



# Making your Post Attractive

The American Legion in 2024 and Beyond



## Who Are We?

The American Legion was chartered by Congress in 1919 as a patriotic veteran's organization. Focusing on service to veterans, servicemembers and their communities, the American Legion evolved from a group of war-weary veterans of World War I into one of the most influential nonprofit groups in the United States.



## What Are We?

The American Legion is the nation's largest veterans service organization, committed to mentoring America's youth and a sponsorship of wholesome programs in our communities, We advocate for patriotism and honor, promote for strong national security, and continued devotion to the well being of our active-duty service members, our veterans and the veteran's family.



# Where Are We Today?

Membership in the American Legion in many areas of the country is on a decline. This is true of most fraternal and Veteran organizations across the country. What was long a tradition, has been replaced by other functions, and other family interests. This can be witnessed in small towns and cities alike.

Post cannot survive on dues alone. We must maximize our efforts to ensure the American Legion's mission continues into the future.



## What are we doing right?

The number of programs in the American Legion far exceeds any one Post's abilities to maintain them all.

The American Legion has taken the lead to actively address issues of national importance in Washington and across the country through Legislative actions and public awareness campaigns.



## What are we doing right?

The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, known as the **GI Bill** was led by the American Legion, which wanted to reward all wartime veterans. John H. Stelle, a former Democratic Governor of Illinois, served as the Chairman of the Legion's Executive Committee, which drafted and mobilized public opinion to get the G.I. Bill to President Roosevelt's desk on June 22, 1944. The original G.I. Bill ended in 1956, although some benefits have been modified and updated and many continue today. More than just education assistance, it addressed home ownership and economic challenges and set the stage for the Americans with Disabilities Act.



## What are we doing right?

The **Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics Act of 2022**, otherwise known as The PACT Act is perhaps the largest health care and benefit expansion in VA history. Championed by the American Legion and others, The PACT Act brought these changes:

- Expanded and extended eligibility for VA health care for Veterans with toxic exposures and Veterans of the Vietnam, Gulf War, and the post-9/11 eras
- Added 20+ more presumptive conditions for burn pits, Agent Orange, and other toxic exposures
- Added more presumptive-exposure locations for Agent Orange and radiation
- Required the VA to provide a toxic exposure screening to every Veteran enrolled in VA health care
- Helped the VA improve research, staff education, and treatment related to toxic exposures





## What are we doing right?

We promote a civic responsibility, strive for national security, and encourage the preservation of American values through National Affairs.

Our **Be the One** initiative to reduce the rate of veteran suicide is working on lessening the stigma associated with mental health treatment. It provides guidance and empowerment to everyone to take appropriate action when a veteran or servicemember may be at risk – one life at a time.





## What are we doing right?

The American Legion's youth programs provide a solid foundation for tomorrow into the next generations. Programs like Legion Baseball and Junior Shooting Sports provide a team spirit. Boys and Girls State (and Nation) further the knowledge of Civics and Government, and Oratorical competitions and Flag Essays encourage America's children to take an active role in learning about our country and our form of Government.

Numerous scholarships for higher education are available at the Post, Department, and National levels to assist with furthering education.



## The Legion has Evolved

Over tie, historically the American Legion has evolved. In some ways this evolution came about very slowly. Gone are Eisenhower Jackets, and suits and ties are seldom seen in all but the most formal of events.

Titles and Positions have changed over time as the focus of the Legion has changed, but some traditions remain for the good of the membership.

Posts can be hindered by holding on to the past for too long though, often despite the interests of the membership.

Oftentimes, the loss of members can be summed up by six words


“We’ve always done it this way...”



## The Legion has Evolved

To survive, we must recruit new members as well as retain our current members. Each member is a Volunteer, and they are as free to leave as they are to join.

New members often haven't established their emotional connection to the Legion for up to a year, or even more. By keeping new members active and involved, you help establish a sense of feeling like they belong here.



## The Legion has Evolved

All American Legion members are volunteers, from the newest member to the National Commander. Every one of them are here because they want to be. There are few paid positions in the American Legion, and on a per hour scale, salaries seldom are commiserated with the amount of work performed.

What we do in our posts day to day, and how we present the American Legion to new members often makes the difference between 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> year renewals or losing members.



## The Legion has Evolved

Why do social organizations like the Legion exist and how can we leverage the information we know to maintain and grow Legion membership. An increase in members could lead to more options that would be available to then attract more members.

Stopping the slide means admitting why the slide is happening in the first place.



# Key Aspects Of The Psychology Of Social Membership

Some of the theory from the NIH behind making members feel welcome.

**Need to Belong:** Humans have a fundamental need to feel connected to others, and belonging to social groups fulfills this need, contributing to feelings of security and well-being.

**Social Comparison:** By comparing ourselves to others within our group, we gain information about our own abilities and opinions, shaping our own concept of self.

**Social Identity Theory:** This theory proposes that people derive part of their self-esteem from the groups they identify with, leading to in-group favoritism and potential out-group discrimination.

**Group Norms:** The shared expectations and behaviors within a group can influence an individual members' actions and attitudes.

**Group Cohesion:** The degree to which group members feel connected to each other, and the need to stay in the group.



## Factors Influencing Social Membership

**Shared characteristics:** People are more likely to join groups where they share similar interests, values, demographics (like age, race, gender), or experiences.

**Social influence:** The power of group norms and peer pressure can influence individuals to conform to group expectations.

**Leadership:** Strong leaders can significantly impact group dynamics and cohesion, shaping the group's identity and behavior.





# The Impacts Of Social Membership

**Self-esteem:** Belonging to a valued group can enhance self-esteem, while exclusion from a group can negatively impact self-worth.

**Decision-making:** Group membership can influence how individuals make decisions, and may potentially lead to groupthink where individuals prioritize group harmony over critical thinking.

**Intergroup relations:** Social identity theory highlights how group memberships can lead to prejudice and discrimination towards out-groups.



## What Does YOUR Post Look Like?

Some key factors to enticing the new member to even walk through the door are obvious, or should be.  
Every Post has a certain curb appeal, positive or negative.

- Is it welcoming?
  - Clean and kept up entryways and windows?
- Are the lights on?
  - Not every post has a physical location, those that do, are your hours posted?
  - If you don't, do you publish your meeting times somewhere?
- Is there a visible schedule of events?
  - What does your post do? There should be a list of the upcoming activities available.
- Is it current?
  - A list of the Fall events still up in January could lead someone to think you're not that active.



## What Does YOUR Post Look Like?

There is no provision in the National Constitution for a Canteen or Bar. Too often the initial opinion from the public is “it’s the bar”.

Being “a bar” takes away from the core of what the American Legion was founded on. There is no emotional or psychological investment in “a bar”, and the programs mentioned today can get lost after a time. Look for alternatives. Get out in the public. Do something unique and helpful in the community.



# Discussion

There is a large body of work shows that people with an active social group membership have a better psychological well-being, are healthier, and live longer than those who do not belong to social groups. The past may be behind us, but the mission of the American Legion remains,  
Service To Veterans, Servicemembers And Their Communities.

- What is your post doing that is working?
- What is it doing that needs to stop?
- How can we improve and modernize and yet keep the Legacy of the American Legion intact?