

## **DEPARTMENT COMMANDERS ANNUAL REPORT TO THE LEGION MEMBERSHIP**

Greetings Legion Family,

As my time serving as Department Commander comes to a close, I am filled with deep gratitude and immense pride. This journey has been nothing short of extraordinary. It has deepened my love for our great nation, strengthened my dedication to our veterans, and reminded me of the profound power of family and community.

When I stepped into this role, I carried with me not only the legacy of those who served before me, but also the voices of my own family—their encouragement, their sacrifices, and their unwavering belief in service beyond self. Those values guided every decision I made, every mile I traveled, and every hand I shook.

Together, over the past year, we have achieved so much. We've honored our heroes, uplifted our youth, supported our veterans, and extended a hand to families and neighborhoods who needed to hear: the American Legion family is here for you. We built meaningful partnerships with schools, churches, local organizations, and civic groups—reminding our communities that a strong community doesn't just happen. It's built, nurtured, and protected by those who care enough to show up.

What I'm most proud of is how we placed families at the heart of our mission. From post picnics and holiday drives to scholarships and simply opening our doors a little wider, we created spaces where veterans and their loved ones felt seen, valued, and supported. Because service to our country doesn't end with the uniform—it continues at the dinner table, at school events, and in the quiet moments when families shoulder the burden of sacrifice.

To my Department Officers and Chairmen—thank you for leading your areas with commitment and confidence. It was inspiring to see our programs thrive without the need for constant oversight. I especially want to recognize my Vice Commanders for stepping up while I was in California caring for my mother. Your leadership did not go unnoticed, and I'm sincerely grateful.

A heartfelt thank-you also goes to Van, Judy, and MaryJo. Throughout this year, especially during my frequent travels, they were my unwavering support system. They are the backbone of our organization—the people I turn to in times of need and the steady, compassionate presence I've counted on time and again. Simply put, they are exceptional.

To my fellow Legionnaires—thank you for standing shoulder to shoulder with me. Your dedication, resilience, and heart have inspired me daily. To the communities who welcomed me—thank you for showing me that patriotism is alive and well in every corner of our state. And to my family—your love and support made this journey possible. Every hour I gave to this role rested on the foundation of your belief in me.

While I may be stepping down from this position, I am not stepping away from our mission. I remain a proud Legionnaire, dedicated to serving those who served and to the communities that sustain them.

Let us continue to lead with compassion, act with purpose, and never forget: united in service, we are stronger. Thank you, and may God bless our Legion family, our communities, and the United States of America.

Kevin Morello  
Department Commander  
2024 – 2025

## DEPARTMENT VICE COMMANDER'S (DISTRICTS 3-8) ANNUAL REPORT

Commander Morello,

The following is submitted to report on my activities as the SDAL Vice Commander for Districts 3-8, for the 2024-2025 year.

June was the completion of the Department Convention and following my election as the Dept Vice Commander, I attended the Blue Hat Day at the South Dakota Youth Trooper Academy. It is the 5<sup>th</sup> year I have attended that event and it is always a pleasure to talk to the attendees. In July I attended the Finance Commission meeting as well as the District Commander training and Department Executive Committee meeting the 12-14<sup>th</sup>. I helped with My Legion training at Redfield Post which was held July 21st. Although it was a small group, I believe it was well received and showed that the course could be taught in a large group environment. I also represented the Department Commander at the home coming of the newly elected SD Auxiliary President AnnaMae Warnier in Alcester.

August started with a visit to the Garretson post for their annual dinner, a trip to Piedmont for the Commander's homecoming and then to New Orleans for the National Convention as a Department delegate. Although the temperatures are hotter than I would have liked, the convention is always a great event.

I represented the Department Commander at the Annual SDAL golf tournament that was held in Webster September 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup>. The weather was good and they had good participation this year. On the 14<sup>th</sup> I participated in the Volga post annual 2.2 for Heroes which is a 2.2 mile run/walk for Veteran suicide awareness. On the 21st I attended SD Sons of The American Legion homecoming for Shane Lamer also representing the Commander. Also in September was the District 4 fall meeting hosted by the Redfield Post on the 22<sup>nd</sup>, District 6 Fall meeting held in Lake Preston on the 28<sup>th</sup> and District 3 fall meeting held in Miller on the 29<sup>th</sup>. That was the first time I had been at the Miller post.

October started with my attendance at the National Fall meetings in Indianapolis the 6<sup>th</sup> - 9<sup>th</sup>. The District 5 fall meeting was held at the White post on the 20<sup>th</sup>, the District 7 fall meeting at the Dell Rapids Post on the 26<sup>th</sup> and the District 8 fall meeting was held at the Wagner post on the 27<sup>th</sup>.

In November I attended the Brookings annual veterans dinner on the 7<sup>th</sup>, visited the Milbank Post on the 19<sup>th</sup>, and attended the legislative round table at the Watertown Post on the 21<sup>st</sup>.

It should be noted that I started my campaigning for Department Commander about this time and although I did campaign I would also discuss the topics at the various times, such as submitting required reports, membership, submitting the "of the year" packages and other pertinent information at the time.

December was a busy month with post visits to Redfield, Brookings, Lake Preston, Watertown, Aberdeen, Madison and White. I also attended the Egan Post Christmas event, participated in the Training Committee preps for MidWinter and the funeral for Pat Huls. In January I made post visits to Garretson, De Smet, Hartford, Sisseton, Volga, Groton, Stickney, Gregory, Wagner, Lennox, and Mitchell. I also participated in the DEC Teams meeting as well as Legion Day at the capitol to honor the Girls State Governor and Boys State Lieutenant Governor. I also spent several days at the Capitol lobbying for or against various bills.

February started with visits to Tea, Pierre, Clear Lake, Wessington and Chamberlain posts. I again spent several days in Pierre at the Capitol to lobby against HB 1278 which would allow non certified outside organizations to charge veterans in assisting them prepare benefits packages. Unfortunately the bill was forwarded and eventually approved. Midwinter was held in Oacoma and I feel was very successful. As part of the training committee, I presented a class on required reports and the various awards from the posts. February ended with a visit to the Lead post.

I had a number of medical items that took up a lot of March, however I still visited the Hudson post as well as the District 3 spring meeting in Winner on March 15<sup>th</sup> and the District 6 spring meeting in Plankinton on the 16<sup>th</sup>. The District 5 spring meeting was held in Volga on March 22<sup>nd</sup> and District 4 meeting was in Cresbard on the 23<sup>rd</sup>. March ended with the District 8 meeting hosted by the Tabor post on the 29<sup>th</sup> and the Garretson post hosted the District 7 meeting on the 30<sup>th</sup>. I had not been to Plankinton or the Tabor post before and I felt all the district meetings were well attended.

April was another busy month. Although not under my preview, I visited the Spearfish and Piedmont post on April 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> respectively. I also attended the District 1 spring meeting in Spearfish on the 5<sup>th</sup> as well as was a guest at their Legion Birthday celebration that evening. On Sunday the 6<sup>th</sup> I attended the District 2 spring meeting in Hot Springs. I met with the Sturgis post on the 8<sup>th</sup>. On the 10<sup>th</sup> I was back on the east side of the state visiting the Gary post. April 16<sup>th</sup> was a trip to the Rapid City post to campaign. The 24<sup>th</sup> I attended a Vietnam Veterans pinning conducted by Representative Dusty Johnson hosted by the Watertown post. I was in the Chamberlain April 26<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> to present a resolutions class to the 3<sup>rd</sup> South Dakota American Legion College. There were 9 attendees and I think the classes were well received.

May 1<sup>st</sup> I visited the Huron post and had the privilege to swear in their newly elected officers. May 6<sup>th</sup> I visited the Mobridge post and again had the privilege of swearing in their new officers. I visited with the Fort Pierre post on the 7<sup>th</sup> and participated in the Internal Affairs commission video teleconference to review submitted resolutions on the 8<sup>th</sup> as well as visited the Webster post that evening.

In that this report is submitted prior to the end of my term as the Department Vice Commander, it is probably fitting to identify future items I will be involved in prior to the upcoming department convention. I will be visiting the Lemmon post on May 13<sup>th</sup> as well as participating in the Aberdeen post Past Post Commander's dinner and ceremony and plan on visiting the Big Stone post on the 21<sup>st</sup>. The beginning of June I will again be a staff member for Boys State as well as participating in a portion of the SDAL 605 ride to raise money for the SDAL Foundation which will then bring us to our annual convention June 18-22.

It has been a privilege to serve our Legion family as one of your Department Vice Commanders this last year.

Kevin Hempel  
SDAL Department Vice Commander  
Districts 3-8

## DEPARTMENT ADJUTANT'S ANNUAL REPORT

Department Commander Morello,

This report is written to satisfy the Constitution and By Laws requirement for the Department Adjutant to write and present to the annual convention, a report covering activities not covered in the annual reports of the Committee and Commission Chairs and other Department officials. This report is as of May 8, 2025.

As I wrap up my second year as Adjutant, I am proud to report that since July 1<sup>st</sup>, 2024, I have visited 46 Posts, with over 90 separate Legion Events in total, attended 16 district meetings/conventions, attended eight Department Executive Committee Meetings, attended the Oratorical Contest, executed the Mid-Winter Conference (which thanks to Post 3 and PDC/ANEC Doug Feltman it was a great success.) Attended more than 43 meetings with outside organizations and spent 25 days conducting National Level meetings and activities, in total I have spent over 75 nights on the road. All this and the year is not over yet. It has been a busy and rewarding year.

Past Department Commander Barns once said, "I think that The Department Adjutant of SD's office is an office that is hard to fill and suit everybody, because you are going to have fault to find with it wherever you are or whatever you do." He said that at the tenth annual Convention of the Department in 1928 and how true he was. I am honored and humbled to be able to work for the Department and our members. I have done my best for what I feel is in the best interest of The American Legion.

With diminishing membership, another significant challenge has been finances. Our raw number of members is down but our market penetration is the highest in the nation. More than 28% of the Veterans in South Dakota are members of The American Legion, this is something for the entire Department to be proud of. With the lower member numbers our revenue is diminishing. At Department Headquarters we have been striving to make as many cuts as possible. Continue to move as much as feasible away from mailing hard copies and, we eliminated a Department vehicle. We made changes to our annual meeting schedules to reduce travel and expenses and have conducted more meetings through video teleconference. Some of these changes have been met with apprehension but are necessary for healthy growth of the Department. Finances will continue to be a significant challenge until we can stop depending on Membership dues as our main source of income. We must secure partnerships, sponsorships and outside donors. If we continue to put the burden on the Posts to fund the Department at some point, we will price ourselves out of membership.

This year has not been all challenges; there have been many rewards. Due to the hard work of Membership Chair Bill Peters and the Posts themselves, our Department won the Big Twelve Challenge for our category for a second year in a row. That means \$2000 for investing in technology.

We continue to make changes and updates to the Department Headquarters. In the past year we have put on display our 106 years of history. Organized and cleaned out our digital systems to be more functional. We made the switch over to QuickBooks from our outdated antiquated bookkeeping system and although it is not complete, we are working with our accountant to reconcile. We overhauled the Department website and have new webhosting services. We dropped redundant email services, and application subscriptions. We started using more applications we already have including AI to build efficiencies in the office. The projects are not complete, we will continue to improve our home in the Codington County War Memorial and Courthouse building where we have been since 1928.

The headquarters staff consists of the Mrs. Judy Greenfield, our Membership and Bookkeeper who has been with the department for 32 years, Mrs. MaryJo Boner Executive Assistant and Programs Coordinator who has been with the department for seven years and myself, the Department Adjutant, I will complete my second year in June. Judy and MaryJo are truly the

backbone of the Department, without their dedication, our organization would come to a grinding halt. I am sincerely grateful to have these wonderful ladies to work alongside, they have made for a very welcoming first year.

Mister Commander, since most of the Committee Chairs and State Officers have filed complete reports, most of the activities of the Department have been covered and reported on. I would like to congratulate you on a very successful year. It has truly been a privilege to have you as my Commander, you have left some big shoes for your successors to fill.

Respectfully submitted,  
C.P. Van Delist, Department Adjutant

## ANNUAL REPORT OF THE NATIONAL EXECUTIVE COMMITTEEMAN

Department Commander Morello and fellow Legionnaires,

I am honored to submit this annual report as the South Dakota National Executive Committeeman (NEC), reflecting our department's engagement and representation at the national level of The American Legion over the past year.

### **National Convention – New Orleans**

The 105th National Convention in New Orleans brought together over 6,500 delegates, alternates, and guests. South Dakota was well represented by a dedicated delegation. We actively participated in committee meetings during the convention, engaged with resolutions affecting national policy, and maintained a visible presence on the convention floor.

One convention highlight was the keynote address from Lt. Gen. Russel Honoré, USA (Ret.), who commanded Joint Task Force Katrina. His message on leadership, resilience, and responsibility profoundly impacted attendees.

The convention concluded with the election of **James A. LaCoursiere Jr.** as our new National Commander. His theme, **L.U.V. – Loyalty, Unity, and Valor**, reinforces the foundational principles of our organization. His leadership calls for strengthening veteran suicide prevention efforts through the **“Be the One”** initiative, increasing visibility in our communities, and expanding legislative advocacy.

### **NEC Duties and Committee Involvement**

As your NEC, I participated in the National Executive Committee's post-convention meeting and the Fall NEC Meeting, where critical decisions regarding policy, finance, and program direction were made. I worked to ensure South Dakota's values and concerns were presented during deliberations.

I also attended the 2025 **American Legion Washington Conference**, where I had the honor of witnessing **National Commander LaCoursiere** testify before Congress. His powerful testimony reinforced our national priorities and elevated the voice of veterans on Capitol Hill. His commitment to veteran suicide prevention, expanded caregiver support, and protection of earned benefits was well-received and critical to our continued advocacy efforts.

I will continue to represent South Dakota at the upcoming **Spring NEC Meeting**, where we will again deliberate on key organizational priorities, policy development, and resolutions impacting veterans and their families nationwide.

### **Legislative Advocacy**

National Commander LaCoursiere emphasized the need to bolster our legislative efforts. This includes support for key initiatives such as:

- **The GI Bill Parity Act**, to support our National Guard and Reserve;
- **The Major Richard Star Act**, to allow concurrent receipt of VA disability and DOD retirement;
- **Funding protection for the Coast Guard** during government shutdowns.

South Dakota's voice is vital in these national conversations. I urge all posts to remain engaged with our Congressional delegation and participate in grassroots advocacy to reinforce these priorities.

### **Looking Ahead**

As we move forward, I challenge every Legionnaire to embrace our mission with renewed energy:

- Continue growing the **“Be the One”** campaign through post-level programs and partnerships.
- Promote our visibility through service projects, public events, and media engagement.
- Encourage membership growth by emphasizing our impact and purpose.

Let us stand united in our efforts, upholding the ideals of Loyalty, Unity, and Valor.

Thank you for your continued trust and support. It remains a great privilege to represent South Dakota at the national level.

Respectfully submitted,  
**Fred Nelson**, National Executive Committeeman  
The American Legion, Department of South Dakota

## **2024-2025 AMERICANISM COMMISSION CHAIRMAN REPORT**

Commander Morello,

Thanks for the opportunity to have served as the South Dakota American Legion's 2024-2025 Americanism Chairman. As of this report's submission, to meet the 1 May 2025 suspense date, of the "Big Three Americanism Programs:" Boys State, Youth Trooper Academy, and the Department's Scholarship Oratorical Program, only the Oratory Program has been completed.

I extend my thanks to the past Americanism Officers: Dan Wyatt, Harry Boner, Doug Harris, and Larry Madsen, and to Past Department Commander Doug Feltman, plus committee members Larry Madsen, Clayton Nei, Mike Kraft, and Ken Sabers for their advice and expertise throughout my tenure as Americanism Officer. A special thanks to MaryJo Boner of Department Headquarters for her assistance in preparing and distribution of the annual Americanism Package along with my accompanying Americanism Officer's Letter to each of the District's and Post's Americanism Officers. In recognition that the American Legion is a family, MaryJo Boner also facilitated effective coordination and mutual support with the Auxiliary to incorporate the Auxiliary's Girls States Program and other related interests.

The Americanism 2024-2025 Program year kicked off the year with an Americanism Program Familiarization Presentation to the Department Executive Committee (DEC) and attending guests at the DEC's 13 July 2024 meeting held at Watertown American Legion Post 17.

In the 2024 fall, eligible students grade 9 through 12 and under 20 years of age, enrolled in public, parochial, military, private, and state accredited home schooling, selected and prepared their oratory thesis based on the United States of America Constitution for Post level oratory competition. Following the Post contests, each District's Oratorical contests were concluded in January 2025. The Department Scholarship Oratorical Contest was held Sunday, 16 February 2025, at 10:30 AM CDT, at the Arrowood Resort and Conference Center in Oacoma, South Dakota at the conclusion of the Department's 2025 Mid-winter Conference.

Originally, seven Districts were scheduled to have contestants at the Department Oratorical Contest. Unfortunately, due to untimely personal and family hardships, two candidates were unable to attend. The five remaining Districts contestants each provided original highly polished, thoughtful, and stimulating prepared 8-to-10-minute presentations. Followed by an assigned constitutional amendment, each contestant demonstrated their in-depth knowledge of the assigned topic, plus an ability to organize their thoughts and discuss for 3 to 5 minutes, our government under the principles of the constitution as related to the assigned topic.

The winner of the Department Contest was Elna Andrews of District 7's Beresford American Legion Post 7. She received Department's \$1,500 Scholarship and 1<sup>st</sup> Place Trophy. Elna and an accompanying sponsor will travel expense paid to the National Oratorical Competition being held, 16 to 18 May 2025, at Hillsdale College, Hillsdale, Michigan, with an opportunity to win \$25,000 for a 1st place finish, \$22,500 for 2nd place, or \$20,000 for 3rd place, as well as \$2,000 for each round of participation at the National Competition.

Our second place Department Contestant and recipient of \$1,000 Scholarship and trophy, was Blix L. Broussard, sponsored by District 2's Rapid City American Legion Post 22. Placing 3rd and recipient of \$500 scholarship and a trophy was Ada Sharp, representing District 4's Aberdeen American Legion Post 24. Each of our finalists: Preston Singrey sponsored by District 6's Arlington American Legion Post 42, and Christian Carley representing District 1's Box Elder's American Legion Post 315, each received \$200 and a trophy.

I extend my personal thanks to the 22 volunteers from across the American Legion Family of Legionnaires, Auxiliary, SAL, and community citizens, who enabled the Department's 2025 Oratorical Contest to flow smoothly. A special thanks to Past Department Commander Doug Feltman for obtaining the five exceptional judges plus an alternate judge, whose task to evaluate and rank order the contestants and subsequent placings was no easy feat.



Prior to the Department's Mid-winter Conference, the Americanism Commission met via Teams on 30 January to review the progress status of Americanism programs. Of special note, historically Post and Individual Americanism Awards selections were processed by the commission on Blue Hat Day during Boys State Week. There was a need identified to break from history in order to avoid distracting volunteers from Boys State support requirements. It was decided to meet the week prior to Boys State on 29 May at Pierre's American Legion Post 8. After an informative Shooting Sports presentation by Americanism Commission member Mike Kraft, the Commission unanimously agreed to propose inclusion of Shooting Sports as an Americanism Program. Mike Kraft has agreed to chair the Americanism Shooting Sports Committee and to lead its implementation. Within my submission for the 2025-2026 Fiscal Year Americanism Budget, I have dedicated a section for a budget line to be added to Department's Annual Budget Planning process. It is anticipated the initial year funding will be handled with donations and dedicated fund-raising projects, minimizing impact to the upcoming 2025-2026 Fiscal Year Budget. Additional topics included Boys State registration status, Youth Trooper Academy, plus an update by Lyle Tolsma, Athletic Chairman, on our 100<sup>th</sup> Year of American Legion Baseball, as well as the current state of High School Baseball Program development.

Due to initial low registration numbers, the Youth Trooper Academy registration was extended two (2) weeks to 4 April, as a result, registrations more than doubled to 55 individuals. Youth Trooper Academy interviews were concluded by 12 April, with quality male and female Academy cadets selected to fill the 24 Academy slots. The Youth Trooper Academy begins immediately following the Department's Annual Convention on Monday, 23 June, concluding on Friday, 27 June, with Blue Hat Day scheduled to be at the shooting range on Thursday, 26 June 2025. A special shout out and congratulations to our 2024 Youth Trooper Academy "Outstanding Graduate," and \$500.00 Scholarship winner, Bowan Ryan from Castlewood American Legion Post 250. Bowan is currently attending Lake Area Technical Institute studying Criminal Justice.

Boys State is scheduled for Monday, 2 June through Friday, 6 June 2025. Registration is currently lagging with registrations currently below last year's rate. This continuing downhill trend is reflective over the past few years. How to reverse this decline for the upcoming 2025-2026 Program Year will be a topic to be addressed with the Boys State Director and his staff, as well as the Ad-hoc Strategic Planning Committee. This year's fee to be paid by each Post for each Boys State Attendee is \$250.00, plus their transportation costs. Blue Hat Day is scheduled for Thursday, 5 June. I encourage all to visit with Boys State participants and the activities orchestrated by the Program Staff to develop our future community, state, and national leaders.

Our support of the Scouting Program continues to engage development of our youth. From the three applications received for Eagle Scout of the Year, the winner was from Spearfish Post 164. The Eagle Scout winner's project involved making an ADA-compliant accessible wheelchair ramp, with a movable railing to load and unload commodities in and out of the VFW building. This challenging project provides noteworthy service to the physically challenged and disabled individuals of the community.

Unfortunately, it is noted that some schools do not include the Americanism Programs in their curriculum of extracurricular opportunities for students to expand their civic and patriotic education beyond the basic classroom instruction. I encourage the American Legion Family Leadership to engage their school district boards and school administrators, plus teachers to increase participation in all our programs: Flag Education, Veterans in the Classroom, Oratory Scholarship, Boys State to include the Auxiliary's Girls State, Youth Trooper Academy, Athletic Program of Legion Baseball, Scouting Program, and Shooting Sports Program.

As each District and their Post prepares your Post annual Americanism program goals for the next program year, and your Annual Americanism Report for submission, reach out and contact your school officials this spring to schedule appointments involving your Post on the upcoming new school year calendar.

A recap of the Americanism Budget as of submission of this report is reflected below:

<u>Americanism Commission:</u>	<u>Budget:</u>	<u>Expended YTD:</u>	<u>Remaining:</u>	<u>% Used:</u>
Oratory Scholarship:	\$4,000.00	\$1,087.62	\$2,912.38	27.19%
Commission Expenses:	\$2,000.00	\$1,225.37	\$774.63	61.27%
YTA & Scholarship:	\$2,700.00	\$500.00	\$2,200.00	18.52%
Public Safety Committee	\$440.00	\$43.00	\$397.00	9.77%
C&Y Programs	\$1,500.00	\$195.06	\$1,304.94	13.00%
C&Y Committee	\$500.00	\$446.00	\$54.00	89.20%
Americanism Awards	\$500.00	\$0.00	\$500.00	0.00%

**Notes:**

- (1) Above includes \$500 for Americanism Awards budgeted in the HQ's Budget,
- (2) Numerous expenditures occur during the remaining months of, May and June.
- (3) The Athletic Committee and Boys State Budgets are managed separately.
- (4) Shooting Scholarship Program Budget Line will be added to the 2025-2026 Budget Year.

Thank you, Commander Morello, the opportunity to represent the Department of South Dakota as Americanism Chairman. And, thanks again to the Past Americanism Chairmen, and Americanism Commission members for their direction and support.

Respectfully Submitted,  
David R. Booze,  
Americanism Commission Chairman

## **2024 – 2025 ATHLETIC COMMISSION CHAIRMAN ANNUAL REPORT**

Commander Morello,

On behalf of the SD American Legion Athletic Commission, we would like to thank you and your staff for your continued support of SD American Legion Baseball.

This year is the 100<sup>th</sup> year anniversary for American Legion Baseball, which all started back in 1925 in Milbank, SD. Birch-Miller Post 9 of Milbank, SD will be the host of a three-day celebration called “The American Legion Baseball Centennial Classic Tournament” sponsored by National. There will be American Legion Baseball teams from SD, ND, NE, and MN participating in the tournament. We welcome all who would like to join in on the celebration to come to Milbank, SD. The dates for the tournament are July 11<sup>th</sup>, 12<sup>th</sup>, and 13<sup>th</sup>, 2025. There will be two games on the 11<sup>th</sup>, three games on the 12<sup>th</sup> and the championship on the 13<sup>th</sup>.

The 2025 American Legion Baseball registration is in full swing with several teams already registered. As always, the SDAL Athletic Commission continues to work together to keep SD American Legion Baseball a priority for our youth who wish to participate.

The state championship host sites and dates for this year (2025) are:

- Class “A” Senior – Watertown, SD (July 29 – August 2)
- Class “B” Senior – Milbank, SD (August 1 – 5)
- Class “A” Junior – Rapid City, SD, Post 22 (July 31 – August 3)
- Class “B” Junior – Milbank, SD (August 8 – 10)

On December 15<sup>th</sup>, 2024, selections were made for the 2026 state championship host sites. They are as follows:

- Class “A” Senior – Rapid City, SD, Post 22
- Class “B” Senior – Madison, SD
- Class “A” Junior – Sioux Falls, SD, Post 15
- Class “B” Junior – Redfield, SD

This years American Legion Golf Tournament will be hosted by Wakonda American Legion Post 13 on September 6<sup>th</sup> & 7<sup>th</sup>, 2025. This tournament is open to any American Legion or Son of American Legion member. The host/chairman is Mark Westergard of Wakonda along with Commissioner’s Elton Blemaster and Gene Gillen.

There continues to be talk about the SDHSAA sanctioning baseball as a High School sport. In March, I participated in a meeting with the SDHSAA who are still conducting a study if they are going to sanction High School Baseball in SD. The earliest this would take place is in the school year 2027.

Commander Morello, this concludes this year’s annual Athletic Commission Report.

Respectfully submitted,  
Lyle W. Tolsma, Chairman  
SD American Legion Athletic Commission

## **ANNUAL BOYS STATE DIRECTOR REPORT**

The Annual Boys State Session will be held on the NSU Campus in Aberdeen SD on 2-6 June 2025. We currently have paltry 128 registered attendees. The Annual Boys State Corporation meeting will be held on Sunday 1 June at 3pm on the campus of NSU.

Respectfully Submitted  
Gene Opbroek, Director

## **ANNUAL REPORT OF THE DEPARTMENT CHAPLAIN**

I was honored and humbled by the appointment by Department Commander Kevin Morello to serve as Department Chaplain for the coming year following the State Convention in June 2024.

During the course of the year I have had the privilege of attending the newly elected Commander's Homecoming; Fall and Spring District meetings; and a variety of Veteran's events within my own district and neighboring districts. I have participated in a National Chaplain's Teleconference with the National Chaplain and a number of Department Chaplains around the nation.

I've been privileged to publish a variety of faith-based posts on the Department Facebook page at appropriate times of the year for the edification of our members across the Department.

The preparation and conduct of the Four Chaplains Memorial service at the Mid-Winter Conference and my own post in North Sioux City, has been a privilege. I felt that since the service included members from the Auxiliary, Sons, and Riders, that the Chaplain representative from each should have a role in the service. It was well received, and each branch of our Legion Family was represented.

Regarding Department Services, the Memorial Service at the State Convention took on a new look after including the names of Past Sons of the American Legion Department Commanders in the Memorial Rolls on the power-point, and the printed list, as well as Legion Past Commanders and Auxiliary Past Presidents. We updated the slide program with appropriate music to enhance the meditation time during the review of those officers who have been transferred to Post Everlasting. The Department services should be all inclusive of our Legion family.

I am continuing to have discussions with other department Chaplains on the possibility of a workshop for Chaplains at all levels within our Department. I am also continuing to look at increasing faith-based publications on social media for the Department's edification.

Respectfully Submitted,  
Rev. Michael Kumm, Ph.D  
Chaplain

## 2024-2025 ANNUAL CHILDREN AND YOUTH CHAIRMAN REPORT

Commander Morello,

The South Dakota American Legion Children and Youth (C&Y) program this year has kept me busy. I want to thank you for your leadership and willingness to help direct my efforts with the C&Y program this past year. I greatly appreciate it.

For the past several years, I have worked with the C&Y programs within the Department. I have had the opportunity to work with many great American Legion Family members from across the Department with fund raiser events in support of The Children's Miracle Network, Special Olympics, Holiday Meal gift card program for young service members and their families, plus I have been able to help organize and direct service-related activities on behalf of Operation Homefront. The service activities that the Department supports at the beginning of every new Legion year are;

- The annual Backpack Distribution program that is put on by the Family Readiness Department at Ellsworth Airforce Base near Rapid City on the last weekend in July. Just this past July, we had 18 American Legion, Auxiliary, SAL, and Rider members from three Districts helping to hand out 400 donated backpacks filled with school supplies. These activities were reported in last fall's Up to Now, The Rising Son, and The Legionette newsletter along with photos of the event. This event is expected to grow this coming July and more assistance will be requested from the Department as time draws closer.
- The second service program that we assisted with was the annual Dollar Tree program where volunteers were asked to pick up donated school supplies over the summer and donated toys in November. These were to be donated to National Guard Armories, VA facilities, or state organizations to assist our younger veteran families with some of the necessities needed for the school year. We had a great crew from the Aberdeen Post assist with this program where over 100 gift bags of donated items were distributed to the Aberdeen VA CBOC and to the local field office of Social Services.
- These are great programs that I hope the American Legion will continue to be a part of.

We had an early start to the 2024/2025 American Legion year by assisting a few veterans with children at home with filing of **TFA** (Temporary Financial Assistance) requests.

- The Sioux Falls Post Commander and Children and Youth program Chairman did a fantastic job working with a veteran in their area which resulted in that veteran receiving the assistance that was requested.
- Our second veteran worked with the Clear Lake Post and myself for assistance and while a formal request for TFA was not submitted, that veteran was able to receive assistance from Operation Homefront which better suited their needs at the time.
- Most recently I received a request through the Sioux Falls Post where a veteran grandparent was in need of assistance with taking care of their child and grandchildren. While the fact that there were grandchildren living with the veteran, the rules of how to obtain assistance through a TFA request are clear. The minor children in need must belong to the veteran or if the older veteran has custody of the minor children, then TFA assistance may be possible. This was as a result of The American Legion passing Resolution No. 5 (May 2022) Titled: Policy and Procedures of the Temporary Financial Assistance Grant Program. The policy clearly states that the minor child must be living full-time in the home of a qualifying veteran or service member. The minor child qualifies if they fall into one of the following categories. Yes, the veteran (the grandparent) could qualify for TFA if the minor child(ren) is living in the veteran's home full-time and is under the veteran's legal guardianship or has been adopted by the veteran. Veterans can apply for assistance through their local American Legion Post if the child is:

- a biological child of the veteran or service member,
- a child legally adopted by the veteran or service member,
- a stepchild by marriage of the veteran or service member, or
- a child who is under the legal guardianship of a veteran or service member.

I have attached a link to the resolution here. <https://archive.legion.org/node/7887>. TFA forms can be found at [www.sdlegion.org/sdal-tfa-form](http://www.sdlegion.org/sdal-tfa-form).

While it has been a busy year, not much of the available budget has not been tapped into yet. With the month of April being Children and Youth Month, there are programs and projects where the available funds will be used to assist the programs once the month is over. I have made this known to the Department leadership of our Legion family in the first week in April. I suggested at the time that unless some of the available funds were needed during the month of April, the balance of the funds would be split between programs supported by the leadership of each branch of the Legion Family within the Department, such as;

- Special Olympics and Children Miracle Network of South Dakota; supported by The American Legion, Legion Riders, and the Sons of the American Legion,
- Project Stuff Sack, supported by The American Legion Auxiliary
- Operation Homefront programs that are supported by the entire Department Family.

The chart below reflects my current budget used to date. I have sent out an email to the Children and Youth Committee requesting their support for these programs. Of the remaining \$1,304.94 in the Program budget, each of these four programs listed above will receive a \$325 check in support of their work. I will use a portion of the Committee funds to help cover cost for C&Y awards and expenses during the convention. There are many Posts from across the Department that represented the C&Y programs over the past month that should be recognized.

On a personal note, I have had a great year where I have learned and grown as a Legionnaire for the Department of South Dakota. I received the Volunteer of the Region Award from Operation Homefront in July. I represented the Department of South Dakota at The National American Legion College in November. I have worked this year in support of all the programs referenced within this report. I was also recently asked to attend the National Awards Ceremony for the Military Child of the year Award which is another program supported by The American Legion through Operation Homefront. I hope to continue to use all I have learned over the past years as I plan to continue to work as, or with the future C&Y Chair of the American Legion, Department of South Dakota in the years to come.

Again, I wanted to thank you for selecting me as your state C&Y Chairman for the 2024-2025 Legion year. It has been a great year working with you. Thank you for your direction and mentorship. I wish you all the best in the coming years!!

Respectfully Submitted,  
Harry Boner, Children and Youth Chair

	July	Aug.	Sept.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May.	June	Usage
C&Y Programs	\$1,500.00	\$0.00	\$0.00	\$23.28	\$0.00	\$0.00	\$0.00	\$0.00	\$171.78	\$0.00	\$195.06	\$1,304.94	13.00%
C&Y Committee	\$500.00	\$446.00	\$0.00	\$0.00	\$0.00	\$0.00	\$0.00	\$0.00	\$0.00	\$0.00	\$446.00	\$54.00	89.20%

## **EDUCATIONAL SCHOLARSHIP COMMITTEE CHAIRMAN REPORT**

Department Commander Kevin Morello,

The past year the Educational Scholarship fund received approximately \$4,144.65 in donations. The cost of some of these donations included the dissolution of Fulton Farmer Post 85 of Epiphany, South Dakota. As seen, in previous years donations to the Education Scholarship fund were zero, this past year's donations have a bittersweet taste. At present the investing value of the South Dakota Community Fund account is last known at \$147,701.00. Monies not invested currently being held in a Savings Account was last known as \$20,275.03. I would recommend the Department Executive Committee explore the option of rebalancing the Savings Account more towards the Investment Account for succeeding years forthcoming. This recommendation is since 4% of the fund value is used to disburse scholarship award amounts to the successful applicants. More scholarship monies mean more disbursements.

Seven applications were received for this year's scholarships. Of the seven applicants one was deemed ineligible on it's face and another is under review for eligibility based on the relationship of the applicant to a connected member of the South Dakota American Legion family. The eligibility issue is whether the Legion Member is current in the present membership year. At last check, the member was expired. Resolution of this issue will be addressed prior to disbursement of monies from the Scholarship Fund. As of now the Education Committee can disburse up to \$6,852.00 to the qualified recipients.

The 2024 State Educator the Year for South Dakota was Chad Long who also was recognized as the American Legion National Educator of the Year 2024. Mr. Long is an Educator of the Lyman School District.

The Education Scholarships offered by the Department of South Dakota are for the children of Veterans, grandchildren of Veterans and Veterans who met the requirements set forth in the Education Scholarship brochure attending post-secondary education, college or technical schools. The fund is self-sustaining through donations.

After serving on the Education Committee for several years I will be submitting my proposed changes to the Education Scholarship Fund to the Department Executive Committee prior to State Convention. I am of the mind that the Education Scholarship Fund (now released of its previous Loan component) can be more effectively utilized as a recruitment, retention and revision of mission to better serve the South Dakota American Legion Family as a whole.

Mr. Commander I will be stepping down as Chairman after the State Convention so that I can focus my efforts on other pursuits. I will remain a sitting member of the State Education Committee (with the consent of your replacement) for my remaining obligation.

Yours in Service  
Michael Pauling  
Chairman State Education Committee



## EMPLOYMENT COMMITTEE CHAIRMAN REPORT

Commander,

This letter serves as my annual report as Chair of the Employment Committee for the past year. A core tenet of The American Legion is ensuring the well-being of our veterans, and this extends directly to fostering opportunities for meaningful employment. Recognizing organizations that actively support our veterans through employment is crucial to this mission and benefits both the veterans and our communities here in South Dakota.

Our state is fortunate to have many employers who value the unique skills, training, leadership, work ethic, integrity, and discipline that veterans bring to the workforce. It is vital that we, as Legionnaires, identify and celebrate these employers who provide good-paying jobs, positive work environments, and comprehensive benefits to our fellow veterans.

Unfortunately, the Department did not receive any nominations for our employment awards last year. To ensure deserving organizations are recognized, I strongly encourage all posts to actively seek out and nominate eligible candidates in their local areas this year.

As a reminder, the Department offers the following employment awards, recognizing different aspects of veteran support:

- Employer of Older Workers Award: Honors employers who demonstrate a commitment to hiring and retaining older workers, including veterans.
- Homeless Veterans Outreach Award: Recognizes individuals or organizations making a significant impact in assisting homeless veterans.
- Award to Enhance the Lives of Disabled Persons: Celebrates efforts to improve the quality of life and employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities, including veterans.
- Employer of Veterans Awards (Small, Medium, and Large Employer): Acknowledges employers of varying sizes who demonstrate outstanding commitment to hiring and supporting veterans.
- The Employment Service Award: Recognizes individuals or organizations providing exceptional employment services to veterans.

The deadline for submitting award nominations is November 15, 2025. Detailed information regarding the criteria and nomination process for each award can be found on the Employment Awards Forms page of the Department website: <https://sdlegion.org/employment-award-forms>

I urge each post to dedicate time to identifying and nominating deserving employers and organizations within their communities. I am readily available to provide assistance with the application process. My contact information can be obtained through the Department Adjutant.

I am optimistic that through a concerted effort by our posts, we will have a strong pool of nominations this year and can appropriately recognize those who champion employment opportunities for our South Dakota veterans.

Respectfully,  
Gregory K. Dias  
Employment Committee Chair

## **FINANCE COMMISSION ANNUAL REPORT**

Commander Morello,

As Department Finance Officer and Chair of the Finance Commission, it has been an honor to serve the Legionnaires of the Department of South Dakota. It has been a pleasure to serve alongside the other members of the Finance Commission who are PDC Paul Evenson, David Booze, Dave Gutzmer, and Dale Hill. These individuals continue to be key in monitoring and advising on budget issues, and in helping me in my role as Department Finance Officer.

The Finance Commission met in July 2024 to prepare a budget for the Fiscal Year 2024-2025 which was then presented to the Department Executive Committee for their approval. The DEC approved a 2024-2025 budget of \$324,575.59. This amount was based on known expenditures such as salaries, insurance, office expenditures and program costs. In addition, Commissions, Committees, and programs had additional requests that were used to determine a budget total.

As of March 31, 2025 income for the Department from membership has been \$206,535.29 (64% of budgeted). Outside income from SD Fundraising Account (\$31,265.59), USAA Royalty Payment from National (\$4,011), AGIA (\$38,310.53), Emblem Royalty (\$3,517.78), SD American Legion Foundation (\$16,590), and MidWinter Sweeps (\$16,426.51) which totaled \$110,121.80. Additional anticipated income will come from 2025 Convention Sweeps. Total income to date is \$316,656.70 which is 97.6% of budgeted.

As of March 31, 2025 Department expenditures total \$193,038.91 (59.5% of projected budget) with a remaining budget of \$131,536.68. The chances are good for not exceeding our income this year. The Cash Balance Report at the beginning of the year had a Cash Balance of \$1,124,974.79 and at the end of March the Cash Balance Report indicated a balance of \$1,166,566.24. It should be noted that that amount includes the Edward Jones Account (formally listed as Trust Fund Account) which has gone from \$846,070.44 to \$940,566.01.

A more detailed report will be in the Proceedings from this Convention once the financials have been reviewed by an outside agency.

The Financials of the Department of South Dakota have remained viable and stable over this past Fiscal Year.

Respectfully Submitted,  
Krisma D. DeWitt, Finance Officer

## **REPORT OF THE SOUTH DAKOTA AMERICAN LEGION FOUNDATION**

The South Dakota American Legion Foundation began in 2010, because of the foresight of our leaders at the time, in believing that it is important to have a steady source of revenue to help support the valuable programs of the American Legion. It is structured as a 501(C)(3) non-profit corporation as designated by IRS, so that the donations to it can be tax deductible for the donor. The funds are professionally managed by the South Dakota Community Foundation. Donations to the Foundation go into an endowed fund that is invested, and are not spendable. It is the return on these investments that becomes available to the SD American Legion to support the programs. In this way, the endowed fund itself is not depleted and will continue to grow. The returns on these investments will continue to come back to the Legion forever. As the endowed fund grows over time, so do the returns coming back to the Legion.

The Foundation has three accounts. A General Fund, with funds that come directly from donors; an Agency Fund, with funds that came to the Foundation in the form of cash or from credit cards, which is then forwarded to the endowed fund; and a Youth Law Enforcement Fund, designed to specifically assist with the Youth Trooper Program. As of this writing, the balance in all three accounts totals \$368,026.22. Volatility in the stock market impacts our funds, but over time, growth has been very positive.

The Foundation is working! In the last three years, \$41,720 has come back to the SD American Legion to support programs. Since inception, over \$90,600 has come back to the Legion to support programs of children and youth. At the present time, \$13,814.04 is available to “Grant” back to support children and veteran programs.

Donations can be in many forms. Gifts of cash or property; bequests through estates, by naming the SD AL Foundation in your will; memorials in memory of friends and fellow veterans and Legion members who have passed; naming the SD AL Foundation as the beneficiary of a life insurance policy so it will pay out upon death; as an IRS approved “IRA Charitable Rollover Gift”, so that your distribution is paid directly to the Foundation rather than become taxable income to you. All of these gifts help assure that the American Legion programs that you care about will continue to be supported forever. Gifts of \$10,000 or more by an individual, entitle the donor to name the specific Legion program that he/she wishes to support. Please let the Foundation know if you would like assistance in structuring a donation.

This past year the Foundation was honored to receive a gift of over \$11,000 in retirement funds left through the estate of deceased individual. We also received a very generous donation of \$10,000 from an individual to honor her Korean War Veteran and dedicated Legion member father, and her dedicated Legion Auxiliary member mother, and to honor “all” veterans. Thank you!

Thank you to all of the individuals, Legion Posts, veterans’ organizations and businesses who have made donations to the Foundation! Many Posts and individuals regularly give memorials to honor friends, fellow veterans and Legion members who have passed on, helping their legacy to continue. Thank you very much! Many Posts have made significant donations to the Foundation. Thank you very much! Your support of fund raisers such as the Fun Auction at the Department Conventions each year, and raffles held over the years help support your Foundation. Thank you!

The Foundation Board members serve staggered terms at the appointment of the Department Commander, with the approval of the Department Executive Committee. Thank you, Mr. Commander, for the privilege to serve!

James N. Kurtz, Board President

## **DEPARTMENT HISTORIAN REPORT**

Commander Morello,

It has been a privilege and an honor to serve and continue to serve as your Department Historian. I am working on the Department History for the year so you will have a remembrance of your year as Department Commander. I will also assist those who are working to put their histories together for the State Convention this year.

Post Historians should be working on their Post Histories right now for the History contest at our State Convention in Pierre. Winners in each category (scrapbook and narrative) can be entered into the National contest. These entries should cover the past years' term of your Post Commanders election to the end of his or her term.

All the information on guidance and points sheets used in judging History books entered in the contest can be found in the Officers Guide.

Our History Book contest is patterned after the national contest, using the point system in judging the winners in each category. The rules were put together to make the history books better, ie. page numbers, id pictures, chronological structure, 3x5 card identifying author, table of contents, etc. The rules are available to everyone in the Officers Guide. On the points sheet, it only gives the general topic with details in the written area of the guide before the score sheet. The intent of the score sheet is to make history books look better.

Certificates will be presented to the first, second and third place winners at our State Convention.

I encourage all post historians to put together a post history. Your Post members will appreciate your hard work in the years to come. I thank all Post historians for their hard work and commitment in preparing these reports.

All Post Histories must be turned in by Friday, June 20th by 1 pm at the Registration Desk. If you can get them to me sooner, that would be great.

Respectfully submitted,

Fred Lee

Department Historian

## **INTERNAL AFFAIRS COMMISSION ANNUAL REPORT**

Commander Morello,

Thank you for allowing me to be the Chairman of the Internal Affairs Commission. The Internal Affairs Commission exists to give oversight to several areas of the American Legion in South Dakota. These include reviewing resolutions to amend the Constitution and By-Laws as well as any other resolutions. Also, the Commission has purview regarding the American Legion Riders and Sons of the American Legion. This year the Commission met on May 8, 2025, and reviewed nine resolutions. After much discussion, these were acted on and, if needed, forwarded to the appropriate convention committee. Discussions included some minor verbiage changes to the Constitution, fundraising issues, Youth Shooting programs, dates of district meetings, Vice Commander changes in oversight, and corrections allowed without general membership consensus. A more detailed report will be given at Department Convention in June.

Byron Callies

## **2024–2025 DEPARTMENT AMERICAN LEGION RIDERS REPORT**

Commander Morello and Fellow Legionnaires,

Serving as the Department Commander's Liaison for the American Legion Riders (ALR) during the 2024–2025 year has been an honor. The ALR program remains one of the American Legion's most visible and celebrated initiatives. Its ongoing success is a testament to the grassroots efforts of its post-level chapters, powered by the dedication of Legionnaires, Auxiliary members, and Sons of the American Legion.

The American Legion Riders continue to uphold the Four Pillars of the American Legion: **Veterans Affairs and Rehabilitation, National Security, Americanism, and Children and Youth.**

### **Veterans Affairs and Rehabilitation**

Throughout the year, ALR chapters across South Dakota have honored fallen veterans with funeral escorts and flag lines. Unaccompanied veterans continue to receive dignified quarterly honors at Black Hills National Cemetery. Riders remain committed to supporting VA facilities through regular visits and coordinating morale-boosting events such as concerts, game nights, and social activities. Their presence is also strongly felt statewide during Veterans Day and Memorial Day ceremonies.

### **National Security**

Riders continued their unwavering focus on POW/MIA awareness, promoting accountability and remembrance through ceremonies and educational outreach. Their support for deployed service members remains active with care package drives, escort missions, and community engagement. One of the key recurring initiatives has been the successful coordination of community blood drives, emphasizing their dedication to both public health and military support.

### **Americanism**

Promoting patriotism through education is a key ALR priority. During the 2024–2025 year, Riders reached hundreds of students across the state with flag etiquette presentations and school programs, instilling a sense of respect and national pride. Additionally, Riders conducted Veterans Day presentations and engaged with classrooms through ongoing youth outreach efforts.

### **Children and Youth**

The ALR has made meaningful contributions to the welfare of children and families, particularly those impacted by military service. Activities include providing school supplies to children of deployed service members, supporting youth programs such as CASA, organizing holiday events, and donating essential items to transitional housing and community shelters. Riders also offered medical assistance to families in need and organized events focused on comforting hospitalized children and bringing joy to local youth.

### **Growth and Community**

The ALR continues to grow in both membership and influence. Riders have a visible and inspiring presence at major events like the Sturgis Rally, where they lead high-profile rides supporting veterans' scholarships and participate in parades celebrating service and sacrifice. Their role in helping to escort Midwest Honor Flight participants remains a deeply valued tradition, reinforcing their commitment to honoring those who served.

### **ALR Statewide**

Coordination among chapters is vital to the ALR's continued effectiveness. Department-level gatherings at the Midwinter Conference, the State Convention, and the annual SD-ALR Rendezvous provide key opportunities for collaboration and planning. In June 2025, Riders from across South Dakota will unite in the Black Hills for the ALR Rendezvous, an annual event that blends business with camaraderie. The gathering includes a wreath-laying ceremony at Black Hills National Cemetery and the state-wide meeting.

**Department Support**

A dedicated group of American Legion Riders will journey across South Dakota to collect donations June 7-10. All proceeds from the ride are donated to the South Dakota American Legion Foundation, which directly benefits veterans and youth programs throughout the state. Last year's ride raised approximately \$6,700 to support these vital initiatives.

**Looking Ahead**

With fifteen active ALR chapters throughout the state, South Dakota has a strong foundation, but the potential for growth remains. I encourage all Posts to consider the value an ALR chapter can bring to their American Legion Family. Together, we can continue to expand our reach, deepen our impact, and serve our communities and veterans with pride and purpose. To all Riders across South Dakota, your dedication, patriotism, and service embody the spirit of the American Legion. Here's to another impactful and mission-driven year ahead.

**Respectfully Submitted,**

**Fred Nelson**

Department ALR Liaison

## LEGISLATIVE COMMITTEE CHAIRMAN ANNUAL REPORT

Greetings fellow Legionnaires,

I am Mike Mehlhaff, the Chair of the South Dakota American Legion Legislative Committee. First, I must recognize the team of Legionnaires that has helped with the legislative work of the Department: Commander Kevin Morello, Dan Fritz, Nathan Juelfs, Doug Feltman, Dan Heil, and Adjutant Van Delist.

In a normal year we would not be as successful without this great team, but doubly so this year, and they have stepped up to represent the legislative interests of the Legion at every crucial moment and I ask you to please recognize them with a round of applause.

The Legislative Committee started our work on Monday, January 27<sup>th</sup> when we met at the American Legion Post 8 in Pierre. Pending Legislation was discussed, and the committee determined the best approach to several bills that effect veterans and the military. As new legislation has been brought forward, we have continued to confer and make decisions on the Legion will lobby and testify on those bills.

Here is an overview of the bills that the Legion Legislative Committee worked with this year:

### **HOUSE BILLS**

**House Bill 1010:** Require cost model reports for certain programs and institutions.

Department Position: The Department monitored this legislation.

Final disposition: Tabled by House Appropriations on 02/8/2025

**House Bill 1038:** Repeal provisions regarding the state payment for burial of veterans.

Department Position: The Department opposed this legislation.

Final disposition: Failed to pass by the House of Representatives on 02/25/2025

**House Bill 1046:** Revise the General Appropriations Act for fiscal year 2025

Department Position: The Department is monitored this legislation.

Final disposition: Signed by the Governor on 03/28/2025

**House Bill 1068:** Allow students to wear certain military decorations at a school graduation ceremony.

Department Position: The Department supported this legislation

Final disposition: Signed by the Governor on 03/11/2025

**House Bill 1076:** Modify provisions pertaining to unethical conduct and improper collection of fees relating to assistance or referrals in a veteran's benefits matter.

Department Position: The Department supported this legislation.

Final disposition: Failed to pass by the House of Representatives on 02/24/2025

**House Bill 1084:** Provide free state park and recreation area admission to current and former members of the South Dakota National Guard and their spouses and dependents.

Department Position: The Department monitored this legislation.

Final disposition: Tabled by House Ag and Nat Res on 01/28/2025

**House Bill 1160:** waive the driver license renewal period for members of the military and their families, and employees of the state department.

Department Position: The Department monitored this legislation.

Final disposition: Signed by the Governor 02/25/2025

**House Bill 1161:** allow additional forms to verify military service for a veteran designation on a commercial driver license or commercial learner's permit.

Department Position: The Department supported this legislation.

Final disposition: Signed by the Governor 03/28/2025

**House Bill 1162:** require the reporting of the number of veterans who die by suicide in this state.



Department Position: The Department supported this legislation as it is in line with our Be the One Campaign.

Final disposition: Tabled by House Military and Veteran's Affairs 02/18/2025

**House Bill 1163:** make an appropriation for a grant to assist in the construction and equipping of a veteran's skilled trade center.

Department Position: The Department monitored this legislation.

Sponsors: Representative Goodwin (prime) and Senator Nelson

Final disposition: Tabled by Joint Approps on 02/27/2025

**House Bill 1188:** allow nonresident military members to purchase three-day temporary nonresident waterfowl licenses.

Department Position: The Department supported this legislation

Final disposition: Signed by the Governor 03/28/2025

**House Bill 1198:** modify the tuition benefit for dependents and spouses of disabled and deceased veterans.

Department Position: The Department supported this legislation.

Final disposition: House Approps sent to 41<sup>st</sup> day on 02/24/2025

**House Bill 1238:** establish protections for a veteran seeking assistance in a veterans' benefit matter.

Department Position: The Department opposed this legislation

Final disposition: Signed by the Governor 03/28/2025

**House Concurrent Resolution 6002:** Urging the United States Congress and the President of the United States to remove the requirement of a project labor agreement for federal construction projects.

Department Position: The Department is monitored this resolution.

Final disposition: Passed as a resolution 02/21/2025

### **SENATE BILLS**

**Senate Bill 6:** Make an appropriation to support capital and infrastructure necessitated by the expansion of Ellsworth Air Force Base and to declare an emergency.

Department Position: The Department supported this legislation.

Final disposition: Signed by the Governor 03/28/2025

**Senate Bill 16:** Set aside certain contractor's excise tax collections relating to Ellsworth Air Force Base, to create a fund for the collections, and to provide an appropriation therefor.

Department Position: The Department is monitored this legislation.

Final disposition: Failed to pass by the House of Representatives on 02/25/2025

**Senate Bill 52:** Authorize the expansion of the South Dakota Veterans Cemetery and make an appropriation therefor, and to declare an emergency.

Department Position: The Department fully supported this legislation.

Final disposition: Signed by the Governor 03/13/2025

**Senate Bill 82:** Require an official declaration of war or other Congressional action before the South Dakota National Guard may be deployed by the federal government.

Department Position: N/A bill killed in the Senate 02/03/2025

**Senate Bill 109:** permit a school district to implement a new or revised section 504 plan, individualized family service plan, or individualized education program for a student who is the child of an active-duty member of the United States armed forces.

Department Position: The Department is monitored this legislation.

Final disposition: Signed by the Governor 03/05/2025

**Senate Concurrent Resolution 603:** Supporting the establishment of a standardized system to recognize and award academic credit or certification for military service.

Department Position: The Department supported this resolution.

Final disposition: Passed as a resolution on 02/13/2025

Senate Concurrent Resolution 604: Supporting the expansion of transportation services for veterans receiving medical care in this state.

Department Position: The Department fully supported this legislation.

Final disposition: Passed as a resolution on 02/18/2025

Following our busy work on January 27<sup>th</sup>, we got to have a little fun by hosting the annual SD Legion Legislative Dinner. A crowd of nearly 100 people joined us for a meal of pulled pork sandwiches and discussed issues important to veterans and our country.

With 30 plus legislators in attendance the dinner was a great success. Legislators have so many choices of events to attend each night, and to have so many of them attend our dinner shows how respected the Legion and its members are when it comes to the legislature.

Putting together a dinner for 100 people is not something that you can do by yourself, and this dinner would not have been so successful without the hard work of the host city's Post. The members of Pierre Legion Post 8 were gracious and hardworking hosts that provided the facility and the manpower necessary to make this dinner the best it could be. I would especially like to recognize Post 8 members Larry Eliason and Ralph Bush for all their hard work and support in completing the mission of hosting a top-quality event.

Commander, I respectfully submit this as the report of the 2025 South Dakota American Legion Legislative Committee. I also want to thank you for the opportunity to serve the great veterans that make up the South Dakota American Legion.

Mike Mehlhaff  
Legislative Chairman

## 2024-2025 ANNUAL MEMBERSHIP REPORT

### Introduction

This past membership year has been one of dynamic progress and active engagement. Our collective efforts have not only strengthened our local foundation in South Dakota but have also positioned us powerfully on the national stage—all fueled by the relentless **Eye of the Tiger** spirit. This spirit reminds us every day that with determination and unity, we win every battle. I'm proud to present a summary of our key activities, strategic meetings, and outstanding achievements during this period.

### Key Events and Strategic Initiatives

- **Membership Conference in Indianapolis (July 2024):**  
I had the honor of attending the Membership Conference in Indianapolis, where I engaged with peers from across the nation. The exchange of innovative strategies and success stories underscored our commitment and the **Eye of the Tiger** spirit that drives us forward.
- **Meeting with Incoming National Commander and Staff:**  
A pivotal moment this year was meeting with the incoming National Commander and their staff to set our ambitious goals for 2025. These discussions were infused with purpose and that fierce, determined energy that we call the **Eye of the Tiger** spirit, steering our focus into the future.
- **National Convention Participation:**  
Attending the National Convention further solidified our department's connection with the broader Legion community. Engaging with national leadership and fellow members reaffirmed that our success is rooted in the relentless drive and resilience of our members—the very essence of the **Eye of the Tiger**.
- **Fall District Meetings:**  
I made it a priority to attend every Fall District Meeting. These forums provided an excellent opportunity to ensure that the voices of South Dakota's members were heard, igniting that determined spirit that propels us to excel.
- **Ongoing Membership Updates:**  
Throughout the year, I consistently sent out updates about our progress and strategies. These communications have not only kept every member informed but have also reinforced our shared **Eye of the Tiger** mindset—always focused, ever resilient, and relentlessly pushing forward.
- **South Dakota's Big 12 Contest Victory:**  
It is with immense pride that I announce South Dakota has once again won the Big 12 Contest for the second consecutive year. This victory is a shining testament to our unity, hard work, and the winning **Eye of the Tiger** spirit that lives in every one of our members.
- **Spring Meetings:**  
Attending all Spring Meetings helped sustain our momentum and allowed us to renew our focus as we move forward. These meetings have been integral in maintaining the drive and passion that define our department, mirroring the **Eye of the Tiger** spirit in everything we do.

### Gratitude and Looking Ahead

I extend my heartfelt thanks to every member and to our leadership for their unwavering support and dedication. Your hard work, enthusiasm, and the **Eye of the Tiger** spirit have been the cornerstone of our achievements. As we reflect on the successes of this membership year, let us continue to harness that fierce determination to drive our organization to even greater heights in 2025.

Together, with our feet firmly on the ground and eyes set like a tiger on the prize, we will continue to break barriers and achieve greatness.

Thank you for your commitment and support throughout this remarkable year.

Sincerely,  
Bill Peters  
Membership Chairman

## **2024-2025 SDAL PUBLIC SAFETY COMMITTEE ANNUAL REPORT**

The South Dakota Public Safety Committee enjoyed another great year. After the State Legion Convention, Dianne Johnson, Doug Feltman and I had the privilege to attend the South Dakota Youth Trooper Academy. Our committee met again in January to select the winners of the “Law Enforcement Officer” of the Year; the “Firefighter of The Year”; and the “EMT” of the Year award winners.

### **SOUTH DAKOTA YOUTH TROOPER ACADEMY:**

Again, this year, we selected 24 outstanding young men and women, from South Dakota High Schools, to attend the 12th SDYTA. For the first time, we graduated all 24 Recruits. The SDHP did an outstanding job of hosting the Academy at the Law Enforcement Training Center in Pierre. Ten State Troopers from across the State volunteer to be away from their Duty Stations, family and friends, to come serve as instructors and as Mentors. The logistic duties are taken care of by SGT Schoenefeld and Lt. Brandon Akron. These Troopers, somehow, squeeze these duties into their already very busy schedules.

This year we had multiple Mentors working at the Academy who are former graduates of this outstanding program. It is very rewarding to see these young Troopers engaged in a very professional manner, as they all do.

Recruits experience a very rigorous week of activities. From learning how to march, engaging in vigorous physical activities, to learning the basics of the duties of Law Enforcement Officers. They also spend many hours with hands on activities such as stopping vehicles, drug interdiction, crash scene investigations, negotiating cars through the obstacle course on the Emergency Vehicle Operations Course and firing weapons on the pistol and rifle range.

On “Blue Cap” Day we had several Legion members and guests come to the Rifle Range to see the Recruits in action and to witness several demonstrations. Later in the evening the American Legion hosted another BBQ which is always a lot of fun for everyone.

The week is capped off by a very inspirational Graduation Ceremony at the Visitor Center near the reflection pond and the Memorials.

This year the American Legion \$500 “Outstanding Graduate Scholarship” winner was Bowen Ryan from Castlewood. Ryan is attending Lake Area Technical College in Watertown. He is pursuing a career in Criminal Justice.

Your Public Safety Committee would like to thank everyone for your support for this outstanding program. Because of our efforts, many of our graduates have become Law Enforcement Officers and/or members of the Military. Others will gain a much better appreciation for Law Enforcement and what the American Legion is all about.

A special “Thank You” goes out to Mary Jo, and the District Commanders or their designees, who work hard with Posts, applicants, scheduling and conducting interviews. Good work!!

The 2025 YTA will be held June 23rd -27th. Announcement: “BLUE CAP DAY” 26 June. Please join us!

### **OF THE YEAR AWARDS:**

Your SDALPSC met in January to select the LEO, FF, and EMT of the year recipients. Again, we did not receive many applications for these awards. These recognitions are very important to those “First Responders” who work to keep our communities safe. The L.E.O. and the FF of the year are designated, officially, by the National American Legion.

As a Public Safety Committee, we encourage each post to consider recognizing these public servants. There are some small communities who may not have many living in their community to select from. However, first responders can come from anywhere in your area. Also, there are numerous Law Enforcement agencies as well as rural or city fire departments to consider. EMT’s also include Paramedics.

One issue we have had is the difficulty finding the proper documentation to support these applications. This next year, we are going to develop examples of proper documentation for our applications. The instructions for filling out these applications are on the State website.

A reminder, it is not the responsibility of the supervisor of the nominee to fill out the application. Once you have submitted an application, it will be much easier the next time. Feel free to call any member of our committee and we would be happy to assist you. NOTE: Please do not rely on the applicant or their supervisor to complete the application. That final packet should be done by the post.

This year's recipients of these awards are: "Law Enforcement Officer of the Year" SGT. Micah Hoffman, a Deputy from the Lake County Sheriff's Office, Madison: The "Firefighter of the Year" is Logan Arthurs, sponsored by the Redfield Post: and the " EMT of the Year" is Elizabeth Verhey from Spearfish.

Just as a Note, when a member of our committee has an applicant for one of these awards, we do not vote.

The State Awards will be presented during the State convention this June in Huron. We look forward to an even better year in 2025-26.

Thank you,  
Larry Price  
Chairman, SDAL Public Safety Committee

## **2024-2025 ANNUAL DEPARTMENT SCOUTING REPORT**

Commander:

As the Council Commissioner for the Black Hills Area Council and a proud Legionnaire, it has been my honor to serve as the Chairman of the Department Scouting Committee for the past year. I have been fortunate to work alongside dedicated committee members Matt Lagerstrom, Fred Nelson, and Richard MacDonald, whose commitment to youth development through Scouting has been unwavering.

This year, we were pleased to have three outstanding candidates for the American Legion Scout of the Year award for the Department of South Dakota. After careful review of all the applications, we are proud to announce Slater Humbracht from Troop 17, sponsored by American Legion Post 164 in Spearfish, as this year's recipient.

Slater completed a remarkable Eagle Scout project: he constructed an accessible wheelchair ramp with removable handrails, connected to a deck that facilitates the loading and unloading of supplies. This project not only enhances accessibility for all individuals but also serves a critical logistical purpose for events such as blood drives and catering for community activities. The recipient of this project was the local VFW post, where both Post 164 and several Scouting units regularly meet—an outstanding example of collaboration between veterans and youth programs.

In alignment with the Commander's initiative to provide every Scout in South Dakota with the opportunity to attend summer camp, the Scouting Committee proudly established a scholarship program. Next year, we will be awarding four \$400 scholarships to support Scouts' attendance at summer camp. We believe this effort continues our mission to foster leadership, service, and adventure among the next generation.

Thank you to everyone who has supported our work this year. Together, we are strengthening the bond between the American Legion and Scouting across South Dakota.

Chris Rendon  
Scouting Committee Chairman

## **2024-2025 STRATEGIC PLANNING COMMITTEE CHAIRMAN REPORT**

Commander Morello,

Thanks for the opportunity to serve as the South Dakota American Legion's Strategic Planning Committee Chairman along with distinguished Committee Members: PDC Doug Feltman, Larry Madsen, Bill Peters, and Matt Pillar. As of this report's submission, the newly established Ad-hoc Strategic Planning Committee met virtually via Microsoft Teams on Tuesday, 8 April 2025, to organize and develop a path forward to accomplish the initial guidance and assigned tasks:

- (1) First, to conduct a review of "The National American Legion's Strategic Plan, and its "2019 Ad-hoc Committee Report" to identify National's Strategic Plan's requirements upon Department versus, Department's implementation of those requirements, and
- (2) Second of equal strategic importance, develop the Department of south Dakota American Legion's Strategic Plan by assessing the Department's organization structure, functions, and relationships throughout the Department's organization and components to ensure continued relevancy of the American Legion based on its mission, vision, goals, and interrelationships.

The committee adopted an established formal "Five Step Strategic Planning Process" to guide its efforts. Step one starts with assessing current and future operating environment applying "Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats" or SWOT as abbreviated. SWOT is a key component of throughout strategic planning, and next step two identifies goals and objectives, followed by step three to developing the plan, then step four to communicate and implement the plan, and in step five monitor performance, and if necessary and as required, modify the strategic plan inclusive of organization structure, interrelationships, and functions, to sustain and enhance American Legion's relevancy-based mission, vision, values, and goals.

The committee recognizes that individuals and teams will be working various topic assignments, and coordinating with subject matter experts throughout the Department's American Legion Family membership via telephone, virtual meetings, and full committee face to face meetings as required to maximize efforts toward the assigned purposes end state.

The committee initial "Face to Face Working Session" will have occurred the day before the start of Annual Department's Convention on Wednesday, 18 June 2025 at the Huron Crossroads Hotel & Convention Center in Huron, South Dakota.

Thank you, Commander Morello for this opportunity, and thank you to the Strategic Planning Committee members for their direction and support as we collectively continue this work to develop, produce, monitor the implementation performance, and modify an active and living Department of South Dakota American Legion Strategic Plan.

Respectfully Submitted,  
David R. Booze,  
Strategic Planning Committee Chairman



## **2025 AMERICAN LEGION TRAINING COMMITTEE ANNUAL REPORT**

The Training Committee had a productive and impactful year, continuing to expand and improve our educational programs for Legionnaires across South Dakota. At the 2025 Mid-Winter Conference, our breakout training sessions were well attended and positively reviewed. Classes included “Reports and Awards,” “Post Constitution & By-Laws,” “Navigating the New Department and National Websites,” “MyLegion App,” and “Be The One.” Feedback indicated that sessions were relevant, the instructors were well-prepared, and the material was useful. Some technical issues with connectivity were noted, and we plan to mitigate these in future events by bringing MiFi devices.

The highlight of the year was the Third Annual South Dakota American Legion College (SDALC), held April 26–27, 2025, at the Chamberlain Community Center. Instructional sessions included Mentorship, Running a Meeting, Resolution Writing, Train-the-Trainer, Organizational Structure, and the Capstone Project. Feedback was overwhelmingly positive. Students appreciated both the content and the networking opportunities, including the group dinner at Charlie’s Restaurant.

Throughout the year, the committee worked closely to evaluate curriculum, manage logistics, and plan for future development. Notably, we are exploring the addition of classes focusing on the American Legion Family, as well as a potential online Adjutant training course. We also discussed succession planning and identified the need to recruit two new committee members and an instructor for Mid-Winter and SDALC 2026.

The Training Committee remains committed to developing knowledgeable leaders who are prepared to support the mission of the American Legion throughout our state.

Respectfully submitted,  
Jack French  
Chairman, Training Committee

## **TRUST FUND COMMITTEE CHAIRMAN ANNUAL REPORT**

### Meetings and Events:

#### January 2024

- Value of Investment account: \$689,091.
- Asset allocation: 51% Equities (stocks) and 49% Fixed income (bonds).

#### September 2024

- Jeff Merchant assumed duties as Committee Chair
- Trust Fund Committee Meeting
  - o Discussed the current asset allocation and concerns about the conservative 50/50 split. A traditional 60/40 split would enable growth while maintaining some downside protection.
  - o Voted to create an Investment Policy Statement (IPS) for the Department.

#### November 2024

- Trust Fund Committee Meeting
  - o Completed draft of the Department's IPS.
  - o Recommendation to forward the proposed IPS to the Department Executive Committee for - approval.

#### December 2024

- Chair presented the IPS to the Department Executive Committee.
- Investment portfolio closed out the year at \$921,623 (10% growth).

#### February 2025

- Chair attends Midwinter Conference and briefs Finance Committee on the proposed IPS.
- Department Executive Committee approves the proposed IPS.

#### May 2025

- Total value of the Investment Portfolio is \$947,590.
- Asset allocation is 53% Equities and 47% Fixed Income (bonds).

Comments: We have engaged with the financial advisory firm to increase our holdings in equities. As outlined in our IPS, we would like to maintain 60% equities and 40% in fixed income. The underpinnings of the US economy remain strong & the outlook for the remainder of the year remains positive, at least by most analysts. We want the portfolio well positioned to take advantage of improving market conditions. That approved asset allocation remains in our best interests.

Respectfully submitted,

Jeff Merchant

Committee Chair

## 2025 ANNUAL VA&R REPORT

Commander,

On behalf of the Department Veterans Affairs and Rehabilitation (VA&R) Commission, which members are Chairman Warren Aas of Watertown, Vice Chairman PDC Tim Jurgens of Milbank, Noel Cummins of Milbank, Buck DeWeese of Spearfish, Brian Havard of Salem, Gary Schumacher of De Smet, and Matthew Pillar of Lake Preston, it gives me great pleasure to present the following Department VA&R Commission report.

The Department VA&R Commission meets virtually once per year via Microsoft Teams with additional meetings called at the discretion of the commission chairman.

There are numerous awards every post in our department can win throughout the year and be recognized for their achievement either at our MidWinter Conference or on stage at our annual department convention. Is your post aware that it can submit for the Department Veterans Affairs & Rehabilitation (VA&R) Award for Excellence? This award is open to every post in our department regardless of goal size. The award will recognize one post in our department each year for their outstanding work and accomplishments in VA&R. All posts can apply for the award and we encourage all posts to submit for the award. The criteria for the award is posted on our department website or you may contact State Headquarters for assistance. The deadline for all post applications to State Headquarters for this award is May 1<sup>st</sup> of each year. The winning post will be recognized on stage at the state convention with a beautiful plaque and group photo to commemorate their accomplishments. Please ask your post leadership to apply for the award.

As a member of the National VA&R Commission, I had the privilege of attending the Washington Conference in February 2025 in Washington D.C. to listen and participate in the national VA&R Commission agenda. DSO Matt Pillar, a member of our Department VA&R Commission, was also in attendance. We listened to many speakers dealing with veterans benefits, veterans' health as well as the National Cemeteries. We make a point to provide all the information we can get our hands on from our meetings and make it available to all VA&R Commission members in our department.

Temporary Financial Assistance (TFA) is available for any veteran in your community that may have fallen on hard times and needs some financial assistance to get back on their feet. TFA is generally one time grant money and other requirements apply. Your post commander has more details about TFA.

If you are a veteran and would like to check into getting enrolled in the VA for healthcare, we encourage you to stop in and see your local Tribal or County Veterans Service Officer in your county for assistance or contact DSO Matt Pillar, our American Legion Department Service Officer at 605-696-8260.

Thank you, Commander Morello, for allowing me the privilege to serve as the Chairman of the Department Veterans Affairs & Rehabilitation Commission during your year.

Respectfully submitted,  
Warren L. Aas,  
Chairman, VA&R Commission

## **V.A.V.S COMMITTEE CHAIRMAN REPORT**

I would like to thank Commander Kevin Morello for the appointment to Chairman of the Veterans Affairs Volunteer Services (VAVS) Committee this year.

I would also like to thank our VA Hospital Representatives: Sioux Falls VA Hospital VAVS Representative Chris Fischer; Hot Springs VA Medical Center and State Veterans Home VAVS Representative Angela Koch; and our Ft. Meade VA Medical Center VAVS Representative Buck DeWeese. The VA Hospital Representatives are the ones who make sure our veterans get additional help from the South Dakota American Legion. I would also like to thank the additional following members of the committee: Dan Wyatt, Nancy Grande, Joe Sande.

The South Dakota American Legion Auxiliary purchased a trailer to be used at the Hot Spring VA. They were kind enough to let us help with the purchase so veterans can be helped with transporting bikes and other equipment for outdoor activities.

VAVS funds were used to donate \$1,000 to each of the three VA facilities along with funds going to the Legion VA Hospital representatives to purchase items specifically needed at each of the facilities. This would not be possible without the generous donations received for the VAVS fund.

In the past we had asked for donations for the popcorn fund because the VA could get a good price in the purchase of popcorn. But these donations are used for many more necessary items than just popcorn. Donations are used to purchase gift cards, toiletries, clothing, stamps, envelopes, backpacks, backpacks, etc.

This year an article was published on the last page of the April 25 Up-to-now about "How to donate to the Sioux Falls VA through the Amazon Wish List Registry for Voluntary Services." These donations fulfill requests from departments within the Sioux Falls VA.

I would like to give a big THANK YOU to all Legion Posts, Auxiliary Units, Sons of American Legion Squadrons and the American Legion Rider Chapters for your very generous donations of time and money that go for a great cause, the Veterans!

Respectfully submitted,  
Charemon Dunham  
VAVS Committee Chairman

## **SOUTH DAKOTA VETERANS' COUNCIL REPRESENTATIVE**

**Commander Morello and Fellow Legionnaires,**

It's been another busy and productive year on the South Dakota Veterans Council (SDVC), and I'm grateful for the opportunity to represent The American Legion as we continue working together to support veterans across our state.

### **Who We Are and What We Do**

The SDVC brings together representatives from The American Legion (TAL), Disabled American Veterans (DAV), Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA), Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA), and the Military Order of the Purple Heart (MOPH). We meet throughout the year—in person and virtually keeping each other updated, sharing resources, and most importantly, ensuring veterans' voices are heard at all levels.

This past year, we met in places like Pierre, Hot Springs, and Mitchell, which has made it easier for more people from across the state to participate.

### **Highlights and Progress**

- **Legislative Work:** We monitored veteran-related bills like SB 52, HB 1010, HB 1038, and HB 1046. In January, we hosted a Legislative Mixer, where we had the chance to connect directly with lawmakers and advocate for better services and benefits for South Dakota veterans.
- **Endowment Update:** The Endowment Fund for the State Veterans Cemetery in Sioux Falls continues to grow. As of January, it held just over \$3.4 million, with nearly \$300,000 available to spend. That fund helps ensure the cemetery remains a place of honor and dignity for generations.

### **Facing Challenges**

- **Staffing at Veterans Homes:** Like many places, our state veterans' home feels the pressure of workforce shortages. The Council supports partnering with colleges and the VA to train and retain good staff.
- **Timing and Visibility:** The Council voted to move officer elections from July to April to better align with the legislative calendar. This should help us stay ahead of key decisions and legislative deadlines.
- **Rural Outreach:** We're exploring new ways, especially online tools and local events, to better reach veterans in rural areas who might not have easy access to the services they need.

### **Looking Ahead**

Next year, we'll stay focused on:

- **Mental health and long-term care**—ensuring those needing support get it.
- **Federal legislation**, including the GI Bill Parity Act and the Major Richard Star Act, and ensuring our Coast Guard members aren't left behind during budget talks.
- **Better coordination** across our member organizations so we can work smarter and speak with one voice.

### **Final Thoughts**

It's truly been an honor to serve on the South Dakota Veterans Council and to represent The American Legion. We've made real progress this past year, and I'm confident that we'll keep moving forward for the benefit of all our veterans and their families.

**Respectfully submitted,**

**Fred Nelson, SDVC Representative**