

VFW Celebrates Centennial of Service

For 100 years, the VFW has advocated on Capitol Hill and ensured veterans receive their earned entitlements

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For 120 years, the Veterans of Foreign Wars has been known for its service to veterans. For the past 100 of those years, the oldest overseas war veterans organization has had an office in Washington, D.C., devoted to just that — service.

Under Commander-in-Chief F. Warner Karling at VFW's 1919 encampment (forerunner to today's National Convention) in Providence, R.I., the National Service Bureau (NSB) was formed. It all began as a committee investigating how veterans looking for jobs were being helped by a federal vocational training program.

NSB had two functions: handling claims submitted to the government's Veterans Bureau and promoting veteran-friendly bills before Congress.

The NSB evolved into today's National Veterans Service with a network of more than 2,000 accredited service officers. The NSB's legislative branch is VFW's National Legislative Service, which has been instrumental in every major veterans legislation passed since the beginning of the 20th century.

VFW service officers are trained experts helping veterans develop their cases by reviewing and applying current law, pertinent legislation, regulations and medical histories. As skilled professionals, VFW service officers assist in filing for disability compensation, rehabilitation and education programs, pension and death benefits, as well as employment and training programs.

"Filing for VA benefits is a complex process that's often the confluence of health care and law. This is where VFW's highly trained service officers offer their knowledge and experience to support veterans," said NVS Director Ryan Gallucci. "While much has changed in the past 100 years, our mission has remained the same — to fight for veterans' benefits."

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The Claims Process Begins

Under the direction of a disabled WWI vet and VFW member, Edward Hale, the NSB worked to respond to thousands of veterans' valid complaints.

In addition to Hale, the committee had Sr. Vice Commander-in-Chief Jack Singer and John McGrane of Providence, R.I., all of whom were lawyers.

The NSB endeavored to help veterans by presenting claims before the appropriate government agencies.

The Bureau of Pensions and the War Risk Insurance Bureau — both under the Department of the Treasury — as well as the Bureau of Vocational Training and Rehabilitation were those agencies.

The committee tasked the Welfare Committees at VFW Posts with being the middlemen between the aggrieved vet and the NSB. The Post was to get specific information from the veteran and then mail it to the NSB in Washington, D.C.

The cover article of the October 1919 *Foreign Service* magazine (forerunner to VFW magazine) explained the process and pitfalls to avoid:

“To insure promptness and justice in these cases, the Welfare Committee should send none but well-founded grievances to the Special Committee, otherwise much time will be wasted in pushing merely trivial, not susceptible of proof or just plain ‘grouch’ complaints. These will simply gum up the machinery and do much harm to well-founded complaints.”

In 1921, Hale resigned due to a disabling accident, and VFW Commander-in-Chief Robert G. Woodside (1920-22) named Robert B. Handy Jr. as director of the NSB.

Handy's dedication to the cause was so great that he once took out a personal loan for \$3,000 to help pay VFW bills during lean times.

According to the 1947-published *The Story of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States*, by Katherine Goldsmith, veterans frequently sought the assistance of VFW.

During a five-month period (March through August 1921), 1,225 claims were received, 616 settled and several hundred were pending while further information was obtained. Of the 616 settlements, about 300 received total disability ratings and 275 were miscellaneous claims. Only seven of that total were granted no increase in rating.

“The claims are increasing steadily, and I firmly believe it is the duty of the Veterans of Foreign Wars to do all in their power to assist those comrades who are genuinely in need of

assistance,” Handy wrote in the June 1921 Foreign Service magazine. “It takes time and there is a wealth of tedious detail to be overcome, but the best way to do it is to attack the job with a grin and with the same spirit the men who are now in need of aid showed in France.”

In May 1921, the legislative arm to the NSB broke off and the National Legislative Committee was born. WWI vet Edwin S. Bettelheim Jr., of Washington, D.C., was named the committee’s first chairman.

Rehabilitation Service was the name of the department charged with handling veterans’ claims work. It was headed by James Sheehan.

A Navy liaison officer was added in 1927 to work on services for members and former members of the Navy and Marine Corps. Claims work during this time involved the actual review of veterans’ records, whereas before someone at the Veterans Bureau reviewed claims.

Sheehan resigned in 1933. Joe Chittenden, state service officer for Florida, was named new director of Rehabilitation Service until his death in 1943.

Under the leadership of VFW Commander-in-Chief Carl Schoeninger (1943-44), the Rehabilitation Service grew. Sect. 535 of VFW’s National Bylaws established a National Welfare and Service Committee.

In 1944, for the first time in VFW history, there was a full-time paid service officer in each state, as well as the territories of Alaska and Hawaii. To keep all of those individuals on the same page, a training program was introduced.

Training is ‘Intense, Hands-on Experience’

VFW service officer training dates back to 1943, when training schools were established across the country. Fred Beard, former Department of Michigan adjutant, was in charge of the school in Dearborn, Mich. The first course saw 25 veterans receiving instruction on VA procedures, laws, public speaking and familiarity with the VFW Constitution and Bylaws.

Later, a joint training program with the Disabled American Veterans took place at American University in Washington, D.C.

In 1946, George Ijams became the new director and set up a training school for VFW Department service officers. In the on-the-job training, trainees learned as they worked at regional VA offices.

Most participants trained were college educated or had experience in legal or social service fields.

Ijams also established a “Service Officer’s Maxim,” still being used today. It stated: “I shall pass through this world but once. Any good thing, therefore, that I can do, or any kindness I can show to any human being, let me do it now. Let me not defer it nor neglect it, for I shall not pass this way again.”

More than 40 years later, an official national training program for VFW Department service officers was established under NVS Director Frederico Juarbe Jr.

“The training program is divided into four distinct phases,” Juarbe wrote in an April 1985 VFW magazine column. “Although the format for each differs, the objective is identical: to enhance technical aptitude to serve more effectively the needs of veterans, their dependents and survivors.”

Today, VFW offers four training courses per year. Some are basic, while others are for those with more than five years in the industry. According to Lauren Barefoot, NVS manager of training and quality assurance, conducting training helps reach a greater pool of people.

“We do everything we can to help others know how to protect veterans’ benefits,” Barefoot said. “Our training is an intense, hands-on experience.”

Most recently, training was held in May at Valley Forge, Pa.

During the event, NVS officially rolled out its new online training with developer PsychArmor Inc.

It allows VFW accredited service officers access to training resources from anywhere, while providing an outlet for service officers to connect with each other through discussion boards.

“It’s a game-changer for VFW-accredited service officers who work for states and counties who many times do not have the opportunity to participate in or classroom training.”

VFW also offers videos referred to as “Hip Pocket” training courses. Videos can be found on YouTube (search for VFW Hip Pocket Training) and on the organization’s Facebook page.

VFW is ‘Organization of Choice’

Veterans preparing to discharge from the military also benefit from VFW service officer expertise.

Established in 2001, VFW’s Pre-Discharge Claims Program (originally known as Benefits Delivery at Discharge, or BDD), is located on 24 military installations. Pre-discharge representatives ensure separating and retiring active-duty personnel receive assistance in obtaining their VA entitlements and benefits upon discharge.

Gallucci said VFW reps help guide military personnel through the claims process. They also are ready to answer questions about education and medical benefits, as well as VA home loans.

He added that it would be ideal to have a VFW office on every installation requiring pre-discharge services.

“Our Pre-Discharge claims program sets up service members for success after they leave the military, and I would love to provide services at as many locations as we can reach,” said Gallucci.

“We’re already in these discussions, so hopefully we’ll see more military sites come online in the coming years.” NVS Deputy Director Dawn Jirak said it’s been her experience that VFW is the “organization of choice” for military officers getting ready to discharge from the military.

“It really speaks to the quality of service our claims representatives give,” she said. “The training program we have developed over the years has exponentially increased the impact of our worldwide cadre of service officers.”

Looking Forward to Next 100 Years

During the director’s reception at the May training at Valley Forge, a celebration took place. People donned period clothing, and an anniversary cake was cut commemorating NVS’s 100th anniversary.

Past NVS directors Juarbe, Bill Bradshaw and Jerry Manar were on hand for the celebration.

Gallucci and NLS Director Carlos Fuentes both said they are excited to see what the future holds for VFW, especially within their respective departments in the nation’s capital.

“We are proud that for more than 100 years, NLS has influenced every piece of veteran-related legislation,” Fuentes said. “We continue our fight each day on Capitol Hill to make sure the voices of our veterans are heard loud and clear.”

Fuentes noted one of the more prominent issues of late is the fight for “blue water” sailors of the Vietnam War who were exposed to Agent Orange.

As NVS enters its second century of service, Gallucci said that his staff is passionate about the work they do for veterans.

Deputy Director of NVS Veterans Benefits Policy Michael Figlioli agrees.

“To be part of this dynamic and energetic team as we celebrate a century of service is certainly a success,” he said. “Reaching a critical number of service members and veterans to educate them on benefits and services available from VA and that of our great organization can be life-changing.”

Editor’s note: This is the sixth and final piece in a series of feature articles on VFW’s accredited veteran service officers. In 2019, VFW is commemorating the 100th anniversary of its National Veteran Service and National Legislative Service offices in Washington, D.C.

This article is featured in the 2019 August issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Janie Dyhouse](#), senior editor for VFW magazine.