

VETERANS NEWS WITH ADAM ROCHE

Why join your local American Legion and VFW?

These organizations offer much to the community



When I returned home from active duty in 2004, I was 22 years old. I didn't know many veterans my age and certainly didn't know how to turn the skills I learned as Sergeant of the Guard for the American Embassy in Kabul and Infantry Squad Leader fighting in both Iraq and Afghanistan into viable employment.

So, for almost 15 years, I found various jobs in the security and restaurant business and as aouncer in several establishments throughout the Hudson Valley.

Numerous times during those years of feeling alone and often misunderstood, family members and friends who weren't even military veterans would attend various functions at local chapters of the American Legion (TAL) and (Veterans of Foreign Wars) VFW. They would encourage me to join them and suggest I get involved, but I always resisted. I found I had accepted the cliché that these groups were filled with older men who gathered at the bar on weekends to tell war stories, watch football games and maybe offer an occasional spaghetti dinner.

In fact, it wasn't until 2016 – when I was blessed to get hired at Mental Health America (MHA) Dutchess County's Vet2Vet program and began visiting local American Legion and VFW chapters and meeting fellow veterans who belonged to those groups – that I realize I had missed nearly 15 years of opportunity to serve both the veterans and the communities of Dutchess County.

I found these men and women offered me a social connection, regardless of their age; understood the obstacles of returning to community life; understood the trauma of battle and the isolation I was experiencing; and many were leaders in the community forming a large network of contacts in various areas of public life.

According to a 2024 Sun Newspaper article, the VFW and its auxiliary members

totaled about 1.4 million, with 5,667 posts around the world. The American Legion has approximately 2 million members in more than 12,000 posts around the country. Those numbers makes both organizations fierce advocates for improved healthcare and benefit access, enhanced women's healthcare and veteran-focused legislative changes at all levels of government.

Locally, both organizations are active participants in community events and offer volunteer opportunities for veterans through youth outreach and scholarship programs for both veterans and non-veteran families. Their commitment to organizing holiday ceremonies and parades that honor our fallen comrades and those who have served, keeping that service at the forefront of public consciousness, is unquestioned.

Despite all this, however, there is evidence that the younger generation of military vets have shied away from becoming involved in their local chapters of TAL and the VFW. Groups like the Wounded Warriors Project, Student Veterans of America and non-veteran groups that focus on activities such as one-on-one mentoring of disadvantaged youth, delivering food to the needy and personal health related pursuits have given returning veterans a wide range of activities to choose from, rather than what some see as traditional and outdated social gatherings.

A 2019 New York Times article stated, "The newer organizations reflect cultural shifts in a smaller community of younger and increasingly diverse veterans who are replacing the older, predominantly male veterans."

Add to that busy lifestyle, raising families, involvement in kids sports and social events, church commitments and a perception that the experiences of serving in more recent conflicts like the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are not adequately represented,

understood or acknowledged by members of the older veterans' organizations, makes recruiting new members into the American Legion and VFW challenging.

However, there is some good news. In July 2019, during President Trump's first term, he signed the "LEGION Act" (Let Everyone Get Involved in Opportunities for National Service) into law. This law honored close to 1,600 U.S. military personnel who were killed or wounded in action during previously undeclared times of war and allowed nearly 6 million additional veterans access to American Legion programs and benefits for which they previously had not been eligible.

Along with opening the door to more veterans, there is a recent trend among American Legion and VFW leaders to not quietly sit back and accept declining participation. They instead are working to appeal to newer generations by simplifying eligibility requirements; pushing the government to speed up electronic health records to help post 9/11 veterans in transition; offering mental health treatment programs; and organizing job fairs with local Chambers of Commerce.

In the case of the American Legion, there is also a move taking place to go back to the founders' original, post-World War I era mission: That is, to give back to communities and foster programs that are inclusive and geared toward family outings and events.

Derric Grimes, an Army veteran and a member of the post in Fuquay-Varina, NC, related in an interview with military.com that about 10 years ago, his post had roughly 250 members and now it's North Carolina's largest post, with more than 920 members. "We made it about family," Grimes said. "Reinvigorating family time – cookouts, fairs and a little something for everyone was the catalyst it needed because if I can't take my family to Legion stuff, I'm not going."

Leaders of both groups say two things

they hear over and over from vets are, "No one has ever asked me to join" and "What is in it for me?"

Dutchess County American Legion Adjutant Kevin Hathorn hears a similar refrain. He says local Legion and VFW posts are collaborating to address the issue by creating a hub of communication at all levels of the organization that fosters community unity and awareness – awareness that will allow members to come to the aid of those in real need of assistance by getting to know the community through blood drives, cook-outs, giveaways and offering construction assistance to them. There is also an effort to better broadcast programs that younger veterans' children can benefit from, such as Legion Baseball, Oratorical Contests and the Boys State Program, a summer program that immerses high-school students with hands-on experience in the practical operation of local government by running a mock government. Hathorn says it's all about keeping the American Legion and VFW strong for future military personnel and their families, and he says that clearly rests on younger vets getting involved.

There is much both the American Legion and VFW offer the entire family and community; and I encourage any veteran, young or old, to take the step of contacting their local chapter. I've found you don't have to commit to attending every weekly meeting. Just getting involved once a month and participating in some select events often serves as a catalyst for becoming engaged and brings new ideas and talents to the group.

If this article has piqued your interest, please call your local American Legion or VFW; or if you are not sure how to proceed, feel free to contact me at the Dutchess County Office of Veterans Affairs at 845-486-2060; or email us at veterans@dutchessny.gov. We will gladly help you get started.

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