

# Your Organizations It's a New Day at the Old Lodge

by Carla Caldwell

Things are changing down at the VFW hall—or the American Legion post, for that matter.

The days of World War II vets sitting around in smoke-filled rooms enjoying beer-soaked Bingo games are giving way to new activities. Today's veterans' organizations are more often filled with younger military men and women who carry out service projects for families and communities.

Sure, you can still get a beer at some posts. And, sure, there's still Bingo in some places. And, yes, the Veterans of

## VFW

The VFW now counts among its ranks 130,000 servicemen and women who serve, or have served, in Iraq and/or Afghanistan, according to Jerry Newberry, the VFW's director of Communications and Public Affairs.

The influx of younger members meant the VFW has had to find new ways to best serve their interests, while maintaining the organization's relevance and connection to members who fought in World War II, Vietnam and Korea, Newberry said.

Many of these new members, like their older brethren, seek assistance to obtain benefits earned serving in the military—a service on which the VFW was founded; and they want to keep in touch with other active and veteran members of the military.

The difference, Newberry said, is that younger members aren't as likely to hang out

at a VFW hall. More programs have been added at VFW sites to appeal to both new and long-time members, but some new members simply prefer to participate through the Internet, he said. The VFW's Web site disseminates information and provides an easy way for members to connect with one another. Videos are a big draw, as are listings of service projects that members can join.

"There is definitely a social networking aspect to it that appeals to younger members who want to stay in touch, but often from home. And, one reason younger members find the VFW attractive is our focus on service to

communities, the nation, active and veteran members and their families."

The VFW understands that it has had to make changes to become attractive to the new generation and remain vital to the older ones. "Our programs are being redesigned to meet the needs of both new and long-time members," says Newberry. "But our primary focus remains the same—helping those who deserve it most."

The organization's motto sums up its special multi-faceted mission—The VFW is there to honor the dead by helping the living. For more information, visit [www.vfw.org](http://www.vfw.org).

## American Legion

At the American Legion, emphasis on service continues to expand as more younger members and their families become active with the organization.

The American Legion was chartered by Congress in 1919 as a patriotic, war-time veterans organization devoted to helping people. Today, the not-for-profit community service organization numbers nearly 3 million members worldwide, making it the largest veterans organization in the world.

And today's members represent a cross-section of American society, with representatives from all walks of life, says Braxton Bridgers, state adjutant of Alabama's American Legion. "We are the community," he says. "We keep the military and the need for a strong national defense before our communities. Not every community is near a military installation, but there are American Legion posts in many communities. We keep that education alive."

In recent years, says Bridgers, he's noticed an increase in the number of younger veterans—primarily because of the increasing number of veterans, and a heightened awareness of organizations that serve veterans. "We're making a concerted effort to recruit these veterans and let them know



U.S. Air Force Maj. Diallo Creal, executive officer for the 49th Fighter Wing out of Holloman Air Force Base, N.M., talks with Ed "Wishbone" Summerall, American Legion Riders chapter 8 president, and other members of the motorcycle club before taking off to Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio, Texas, Oct. 3, 2007. The riders are bringing comfort, personal items and monetary donations to Brooke Army Medical Center for Operation Wounded Warrior. (U.S. Air Force photo by Airman 1st Class John Strong)

Foreign Wars, American Legion and their auxiliaries have always provided service. It's just that the emphasis on service is even greater today, especially with the ever-increasing number of veterans.

And with so many young military personnel returning from Iraq and Afghanistan and other places around the globe, the organizations are experiencing boosts in their membership. All three emphasize veterans, but all three welcome eligible active duty service members, and all help those service members and their families when needed.

we're here and what we do and how we can assist them while they're still on active duty, then when they separate."

One area where American Legion members have increased service is in assisting the families of deployed service members, says Bridgers. "The American Legion post and members are available to assist the families through community service projects—be it helping with car repair or mowing the grass—something they cannot take care of because of physical or financial hardships." This particularly affects younger soldiers and their families, he says, as they may not be as financially secure as older service members.

"Sometimes, there's a delay in getting pay set up when a soldier is activated, or getting benefits on track," says Bridgers. "We're here to offer advice or to help connect the service members or family members with the right person in the military or veterans system who can help them."

The American Legion operates a Family Support Network, which is ready to provide immediate assistance to service personnel and families whose lives have been directly affected by Operation Iraqi Freedom and America's war on terror.

The American Legion has a nationwide toll-free telephone number, 1-800-504-4098, for service members and their family members to call for assistance. Applicants can apply online by visiting [www.legion.org/veterans/fsn](http://www.legion.org/veterans/fsn) and clicking the assistance form at the top of the page. Calls are referred to The American Legion department, or state, in which the call originated. Departments relay the collected information to a local American Legion post. The local post then contacts the service member or family to see how assistance can be provided locally. Since the creation of the Family Support Network during the first Persian Gulf War, thousands of posts have responded to meet these families' needs.

The American Legion also sponsors

many popular programs for youth across America, including baseball and the high-school level Boys State, a program which provides government instruction for high school students. Participants learn how the government works and get to participate in the process. Activities include legislative sessions, court proceedings, law enforcement presentations, assemblies, bands, chorus and recreational programs. The American Legion

Auxiliary sponsors Girls State for high school girls.

Two more ways the American Legion helps service members and their families is through Operation Grateful Heart and Heroes to Hometowns, both of which connect service members or family members with national, state and local support systems and resources when needed. For more information, visit [www.legion.org](http://www.legion.org). ●

Carla Caldwell is a freelance writer in Georgia

