

## American Legion signs Army Community Covenant

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By **Rob McIvaine**

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (Sept. 2, 2009) -- The American Legion, a veterans' organization with a membership of 2.7 million men and women, brought nearly 6,000 state representatives, top political and military officials, and Miss America to its 91st national convention in Louisville, Ky., to sign a nationwide Army Community Covenant.

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"The leaders and representatives of our armed forces have joined us today to inspire communities across America to continue to create programs and initiatives designed to make life easier for warriors and their loved ones," said David K. Rehbein, outgoing American Legion national commander.

The Army Community Covenant, undertaken to foster effective state and local partnerships to improve the quality of life for Soldiers and their families, has quickly expanded to include all branches of the armed forces, including the Reserves and the National Guard.

"We're in the eighth year of this war, the longest in our nation's history with an all-volunteer force," said retired Maj. Gen. Craig Wheldon.

Wheldon is a former commander of the U.S. Army Community and Family Support Center, now re-designated as Family and Morale, Welfare and Recreation Command.

"The secretary of the Army thought this would be an opportunity to engage the American public in their communities and raise the level of visibility of the dedication and sacrifices our servicemembers," Wheldon said.

The Army Community Covenant aims to inspire the leadership in cities, towns and states to develop new or expand existing programs and services that support Soldiers and their families. The signing ceremonies visibly demonstrate the communities' support for military families.

"It's also an opportunity for the military to thank the community for the support they provide," Wheldon said.

Wheldon's organization has identified more than 1,500 "best practices," from national initiatives to local programs that offer effective community support for troops and their families.

For example, 35 states provide full tuition to military families for higher education. Many nonprofit organizations also help military families with their financial needs, such as The American Legion's Temporary Financial Assistance program (for families with children who are minors).

Other groups focus on assistance to children and youth who experience trauma and loss, such as the legion-endorsed Operation Military Kids.

Some groups focus on assistance to military families, such as The American Legion Riders and the Patriot Guard, who for years have protected the sanctity of military funerals across the country, and Operation Wounded Warrior, an annual multi-state motorcycle run by the New Mexico American Legion Riders, which supports wounded servicemembers in VA medical facilities across the southwestern United States.

"I'm a legionnaire," Wheldon said. "And The American Legion seems to be a very good fit for the kind of support the Army Community Covenant is looking for. The Legion doesn't need to spend any money on this. We're just asking its members to help us with our outreach efforts to the mayors and other civic leaders in their communities."

Many legionnaires, veterans of World War II, Korea and Vietnam, at the convention were already involved in improving the quality of life for Soldiers and their families.

Bill Ferguson, outgoing Alabama state commander, spent nearly 23 years in the Navy, "...because my dad was a colonel in the Army," he remembered with humor. He has been a member of the American Legion for 15 years, with eight of them being active.

"I got active because my son was fighting in Baghdad and I wanted to support him and to make sure the support would be there for him when he got back home," Ferguson said. His son has continued in his father's footsteps by becoming CEO and president of the newly formed Afghan / Iraqi Veterans Organization.

Charles French, a delegate from Georgia, joined the Air Force during Vietnam and has been a member of the legion for 24 years, with nearly eight of those years as an active member.

"It was atrocious the way we were treated when we returned from Vietnam. I don't want to see that kind of treatment happen to our military men and women ever again. That's why the signing of this community covenant is so important to me," French said.

But his resolve isn't stopping there. With the signing of the community covenant and the American Legion's pledge to help their local communities get involved, French said, "I'm going back to Georgia and spread the word through the media."

Six men from Louisiana, representing the Korean conflict and Vietnam, echoed this support and future commitment for the same reason.

"We didn't get a heroes' welcome when we returned from Vietnam," Frank J. Streva, a Navy man during Vietnam and now the chaplain for the W. B. Williamson Post #1 in Lake Charles, La., said to laughter from around the table.

"That's because you were no hero," Jack Young, a former Soldier during Korea and Vietnam, commented with a smile. The men quickly got serious when talking about their current mission.

"We're involved with enhancing our relationship with younger veterans and the communities where they live," James Jackson, former Soldier, said. "We also run a community baseball program, sponsor a gumbo cook-off and support the Veterans' Day celebration."

Their hometown Soldiers, who live with their families in the Lake Charles area, are members of the National Guard's 256th Infantry Battalion at Fort Polk, La. They're about to be shipped out for their third tour.

"We're holding a deployment ceremony in December," Jackson said. "We'll be feeding over 1,500 family members as we send them off. We might have been called baby killers by some when we returned from Vietnam, but we want to change that kind of attitude by giving back."

Whelden emphasized this need to change what happened in the past.

"Let's not repeat what happened after Vietnam. Today, these men and women, who were about 10 years old when 9/11 happened, continue to step up and join in the fight with their families left behind. With the help of the American Legion, the hope is that all communities across this nation will also stand up and support those who risk their lives every day for our great nation," Whelden said.

Following a patriotic opening with songs sung by Miss America, Katie Stam, and country music artist Michael Peterson, the Army Community Covenant was signed at the Kentucky International Convention Center by: Adm. Michael Mullen, Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff; Gen. David H. Petraeus, commander, U.S. Central Command; David K. Rehbein, national commander of the American Legion; and other dignitaries.

"Seeing Adm. Mullen and Gen. Petraeus up there signing the covenant made us feel really important and we're hoping this same feeling of importance about this document, which is a symbol of the work we will continue to do, will be felt across the U.S.," Steva said.

"We all have to contribute and remain committed to this fight (in Iraq and Afghanistan). So what can the average American community do? We're asking everyone to support and care for our veterans and their families back home who have paid dearly with their lives for our freedom," Whelden said.

Since April 2008, 85 communities have signed community covenants, and often the events are an opportunity to announce new regional initiatives or programs to support service members. The Army Community Covenant's goal for 2009 is to have every state, city and town host these ceremonies and pledge their support to Soldiers and their Families.

More information, including contacts and how to host a ceremony, is available on the Web site, [http://www.acsim.army.mil/Community\\_Covenant/index.htm](http://www.acsim.army.mil/Community_Covenant/index.htm).

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