

Basic Training Part II

History

American Legion youth programs began to take shape during the organization's first two decades. Support for Boy Scouts of America, passed by resolution at the First American Legion National Convention in 1919, was the initial youth program officially sanctioned by the organization, which would go on to become the nation's largest non-denominational sponsor of Scouting units. American Legion Baseball was started in 1925 in South Dakota. American Legion Boys State was founded in 1935 in Illinois to counter a rising tide of subversive anti-American youth camps popping up across the country. In 1938, the National High School Oratorical Contest debuted as an American Legion program to instill leadership and knowledge of the U.S. Constitution



Chris Christie.

Prominent past alumni of the Boys State and Boys Nation programs include former U.S. President William Clinton, Neil Armstrong, Alan Keyes, Lou Dobbs, Sam Nunn, Rush Limbaugh, Phil Jackson, Michael Jordan, Jon Bon Jovi, Samuel Alito, James Gandolfini, Bruce Springsteen, Richard Cheney, Tom Brokaw, Joseph Lieberman, Richard Lugar, Michael Dukakis, Scott Bakula and

As a lobbying organization, The American Legion set in motion many reforms to provide compassionate care, benefits, training and support for veterans and their families. A survey conducted by the Legion in 1923 revealed that many veterans of the Great War had plummeted into homelessness and despair after discharge.

Many suffered from puzzling mental illnesses known at the time as "shell shock" (today diagnosed as post-traumatic stress). As the 1920s unfolded, it was not uncommon to see blind, limbless or mentally ill former doughboys selling pencils and apples on street corners, just trying to survive.



The American Legion's relentless work on behalf of disabled veterans led to passage of the World War Veterans Act of 1924, linking military service to several classes of physical disability.

The federal government's disorganized and often-corrupt collection of agencies to help veterans was consolidated first into the Veterans Bureau in 1921, which also became entangled in corruption, before services were greatly improved under the Legion-urged creation of the Veterans Administration in 1930. As the early VA took shape, The American Legion began fighting for adequate funding for the agency so it could provide quality care.

Members of the Legion began volunteering in VA health-care facilities where they could provide firsthand oversight, adding credibility to their lobbying efforts.



The Veterans Affairs & Rehabilitation Commission of The American Legion became the most prominent stakeholder voice on all the service arms of the Veterans Administration that it helped create:

- Health care
- Pensions and benefits
- Education
- Homelessness prevention
- Employment opportunities
- Cemetery benefits



On June 14, 1923, The American Legion's Americanism Commission led a conference in Washington bringing together no less than 68 other organizations, military groups, educators and others for the first of two national flag conferences that would lay the groundwork for U.S. Flag Code. President Warren G. Harding was the keynote speaker at the 1923 conference. By the time of the 1924

Flag Conference, 32 states had agreed to adopt the code for their schools after some adjustments were made. The American Legion would lobby Congress for the next 18 years to adopt into law U.S. Flag Code.



The American Legion Endowment Fund, established in 1925, created the Temporary Financial Assistance program to provide financial support for minor children of eligible veterans. The fund was also dedicated to provide training and support for American Legion service officers. The TFA program was augmented in 1990 during Operation Desert Storm with the Family Support Network, which connected American Legion volunteers with military families in need of support during

deployments. Renamed The American Legion Veterans & Children Foundation in 2018, the fund continues to support service officers and military/veteran families with children at home, who are facing emergency financial hardships.

The nation's economic descent in the Great Depression presented profound challenges for veterans and their families. The Economy Act of 1933 threatened to unravel many of the Legion's hard-fought gains on behalf of disabled veterans and their families.



On March 28, 1934, the Legion recorded one of its most significant victories ever by driving forward Public Law 141, which was

vetoed by the president but later overridden by Congress, to protect disabled veterans and their benefits from federal budget cuts proposed under the Economy Act.

That accomplishment on Capitol Hill not only preserved benefits for needy veterans and their families, it also firmly established The American Legion's might in Washington.

In the decades to come, The American Legion's continuous efforts to improve the lives of veterans led to some of the most significant developments in U.S. society, most notably passage of the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, better known as the "GI Bill."

The original language of the bill, written in longhand by American Legion Past National Commander Harry Colmery, was the cornerstone of a half-century of American prosperity after World War II.

Read the original draft of the GI Bill, handwritten by Colmery on stationery from the Mayflower Hotel in Washington, D.C.

** See the RESOURCES page on the legion.org site/basic training for more information.

Millions of veterans received college educations, bought homes with affordable VA loans, and created what became the American middle class as the century's second half unfolded. Some have described the GI Bill as the nation's most significant social legislation of the 20th century.

Through the years, The American Legion has fought to protect GI Bill benefits from federal budget cuts and to extend them to veterans seeking different types of educations after discharge, such as certification for trades, apprenticeships and online classes.

The post-World War II American Legion grew and expanded, reaching record membership of 3,326,556 in 1946 and adding 2,600 new posts in a 12-month period ending in January 1947. The organization, fresh off of its success in getting the GI Bill passed, was well-positioned to ensure that the benefits promised in the legislation were fulfilled.



Hundreds of new VA health-care facilities were built in the post-World War II era, and the Legion strongly urged a VA-medical school affiliation program to make sure those facilities were properly staffed and equipped; medical school affiliations flourished in the years that followed to strengthen VA hospitals and clinics.



During the Korean War, The American Legion fought to expand VA eligibility to all who had honorably served in the U.S. Armed Forces, not just those who served during wartime. Along with that came the need to lobby for adequate VA funding, which proved to be a consistent and persistent battle for The American Legion over the decades to come. The American Legion Child Welfare Foundation was formed in 1954 to provide grant money for nonprofit organizations that serve to improve the lives of children and youth; the foundation now issues over \$600,000

a year to worthy organizations. The Legion also provides support for Special Olympics, Junior ROTC, high school rodeo, after-school tutoring and many other activities at the national, state and local levels.

Next month will continue the history section of Basic Training.