



THE AMERICAN LEGION
Veterans Strengthening America
NATIONAL HEADQUARTERS

PO BOX 1055, INDIANAPOLIS, IN, 46206-1055 • WWW.LEGION.ORG • P: (317) 630-1350 • F: (317) 630-1223

**Suggested Remarks for
The American Legion
102nd Birthday
March 15-17, 2021**

The American Legion National Headquarters
Media & Communications
P.O. Box 1055
Indianapolis, IN 46206
(317) 630-1298
pr@legion.org

The American Legion was born during a global pandemic. The Center for Disease Control estimates that 50 million people died of an influenza outbreak which was first identified in 1918, spread rapidly in 1919 and continued into 1920. An estimated 500 million people —one-third of the global population — were infected, according to the CDC.

The doughboys of World War I suffered greatly. Though it was frequently referred to as the “Spanish Flu” some trace the first outbreak to Camp Funston, Kansas. In 1918, more than 121,000 sailors and Marines were admitted to Navy hospitals for influenza. It is estimated that the disease caused many of the 63,114 “non-battle deaths” of U.S. servicemembers during World War I.

Yet, out of the ashes of what was then the deadliest war in world history and in the mist of what is still the worst flu pandemic ever known, came an organization that was devoted to, among other things, “mutual helpfulness.”

Strong evidence suggests that The American Legion was not organized in spite of these hardships but because of them. Life was not easy for the founders of The American Legion. They had experienced trench and chemical warfare, earth-shattering artillery, dysentery, cholera and typhoid. They watched many of their closest comrades die before the nation’s pre-eminent World War I organization would even come to be.

Yet it did come to be. In Paris, France, March 15th through 17th, 1919. This new organization of American veterans of the “Great War,” would later develop a constitution with a Preamble pledging to “promote peace and goodwill on earth.”

It is a pledge that Legionnaires continue to repeat during the opening of every American Legion meeting. The founders had experienced the horrors of war and felt a special obligation to avoid future conflicts unless America was truly threatened.

In 2019, the nation’s largest and most respected veterans organization celebrated its centennial. A year into its second century of service, The American Legion inspired its members again to answer their nation’s call ... so it could weather another global pandemic.

Social-distancing and safety became priorities, but service remained the mission. American Legion Family members made facemasks, collected gloves and provided other personal protective equipment for first responders and health-care workers.

Posts served as supply centers and drive-thru food pantries. Departments held online job fairs for veterans and their spouses. Blood donations were made in American Legion parking lots and meeting halls.

As a precaution, many of the traditional large American Legion Family gatherings were either put on hold or morphed into teleconferences.

Throughout the year, National Commander James W. “Bill” Oxford sent a consistent and clear message that not even a global pandemic would stop The American Legion from its mission — veterans strengthening America. “We have faced down enemies, foreign and domestic throughout our nation’s history. While the threat is ominous, we will once again work together to overcome it,” he vowed.

After receiving a donation of 250,000 facemasks from the organization’s close allies in Taiwan, The American Legion quickly sent 10,000 of the coverings to the Holyoke Soldiers Home in Massachusetts. The facility had been ravaged by COVID-19, which reportedly took the lives of 76 patients there.

“We owe it to our nation’s veterans to ensure that these types of tragedies do not repeat themselves,” Commander Oxford said.

The economic consequences of the coronavirus have been devastating. Businesses shut down, vacations were cancelled and lawmakers argued over the size of relief packages.

During a virtual meeting of the National Executive Committee in October, American Legion leaders passed a “Buy American” resolution, which called for the return of manufacturing from overseas and the creation of more domestic production of goods.

The N.E.C. also established a Mission Blue Post Assistance Program, which provides one thousand dollar grants to active American Legion posts that participated in at least one American Legion program in the most recent 18 months and were adversely impacted by health protection restrictions.

Crisis response is nothing new to The American Legion. Its National Emergency Fund has provided relief to natural disaster victims for decades. During the prolonged government shutdown of 2019, The American Legion provided more than one million dollars of Temporary Financial Assistance to Coast Guard families who experienced payment delays.

The American Legion's commitment to service has continued throughout the COVID-19 crisis.

Post 483 in Queens, New York has regularly provided meals and delivery to area home-bound veterans and seniors in need.

The American Legion Operation Comfort Warriors program provided an \$18,000 grant for the purchase of iPads so hospitalized patients in the VA Minneapolis Health Care System can have virtual visits with their loved ones.

American Legion Post 176 in Springfield, Virginia, joined with Philips North America as a tele-health host, so patients would not have to risk additional exposure when traveling for medical appointments. The initiative, Project ATLAS, is expected to spread among many participating American Legion posts.

Post 65 in South Phoenix, Arizona, teamed with the HeroZona Foundation to provide thousands of free drive-thru COVID-19 tests to residents of the Grand Canyon State.

The results of an American Legion COVID-19 survey indicated that forty percent of veterans believed that communication with friends and families was the most important factor in their emotional well-being.

Prior to the pandemic, an estimated twenty veterans a day were committing suicide. From 2020 to 2021, The American Legion Buddy Check program took on an even greater importance.

Legionnaire Leroy Lippi, Jr., of Post 272 in Linglestown, Pennsylvania conducted no fewer than 438 buddy checks in less than one month.

Jennifer Havlick, a Legionnaire from Post 109, in Two Harbors, Minnesota, led nightly Zoom meetings and mobilized what she terms “enhanced Buddy Checks,” to communicate with — and run errands for — veterans quarantining at home.

In early 2021, the American death toll from the coronavirus surpassed U.S. losses in World War II. The American Legion has not been immune. Most vulnerable were members of the Greatest Generation, though every age group has been affected.

The challenges of The American Legion’s one hundred and first year were not lost on its national commander.

Quote: “We are meeting differently,” Commander Oxford said. “We are serving differently, but we are still serving... 2020 is year that many would like to forget, but I truly believe it could be our finest hour.” – unquote.

As The American Legion observes its 102nd birthday, it does so in a spirit of remembrance. Equally prevalent is a spirit of optimism. As vaccines are administered, American Legion posts will continue to play a role.

Just as The American Legion survived and thrived through the Spanish Flu pandemic during the early days of the organization, America’s wartime veterans will ensure that The American Legion Family overcomes the current challenge and prospers in its one hundred and second year and beyond.

America needs a strong American Legion, especially in times just like this.

God Bless you and God Bless America!

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