Require the employment of VA women veterans coordinators who can provide MST sensitivity training for benefits claims processors
- Direct VA to improve its adjudication process to ensure MST claims are decided uniformly throughout the nation
- Pass legislation permanently extending the VA child-care program for veterans
Support for women veterans struggling with MST

According to VA, one in every five women veterans using the VA health-care system screens positive for military sexual trauma. The American Legion believes that alarming figure is cause for concern and action from multiple government agencies. (It is notable that while women veterans represent the vast majority of MST cases, there are cases involving men, amounting to less than 1 percent.)

MST is defined in U.S. Code as “psychological trauma resulting from a physical assault of a sexual nature, battery of a sexual nature, or sexual harassment which occurred while the veteran was serving on active duty, active duty for training, or inactive duty training.”

The American Legion supports implementation of processes to ensure that all veterans and servicemembers, active duty or VA patients, receive proper and discreet care and assistance when struggling with the effects of military sexual trauma.

There also is concern that some women fear retaliation or even misunderstanding, whether they are DoD or VA patients seeking help with MST. The Legion wants to ensure that they receive proper and discreet care and assistance. The Legion also endorses improved investigation and prosecution of reported cases of MST. Additionally, the Legion calls on the Department of Defense to examine the underreporting of MST and to permanently maintain records of all reported allegations.

The American Legion strongly supports the Military Sexual Assault Victims Empowerment Act/Military SAVE Act, which will improve private treatment of veterans who are victims of military sexual assault.

In defense of women veterans

The American Legion’s Women Veterans Outreach Program was created as a direct result of findings from a March 2011 Women Veterans Survey Report. The results of the survey, along with recent Government Accountability Office reporting – even VA’s own reporting – raised questions about the department’s understanding and treatment of female veterans in the VA health-care system. This led the Legion to increase its efforts to improve VA care for women.

The Women Veterans Outreach Program is moving forward on a number of fronts. Initial efforts have focused on laying the groundwork for a viable and effective program. The Legion’s platform is to educate, collaborate and provide oversight; to educate veterans and the communities that support them; to collaborate with local, state and federal agencies that can provide needed services; and to provide continued oversight of VA’s delivery of benefits and services. Legion advocacy efforts will ensure that the needs of women veterans are being met and, more importantly, that women veterans are informed about issues that can profoundly affect their lives.

Initial program implementation will include the placement of women veteran outreach coordinators at the state level. Many states already have such coordinators and vibrant programs, while others continue to develop their programs. Coordinators will be trained and educated in their responsibilities and given the necessary assistance to get their programs up and running.

As part of this commitment, The American Legion will continue to make a high priority of legislation that will help women veterans receive the health care and treatment they earned through their dedicated service to America.

Top issues facing women veterans

The American Legion’s System Worth Saving Task Force conducted field research on the health care of women veterans in 2013. Among the concerns it discovered:

- Many women veterans do not identify themselves as veterans.
- Many women veterans do not know or sufficiently understand their benefits.
- VA medical facilities do not have adequate baseline plans to close the gender gaps and improve use of facilities and services for women.
- Additional research is needed to determine the purpose, goals and effectiveness of VA women health-care models on overall outreach, communication and coordination of women’s health services.
- Women veterans do not receive timely mammogram results.
- Many VA medical facilities do not offer inpatient/residential mental health programs for women veterans.
Pillar 2
National Security

To the veterans who make up The American Legion's membership, national security is a deeply held value. The 9/11 terrorist attacks exposed America's vulnerabilities and magnified the importance of this value – not only for military veterans, but for all. Fifteen years since the attacks, the United States faces multiple strategic challenges: the Islamic State, Russian aggression, China, North Korea, Iran and counterterrorism. It is notable that three of those nations – Russia, China and North Korea – all possess nuclear weapons.

At the same time, the servicemen and women who volunteer to defend America are feeling the squeeze as they try to take care of themselves and their families. Too many servicemembers and retirees are being put into positions to choose between diminishing options, or being forced to increase their out-of-pocket contributions for benefits provided without such additional costs to those who served before them. Basic benefits such as housing allowances, commissary privileges, post or base exchange benefits, and even basic medical care cost more in increased fees or provide less value through decreased returns. This puts undue strain on military members as they face threats from multiple global enemies.

Top priorities of the National Security pillar

- A military that is properly funded, staffed and equipped to defend our nation against a growing number of global threats, including cyber attacks
- Focusing awareness and surveillance on rogue nations, terrorist groups and global threats to U.S. security around the world
- Supporting the Department of Homeland Security and urging its steadfast protection of U.S. borders, ports and other entry points
- Enabling a decent quality of life for troops and their families – active duty and reserve-component alike – that includes reasonable compensation, benefits, health care, child care and family support programs. The Legion adamantly opposes any degradation of benefits.
- Advancing the goals of U.S. foreign policy through the State Department

Supporting a strong national defense

The American Legion believes an unmatched, fully funded American military is essential for peace and prosperity in the 21st century. America's adversaries should have no doubt about our nation's resolve and capability to respond with overwhelming force to any threat.

However, due to sequestration and scaled-back budgets, U.S. Armed Forces are operating on lean times.

- The U.S. is fielding a smaller Army today – less than 500,000 active-duty troops – less than it was before 9/11, a time of relative peace.
- The Navy is on pace to reach its lowest number of ships since before World War I.
- Today's Air Force is the smallest it has been since 1947, and two years ago announced plans to cut 500 planes, due to sequestration.

Sequestration risks severe and permanent damage to our defense industrial base, which is a reliable provider of wartime needs and a national strategic asset. The American Legion wants the federal government to fully fund
Pillar 2 National Security

a superior national defense and protect U.S. troops from further cuts.

The American Legion wants Congress to:

■ Recognize the security the United States needs in the face of global extremism and the rise of the Islamic State.

■ Work to ensure that sequestration ends, without extension, as planned in fiscal 2018.

Secure the borders against illegal immigrants, terror threats

While the number of illegal immigrants in the United States is down from a 2007 peak of 12.2 million, the number has been relatively stable for the past five years and still represents approximately 11.3 million people. The American Legion encourages the Justice Department and other regulatory agencies to engage in a broad exchange of intelligence and related activities. Federal agencies need modern systems and technology to aggressively track foreign nationals as a deterrent to terrorist and criminal activities. Recent terrorist attacks in Europe have shown the effectiveness that some terror organizations have in hiding terrorists among illegal immigrant populations.

The American Legion is committed to immigration reform that prioritizes and emphasizes border security against those seeking to enter the country illegally, coupled with internal tracking of resident aliens and known illegal immigrants. The American Legion is opposed to the granting of amnesty or legal residency to illegal immigrants currently in the United States.

Foreign relations a key aspect of maintaining peace

The American Legion supports robust federal funding for foreign relations and international affairs, and for the State Department's continuing efforts to seek peaceful and diplomatic resolutions to global conflicts. The American Legion strongly supports the State Department and the function it performs for American citizens overseas. It is the first line of defense in combating myriad security threats outside our borders. Therefore, it is essential to ensure full funding to maintain a credible sense of deterrence to threats to American interests overseas.

The American Legion calls for:

■ Additional staffing of foreign service officers, and to ensure veterans preference hiring policies are implemented and enforced in the expansion of this corps. Qualified and experienced veterans represent a tremendous opportunity to enhance the American diplomatic mission.

■ Increased funding for the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) within the State Department. Such funding is even more critical in nations which are, or may become, hotbeds of recruiting and development for international terrorist organizations. By assisting the citizens of struggling nations today we may prevent those citizens from becoming twisted into weapons against western democracy in the future.
Countering emerging dual threats of China

In the South China Sea, China has begun a program of terraforming - creating artificial islands to alter the borders of international waters and placing military equipment on them. This radically challenges the international waters and sovereignty in the area as determined under the U.N. Convention on the Laws of the Sea. Additionally, it has the potential to destabilize trade routes as well as limit the ability to maintain security of U.S. allies in the region.

At the same time, China is emerging as a threat to wage nontraditional warfare via cyberspace. The American Legion is deeply concerned with this and other emerging threats to online security.

The American Legion is seeking:

- Strengthened regional partners through intelligence gathering and improved surveillance capabilities.
- Better armed allies worldwide able to counter the technical advantages or China or other regional threats, in both quantity and quality.
- Full efforts to defend against the threats of cyberspace warfare, and prosecution of violators to the fullest extent of the law.

A call for full accounting of America’s POW/MIAs

More than 80,000 U.S. servicemembers and civilians remain missing in action or otherwise unaccounted for from America’s wars and conflicts. Reports indicate that in former enemy areas where Americans could still be alive, information has been deliberately and cruelly withheld. The families of prisoners of war (POWs) and those missing in action (MIAs) suffer untold uncertainty due to a lack of accurate accounting for their missing loved ones, often in spite of heroic efforts by U.S. specialists who have worked to identify and rescue those behind enemy lines.

The American Legion remains steadfast in its commitment to the goal of achieving the fullest possible accounting for all U.S. military personnel and designated civilian personnel missing and unaccounted for from all of our nation's wars and conflicts.

The American Legion is seeking:

- Continued declassification of all POW/MIA information (except that revealing intelligence sources or methods) in a form readily available to the affected families and public review.
- Continued priority in addressing the POW/MIA issue.
- Ensuring the “fullest possible accounting” is defined as turning over live prisoners, repatriating remains of those killed in action or who died in captivity, or providing convincing evidence where neither is possible.
Pillar 3
Americanism

The nation’s cultural, moral and patriotic values have been under attack for decades, a disheartening trend that continues today. Prayer has been removed from schools. The U.S. flag is no longer protected from desecration. The Boy Scouts of America have faced legal challenges in communities they serve. Immigration laws are defied. References to God on U.S. currency, in the Pledge of Allegiance and on public monuments have been challenged by a minority of voices whose vision for America is in direct contrast to our founding fathers.

The American Legion is an organization dedicated to God and Country, with a membership of military veterans with wartime service who take deep pride in the U.S. flag. Since its inception nearly 100 years ago, the Legion has been a stalwart champion of patriotic values, morals, culture and citizenship. The Legion’s pillar of Americanism embodies its devotion to law and order, the raising of wholesome youth, an educated and law-abiding citizenship, and respectful observance of patriotic holidays and remembrances.

Top priorities of The American Legion’s Americanism pillar

■ Amending the U.S. Constitution to give Congress the power to protect the U.S. flag from desecration
■ A constitutional amendment to permit voluntary school prayer
■ Waiving the two-year eligibility restriction for immigrant spouses of deceased active U.S. military personal pursuing lawful citizenship
■ Opposing legislation that would allow conscientious objectors to prevent their personal taxes from funding the military
■ The English language being declared the official language of the United States

Protect the U.S. flag from desecration

The American Legion believes that the U.S. Constitution should be amended to add the following: “The Congress shall have power to prohibit the physical desecration of the flag of the United States.”

The Legion joins all of the states and an overwhelming majority of citizens in declaring that the American flag deserves legal protection from acts of public and intentional physical desecration. In 1989, the Supreme Court declared flag desecration to be a right protected by the First Amendment. The Legion
disagreed at the time and now reaffirms its position that flag desecration is a form of conduct – not speech – that can and should be regulated by law.

All 50 state legislatures have petitioned for a constitutional amendment that would give power to Congress to prohibit such conduct. Such an amendment has passed the House of Representatives six times but has fallen short of the two-thirds majority required to pass the Senate. As a symbol of our nation, the U.S. flag belongs to the people, who should be given the power to protect it. The Legion’s position on its protection is inviolate.

Don’t deny the Pledge of Allegiance in schools

Recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance by students and teachers in our nation’s schools should be a regular part of school activities and events. In support of keeping “under God” in the Pledge, The American Legion affirms that pledging allegiance to the U.S. flag is the voluntary offering of a patriotic oath to the nation; no one should be denied this opportunity.

The removal of these words will set a precedent that questions the propriety of numerous
references to a supreme being in historical documents, on currency and on many government buildings, including the U.S. Supreme Court.

**Stop courts from awarding attorney fees in establishment clause lawsuits**

The American Legion is dedicated to combating the secular cleansing of our American heritage performed through lawsuits that attack the Boy Scouts, the public display of the Ten Commandments, and other symbols of America’s religious history. The authority given by Congress to the courts to impose damages, or attorney fees, in establishment-clause cases is being used by legal activists to compel municipalities, state and federal agencies, and private groups to cast off all religious association. Often, these proceedings are based on the pursuit of taxpayer-funded attorney fees. The Legion supports legislation to expressly preclude courts from awarding attorney fees in lawsuits brought to remove or destroy religious symbols.
Pillar 4
Children & Youth

Today’s young people face an array of societal pressures, vastly different than previous generations. Children and youth now face a world often lacking traditional American families, high incidence of illegal drug usage, and TV shows and movies filled with obscenities and indecencies. Children face an alarming increase in bullying, directly linked to the spread of smart phones and social media tools.

The American Legion strongly supports traditional family values, assistance for at-risk children, and activities that promote their healthy and wholesome development. The Legion offers a multitude of programs that address these needs, such as Boys Nation and Boys State, Youth Cadet Law Enforcement, Junior Shooting Sports, Oratorical competition, American Legion Baseball, the Family Support Network, Child Welfare Foundation and Temporary Financial Assistance.

Top priorities of The American Legion’s Children & Youth pillar

- Opposing any attempts to weaken U.S. laws governing production, sale and distribution of pornographic materials
- Supporting legislation to provide financial assistance to families with children who suffer catastrophic illnesses
- Advocating for research and early intervention efforts to prevent intellectual disabilities in children. This includes research on the development and function of the nervous system, fetal treatments and gene therapy to correct abnormalities from defective genes; and early intervention programs with high-risk infants and kids
- Federal legislation to restrict the excessive use of violence, vulgarity and immoral expressions in media such as movies, television programs, video games and the Internet
- Adequate funding for border, state, federal and military drug-trafficking prevention programs to keep illegal substances from reaching our nation’s youth
American Legion National Contacts

Veterans Affairs & Rehabilitation
(202) 263-5759
var@legion.org

Veterans Economic and Employment
(202) 263-5771
ve&e@legion.org

Legislative
(202) 263-5752
leg@legion.org

National Security/Foreign Relations
(202) 263-5765
nsfr@legion.org

Americanism
(317) 630-1203
americanism@legion.org

Children & Youth
(317) 630-1323
c&y@legion.org

The American Legion Magazine
(317) 630-1298
magazine@legion.org
This guide was produced on behalf of the Legion’s 2.2 million members, the wartime veterans of the 20th and 21st centuries, who can be found in nearly 14,000 posts in every community across our great nation.

This is their vision for a strong America.