

Mr. Chairman and fellow committee members, thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today about The American Legion. My name is Mark Sutton, I am a U.S. Marine Corps Veteran from 1988 to 1993, the public relations and legislative director for the American Legion Department of Michigan and I extend greetings from our Department Commander Steve Striggow of Holly.

This week marks a milestone in American Legion history. On Friday, March 15 The American Legion will celebrate it's one-hundredth anniversary of its founding in Paris, France.

On March 15, 1919 hundreds of World War One service members gathered at what was billed as a morale and welfare meeting. At the meeting the idea of creating an organization to help their fellow comrades when they returned home was started. We call this the Paris Caucus. One of the co-founders is Teddy Roosevelt, Jr.

That meeting was followed up by the first state side caucus in St. Louis in May of 1919. Where the Legion established its founding foundation of four pillars, Americanism, Veteran Affairs and Rehabilitation, National Security, and Children and Youth. From that meeting World War one service members and veterans spread out over the states and

began establishing departments, posts and signing up members. They also began the business of helping veterans as they were returning home.

Today's briefing will cover who we are, what the organization has done on the national level, and on the state level, and then our role and concerns in Michigan specifically for this legislative session.

Who are we?

The American Legion was Congressionally Chartered in September of 1919, and its membership is made of war-time era veterans. Meaning any servicemember who served active duty during a war-time era qualify for membership. Those war-time eras are, World war one, World War two, Korea, Vietnam, Lebanon/Grenada, Panama, and since August 2, 1990.

The difference between the Legion and the Veterans of Foreign Wars is that membership in the VFW requires service in the theater of operation of the war-time era. Did the service member serve IN Iraq or in Afghanistan?

The AMVETS only requires service in the US Military.

The Military Order of the Purple Heart is open to only those who have purple hearts and membership in the Disabled American Veterans requires a disability rating from the VA. Other organizations include the Marine Corps League and Vietnam Veterans of American.

Some veterans are members in multiple organizations.

The American Legion is made up of thirteen thousand posts, 55 departments, and two million members. We have 55 departments those are made up of the 50 states, the department of Mexico, Puerto Rico, Philippines, France, and the District of Columbia.

The American Legion Family includes the American Legion Auxiliary and the Sons of the American Legion. The auxiliary is comprised of the female descendants of war-time era servicemembers and the sons are the male descendants.

The American Legion Auxiliary is a separate organization and the Sons are a program of The American Legion.

The Legion is founded on four pillars, each having different programs and missions to each one.

Americanism Pillar: We believe in the American way of life, our history is of one fighting against other ISM's, from communism, fascism, naziism, and socialism. We believe in the protection of the U.S. Flag, and work to education kids and the community on the proper ways to display and care for the flag, we support scouting, baseball, the U.S. Constitution, and teaching about the role and function of government.

Veteran Affairs and Rehabilitation Pillar: Our accredited veteran service officers help veterans navigate through the red tape of the US Veteran Administration, by crossing the T's and dotting the I's. at no cost to the veteran. Through our System worth Saving program a team of Legionnaires inspect and tour VA Medical Facilities and hold Townhalls to hear from the veterans being cared for in the centers to see how the system is working or not working for them. Is the VA system broken? Not every where, but like any large government program it has its problems and the American Legion seeks to point out the good and help improve whenever it can. We do not support privatizing the VA system.

National Defense Pillar: We believe in a strong national defense which includes proper funding of our military, legal immigration, and border security.

Children and Youth Pillar: We believe the strength of our nation is in the next generation and we support programs to help develop children and youth in this country.

I would like to talk about the national impact the American Legion has been apart of over the past one-hundred years, tidbits you may not know.

In 1923, a resolution called for a code for the U.S. Flag, the American Legion led a conference with other veteran service organizations and in 1942, the U.S. Flag code was adopted by Congress.

Legionnaires pushed for the creation of a department of Veterans Affairs and in 1921 the U.S. Veterans Bureau, was established and later became the Veterans Administration.

In 1943, past national commander Harry W. Colmery hand wrote the first draft of the original G.I. Bill in the Mayflower Hotel on hotel stationary in Washington. After it's signing in 1944, enrollment in to

colleges in the U.S. doubled. The national adjutant at the time of the signing and present when FDR signed the bill was the former Department of Michigan Adjutant. The Legion has continued to lobby to enhance the G.I. Bill as times changed.

In 1950, the American Heart Association was struggling and the American Legion and American Legion Auxiliary donated \$50,000 to them help, and it provided the boost they needed to continue their great work.

The George L. Giles Post 187 in Chicago sponsored the original Harlem Globetrotters the rest is history.

Although the Michigan State Police was one of the first police agencies to adopt flashing lights on their police cars, a Legionnaire in Ames, Iowa who saw the Michigan idea wrote a resolution to require all police departments to use similar devices and to require testing for those who wished to drive cars. The resolutions were passed by the Department of Iowa and other departments followed suit in their own state legislatures.

The American Legion has a National Emergency Fund to help Legionnaires and Legion Posts who suffer damage due to a natural disaster, like hurricanes and floods.

They also have a Temporary Financial Assistance fund to help veterans with children in the home to request help. In January, this fund was used to help U.S. Coast Guard families who were not being paid due to the government shutdown. The Legion gave out one million dollars in financial aid to Coast Guard families during that time. Approximately 80 Michigan Coastie families received assistance from those funds.

The Legion supported the building of the Vietnam Memorial in Washington with a one-million-dollar donation.

In 1968, the Legion called for VA research on the medical uses of marijuana, those calls continue today.

During the 1980's the legion worked with Columbia University on research on the effects of Agent Orange on our veterans. Which led to a partnership with the Vietnam Veterans of America the first ever lawsuit against the VA demanding they recognize the effects of Agent Orange on our veterans and care for them as service connected.

The Legion has demanded similar research on Post Traumatic Stress, Traumatic Brain Injury, Gulf War Illness, Burn Pits, and Military Sexual Trauma.

Recently we helped to pass the VA modernization act and expand care and eligibility to access to VA benefits.

After the events of September 11, 2001, the American Legion Legacy Scholarship fund was established and each year the American Legion Rider program puts on a fundraising ride to raise money for this cause. The fund supports the descendants of service members who have died since 9-11 or are 50 percent disabled from the VA.

President Harry Truman was the first Legionnaire to become president and our Boys Nation program inspired a young man named Bill Clinton from Arkansas to pursue a life of public service after he met President John F. Kennedy. President Clinton references two events for his inspiration, one was when he was on the Washington Mall listening Martin Luther King give his "I have a dream" speech, and the second was his time at Boys Nation and meeting JFK.

Other notable programs of The American Legion. The American Legion Baseball World Series is held each August. The National Constitutional Speech Contest is an opportunity for high school students to compete for eighteen, sixteen, and fourteen thousand dollars in scholarship money each April. We recognize an Eagle Scout each year and award them with a ten-thousand-dollar scholarship. We have an air-rifle shooting competition each year and award ten thousand dollars to the first-place winner. We also recognize a law enforcement officer and first responder each year at the national convention.

Those are just some of the tidbits about The American Legion, there is not enough time to speak of everything.

Let's talk specifically about Michigan.

The Department of Michigan is made up of three hundred and ninety individual posts. A post building is not required, but about half of those posts do own a structure. At the end of our 2018 membership year we had 66,000 Legionnaires, 29,000 Auxiliary members, and 23,000 Sons of the American Legion.

The department's organizational process started right after the St. Louis Caucus and the first meeting was on June 28, 1919, in Detroit.

George C. Waldo was our organizational commander.

One of the first motions made was to muster as many veterans together in the city of Detroit to welcome home the Polar Bear Units who were returning from Russia.

Another motion was to move forward immediately when funds from the Michigan Patriotic Fund was made available to support the welfare of the service members returning. This was the Legion's first partnership with the State of Michigan to help our veterans.

The Patriotic fund was a fund used during world war one to support the spouses and children of the men who were sent to the war effort. Upon the wars ending Legionnaires immediately lobbied the legislature to allow the Legion to use those funds to help disabled veterans, their families, and provide temporary assistance to those in need.

In 1921, the State of Michigan budgeted \$326,000 to the American Legion Department of Michigan to continue those efforts. One of the

efforts from that was the creation of the American Legion Hospital in Battle Creek. This hospital was to treat the veterans who had contracted tuberculosis and help disabled veterans in need. Twenty-nine acres on the old Roosevelts community house near Fort Custer, was the beginning, five miles west of Battle Creek. It operated as a hospital until 1963. There were no VA facilities in Michigan at the time. The Battle Creek VA Medial Center opened a few year later down the road.

The American Legion Department of Michigan has been providing services for state veterans in partnership with the state of Michigan for a hundred years.

In 1923, American Legion's all over the country saw a need to help the orphans of our World War one Veterans and created the American Legion Children's Billet program. We opened one in Otter Lake, Michigan. This stayed open until the 1970's, caring for the orphans of our fallen comrades.

In 1935, the Michigan Legion Welfare Committee and other VSO's lobbied congress for a veteran hospital on the east side of the state towards Detroit. The Veterans Administration and the U.S. Congress

allocated one point four million dollars for a 350-bed hospital within a forty-mile radius of Detroit. After many inspections of possible spots and none being adequate for the hospital, Mr. and Mrs. Henry Ford donated 29 acres of land in Allen Park for the construction of Michigan's first VA Hospital.

Today, Michigan is home to five VA medical Centers, twenty-nine community-based outreach clinics, eight vet centers, one VA regional office, two national cemeteries, and currently two state veteran homes.

Five Michigan Legionnaires have been elected as National Commanders, One Michigan Legionnaire, Bob Spanogle, was our National Adjutant and then made an Honorary National Commander. Donald Glasshof was the National Adjutant at the FDR bill signing ceremony, and the current National Judge Advocate Kevin Bartlett is a Michigan Legionnaire from Marshall.

In Garden City, Mich., in 1993, Chuck "Tramp" Dare and Bill "Polka" Kaledas, commander of American Legion Post 396, shared an idea to start a motorcycle enthusiasts association within the organization. The two longtime riders wanted an environment where Legion family

members could come together to share a common love for motorcycles.

This was the beginning of the American Legion Rider Program.

Today, there are over two thousand rider chapters in the nation.

Each year the department honors a police officer and first responder,

and we pass those nominees to the national level for possible

recognition. Michigan State Trooper Joseph Rowley of Freeland, was

named as the 2017 American Legion National Law Officer of the Year

during the 99th American Legion National Convention in Reno, Nev.

Last summer Richard Clark of Michigan, Jackson County Sportsmans

Club took third place at the National American Legion Junior Shooting

Precision match in Colorado.

The Midland American Legion Baseball team has a strong history of

baseball and is a regular at the National American Legion Annual

Tournament.

Our Boys State program is over eighty years strong, with alumni

including Former State Senator Jason Allen, City of Lansing Mayor

Andy Schor, and former Senate candidate John James. For our Girls

State program one of our most enthusiastic alumni is U.S. Senator Debbie Stabenow.

Our 18 Department Accredited Veteran Service officers help veterans receive the benefits they have earned from the VA.

We have a 1,200 acre property in Custer that provides a place for veterans and service members a place to take themselves and their families to reconnect with each other after deployments or rehabilitation from injuries, both visible and invisible.

Our temporary financial assistance programs assist all veterans regardless if they served during a war-time era or not. We give tens of thousands of dollars away each year to support Michigan veterans.

Our Youth Law Enforcement Cadet – Student Trooper program gives high school students the opportunity to see what it is like to be in a police academy. In partnership with the Michigan State Police we offer students a one-week camp at the MSP Academy facilities in Lansing to learn all aspects of a law enforcement career. Many of the troopers and police officers in Michigan are graduates of this program. They learn how to shoot, swim, run, run, do push-ups, conduct traffic stops, learn

about forensics, investigations, run, police pursuits in vehicles, run, and water safety. Did I mention they run?

Our High School Constitutional Speech contest offers students the ability to compete for money for college. We have other student programs as well and they are available in the information I have provided you.

Every June and through out the year posts perform US Flag retirement ceremonies to dispose of flags properly.

What does the American Legion Department of Michigan role for the 600,000 veterans and their families have today and what issues concern us?

American Legion and other VSO family members volunteer tens of thousands of hours to the State Veteran Homes, VA Medical Facilities, and other VA Facilities to help our veterans and saving Michigan tax payers money. Honor guards provide the burial rights for our fallen at the national cemeteries every day of the year.

We come here to this building and bring veteran issues to light and advocate on behalf of all veterans in Michigan. We go to Washington and advocate for legislation that will care for our veterans, and secure our nation.

The Michigan Veterans Coalition is made up of five organizations:

The American Legion, DAV, VFW, Vietnam Veterans of America, and the Military order of the purple heart. We receive a three point eight million dollar grant each year from the legislature. With this grant money we provide sixty accredited veteran service officers helping veterans and county veteran service officers service to administer and file claims on behalf of veterans for service-related disabilities. In return those veterans received in fiscal year 2018 two hundred sixty-two million dollars in benefits. That is cash in pocket to the veteran for that year. Many ask how can we serve more veterans? The coalition of VSO's can, but it takes boots on the ground and twenty years ago the budget was 3.9 million, today it is less, and factor in inflation it is even less.

The grant money given to us is only used for veteran service operations, and the membership dues our members pay provides on the American

Legion side 19 veteran appeals advocates in Washington free of charge to the state and to the veteran.

In addition, the Legion has partnered with the Sault Tribe in the U.P. to provide an accredited veteran service officer to the tribe. This officer is a veteran and is officed in tribe clinics and offices. They provide service to veterans of the tribe and veterans in the community. We are looking to expand this program to other tribes in the state.

The department has also opened a VSO office in the Downriver Community Center in Southgate. The community center services over 20 communities with state, county, and local services. Our service office there allows easy access to veterans. For an example of one stop shop for benefits, this center is a great example.

It was mentioned in a previous meeting about a veteran in need of services being helped by a veteran saying they were a service officer. I want to make some clarifications. Some VSO's have positions in the their post's called Post Service Office. These are volunteers, they are not paid service officers. They are also not ACCREDITED with the VA. They are not authorized to fill out forms for veterans and submit them to the VA. Their job is to be a traffic cop for veterans. To direct them to

services within there area. In the American Legion, we teach them to know where the resources are for the area, especially who is the accredited service officer. They help veterans connect and that is it.

If a veteran calls your office seeking help there are things you can do or your staff can do to assist.

Number one. Are they looking for help with the department of Veterans Administration? Or are they looking for temporary financial assistance of some kind?

If they are seeking help with the VA, next ask if they have filed a claim yet, and if so, who is their power of attorney with, this will tell you what number to have them call, call the representing organization.

If they have not filed a claim or do not know who their POA is with, you want them to visit their County Veteran service office, or go to michiganveterans.com Click find a benefits counselor, chose your county and find one near them.

The term is ACCREDITED is the important term when it comes to helping veterans with VA claims. They work for an organization that is

accredited with the VA, they have support, and they are paid to do this work.

If the veteran needs services outside of the VA then call the Regional Coordinator in your prosperity region, they should have a list of resources to help the veteran. They can guide the veteran to the Michigan Veterans Trust fund or other help offered by businesses in the area.

If you feel your office needs to take a personal interest in a claim then call Gary Easterling, the American Legion Director of Veteran Services. His phone number is 313-549-8557. He will need the veterans, name, social security number or VA Claim file number to help or he can call the veteran directly and let you know the status.

Some have asked about the Gross Domestic Expenditure or GDX and if Michigan is still in last place. Michigan is currently 50 out 53 when calculating the averages, but I will tell you that that calculation is not a good reference for services in Michigan. How it is calculated the State will never rise above the 45th place. I can say that we are the 11th largest veteran population and 11th highest receiver of compensation and pension benefits for veterans.

What could be the biggest piece that could help increase awareness to veterans? Advertising. Marketing, not marketing the brand of the Michigan Veterans Affairs Agency, but marketing the purpose of seeing an accredited veteran service officer. Don't face the VA Alone.

Veterans do not trust the VA, they trust their fellow veteran if they earn it. An example is the driver license designation. Senator Johnson, thank you for championing that effort. As you stated to me there have been 137,000 veterans who have taken advantage of this. Only one letter has been sent to veterans on that list, and it only briefly talked about benefits they may be entitled too. Direct mail research tells us that it takes 3 or more mailings to get their attention and it should be an opportunity to educate veterans on an ongoing basis.

The American Legion is watching the new state veteran homes and the progress happening there. We have advocated for more than thirty years for new homes and they are final coming together. We want to ensure the state continues to build the other five homes it has said it would. We will continue to be vigilant on the current homes as well.

We support the Michigan National Guard and their efforts to upgrade and replace many of their armories. They are our force in readiness, and they must train properly and prepare for the unknown fight ahead.

We support reforms to the charitable gaming laws to allow our veteran service organizations and other non-profits to earn money to do the great programs they have done for decades. They provide scholarships and community projects that help their local communities and charitable gaming like Texas hold-em tournaments help earn the funds to continue their great works.

The Sons of the American Legion in Michigan is a strong proponent of the Missing in America Project. This project seeks to find remains of veterans who are sitting on shelves of funeral homes that have not been claimed. With current law nationally and at the state level, if no next of kin can be found a veteran service organization can petition to have the remain buried at a national cemetery. To date over 100 cremains have been interred through this program. At the end of last year two funeral homes in Detroit were found to have cremains unclaimed. So far 17 have been identified as veterans and have been buried at the Holly

National Cemetery with the help of Past Detachment Commander Greg Price. The program is ongoing.

I can continue with more, but we do not have the time. The American Legion does more than most know, advocates more than most know, and will continue another hundred years if there are veterans who want to help other veterans.

Thank you for your time and I am happy to answer any questions you may have.