

DEPARTMENT COMMANDER'S ANNUAL REPORT TO THE LEGION MEMBERSHIP

Legion Family,

As my year as Department Commander comes to a close, I look back on my travels and all the events I was privileged to participate in. This report is submitted the end of April, and I am sure I will participate in more activities for May and first part of June.

My theme this year was the acronym L. I. S. T., which stands for Legion family working together, Involvement in our communities, Serving our veterans, youth and communities and Telling our stories. I continue to believe being active in our communities makes both our communities stronger as well as our Legion family. My commander's program was actually two separate programs which all money raised will be divided equally between the two. Those programs are the South Dakota American Legion Foundation and the newly approved South Dakota Legion Junior Shooting Sports program. I would like to thank all those who supported my theme and my program this year.

Major events I participated in this year include National American Legion Membership Workshop and National Fall Meetings both held in Indianapolis; American Legion National Convention held in Tampa Bay; and the American Legion National Legislative Conference held in Washington DC. At the department level, major events included all fall district meetings, Midwinter and all spring district meetings as well as all the Auxiliary Christmas parties for the veterans at the various VA facilities and State veteran's home. There were also quite a few Post events and veteran's events I was able to participate in. While traveling around the state, I drove almost 20,000 miles with the department legion car and drove about 2,500 with my personal vehicles.

We have accomplished a lot this year and I am proud of how the Legion family continues to work together to realize our goals. I would like to specifically call out Department Auxiliary President Susie Learning, Detachment Commander Wyatt Ries and Riders Liaison Fred Nelson. It has been a pleasure working with you as the leadership for our South Dakota American Legion Family. Although I wish we had more participants, our Americanism youth programs remain strong. Each chairman of the programs will present their own reports; however, I wish to thank the various commissions and committees for all the work they do for our veterans and our youth. Additionally, I would like to say good job and thanks to the District Commanders and Department Vice Commanders. Your leadership, support and hard work do make a difference.

Finally, I would like to thank my fellow legionnaires. You are the backbone of our organization and as they say, "where the rubber meets the road." Your involvement in all of our programs makes a difference to our veterans, our youth and our communities. Thanks for all you do and I would ask that you keep making a difference.

Kevin Hempel
Department Commander
2025-2026

DEPARTMENT VICE COMMANDER'S (DISTRICTS 1-3) ANNUAL REPORT

Commander Hempel,

The following is submitted as my report as the South Dakota American Legion Western Department Vice Commander for the year 2025 – 2026.

The year start fast and furious. During the Department Convention, I was elected and sworn in as the Western Department Vice Commander. This included Districts 1 – 3. Immediately following the convention, we had our first of many Department Executive Committee meetings.

During the summer months, I was also on the American Legion Athletic Commission. I was appointed to represent Region 7. There was a serious amount of driving to these various towns where legion baseball was in full swing. I served as the Tournament Commissioner, ensuring that each player and team met the state specified rules for eligibility. There was district tournament held in Gregory for four days. There was a region legion baseball tournament in Belle Fourche, SD. Winners from both tournaments earned a spot in their respective state tournaments. I was the State Commissioner for the State A Junior Baseball Tournament held in Rapid City. Wayne Sullivan was the director and ran an awesome tournament. Big congratulations to Post 22.

One of the best events of the summer was to attend the yearly Beers and Ears feed at Post 303, Hermosa, A great time was had by over 750 attendees. Corn and butter from ear to ear. Really looking forward to next year. Great community involvement.

During the “BER” months, we started with flag ceremonies for Labor Day Flag at various posts throughout the area. There were District Fall Legion Meetings. District 1 was at Post 31, Lead. District 2 was held at Post 246, Wall, and District 3 was held at Post 8 Pierre, SD. Good food and friendship was had by all.

Visited various post throughout all three Districts. I attended the monthly DEC meeting by the use of ZOOM.

I attended the Northern Hills Veterans Appreciation Day event, “WE’VE GOT YOUR SIX”. It was a great four-hour event and had about 450 vets attend. Good information was abundant and clothing and back packs were given out.

11 November was Veterans Day & saw me visit five local posts within Districts 1 & 2. Lots of respect with some stories and cards from local grade schools.

December was a little slower with Christmas and vacation occurring. Set out one Saturday and made a ride down to Winner Post 169, Colome, Post 146 & Dallas Post 91. Long day.

11 January was a busy day. District 1 held their Oratory contest. Also had to be in Pierre Post 8 for the Athletic Commission Committee. We selected the sight for Legion Baseball State sites and dates. Various towns submitted bids in all divisions.

January 18 was District 3 Oratory in Pierre.

Feb 19 – 22 was the Mid-Winter conference in Oacoma the Cedar Shores. Plans were finalized and training meetings started Friday afternoon and went through the weekend. There were reports given and I announced my candidacy for Department Western Vice Commander. It was announced to the Legionnaires that Post 315, Box Elder SD had nominated Black Hills Energy for the Large Veteran Employer of the Year award. Guess what happens when you nominate companies. You Win. Congratulations to Black Hills Energy, Post 315 and to Melonie McDonald for taking the time to submit this Company.

Mar 15 saw us at the District 3 Spring Meeting at Post 6. Much was discussed and they voted their delegates to the National Convention,

11 April was the District 1 Spring Meeting held at Post 164 Spearfish SD. Fantastic meeting and election of Delegates for the National Convention. 12 April saw the District 2 Spring Meeting. The election of officers and Delegates to the National Convention.

As it is there are always DEC Meeting every month that require attending. I did miss a couple but one was for shoulder surgery.

Made a post visit to Post 120 Isabel SD on April 29, that was quite the drive for one night. They have many events coming up for the next four months. District 1 Commander Jack French did the driving.

It has been my privilege and honor to serve our American Legion Family as your Department Western Vice Commander for this last year.

Marvin Tisdall
SDAL Department Vice Commander
Districts 1 – 3

DEPARTMENT VICE COMMANDER'S (DISTRICTS 4-8) ANNUAL REPORT

Commander Hempel,

The following is my report as the South Dakota American Legion Eastern Department Vice Commander for the 2025-2026 year.

I was elected as the Eastern Vice Commander at the State Convention in Huron SD. I had a slow start with the wife being in the hospital and taking care of her. I had to cancel a few things but starting in September I attended all the District 4-8 Fall District meetings.

I welcomed golf players and played in the American Legion Department golf tournament on the 21st of September.

In September, I attended the Volga and Parkston meetings and spoke to the Post about the upcoming year.

In October, I attended the dinners in Garretson and Sioux Falls for the National Auxiliary President. I attended Humor for Hero's at Sioux Falls Post 15. I also attended the Baltic's Memorial Park dedication.

In November I attended Brookings' and Gary's Membership meeting, attend the Hartford Veterans Appreciation Dinner and Social, and attended the Veterans Day Program in Garretson

In December I attended a SF Joint meeting. I attended the Egan Christmas Festival and then traveled to Arlington for their meeting. I volunteered for Wreaths Across America at the SF Veterans Cemetery. I attended the White's Post Christmas and the Montrose Steak Feed.

In Jan I started working on the revitalization of the Colton Post; I attended their meeting to talk with them about recruiting ideas and planning events. I also attended and spoke at the Ethan Dart tournament and led them in the Pledge of Allegiance. I went to Lake Preston to attend the Kingsbury County Meeting.

In Feb, I attended Garretson's Legion Breakfast, had two meetings with Colton then attended the Mid-Winter conference Feb 19-22.

I attended all Spring meetings for District 4-8

In March, I organized a Veterans Appreciation All-American BBQ in Colton SD and signed up eleven new Legion members and 45 SAL members to start a new charter. We have had several meetings since and have elected new officers. I assisted them with 3 Honor Guards and 1 Color guard.

In May, I traveled to Huron to swear in their new officers, went to Gary with Arlo to help them out with membership and ideas, and I will be attending the Memorial Day program in Menno to be their guest speaker.

I have visited on the phone with many Posts regarding membership, questions, and problem solving.

It has been my privilege and honor to serve our American Legion Family as your Department Eastern Vice Commander for this last year.

Shane Lamer
SDAL Department Vice Commander
District 4-8

DEPARTMENT ADJUTANT'S ANNUAL REPORT

Department Commander Hempel,

In accordance with the Constitution and Bylaws, I respectfully submit this report summarizing departmental activities not otherwise covered by committee and commission reports.

As I conclude my third year as Department Adjutant, I am proud to reflect on a year marked by significant activity, meaningful engagement, and continued progress for our organization. Since July 1, 2025, I have visited **31 Posts**, participated in **more than 80 Legion events**, attended **16 district meetings and conventions**, and taken part in **eight Department Executive Committee meetings**. I supported the **Oratorical Contest**, coordinated the **Mid-Winter Conference**—made successful through the partnership of Post 3 and PDC/ANEC Doug Feltman—and represented the Department in **over 41 meetings with external organizations**. National-level responsibilities required **25 days of travel**, contributing to a total of **50 nights on the road** and **21,343 miles logged** so far this year. It has been both a demanding and deeply rewarding period of service.

Past Department Commander Barns observed in 1928 that *“the Department Adjutant... 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.”* That sentiment remains true nearly a century later. I remain humbled by the trust placed in me and committed to acting in the best interests of The American Legion and its members.

While our overall membership numbers continue to decline, our **market penetration remains the highest in the nation**, with more than **28% of South Dakota's veterans** belonging to The American Legion. This is an achievement every Post should take pride in.

However, declining membership directly affects departmental revenue. To remain responsible stewards of our resources, Headquarters has continued shifting away from hard-copy mailings, adjusting meeting schedules to reduce travel costs, and increasing the use of video conferencing. Some changes have been met with understandable hesitation, but they are essential to the long-term health of the Department.

The reality is clear: we cannot rely indefinitely on membership dues as our primary funding source. To remain strong, we must expand partnerships, sponsorships, and donor support. If we continue placing the financial burden solely on Posts, we risk eventually pricing ourselves out of membership.

Despite challenges, this year brought significant accomplishments. Thanks to the dedication of Membership Chair Bill Peters and the hard work of our Posts, South Dakota won the **Big Twelve Challenge** in our category for the **second consecutive year**, earning **\$2,000** for technology improvements.

At Headquarters, we have continued modernizing our operations. This year we donated a substantial portion of our historical archives to the **South Dakota State Historical Society**, where they are now being cataloged for public access. We organized and streamlined our digital systems, with all staff now operating from a unified shared drive for improved collaboration and recordkeeping. Transitioned fully to a new accounting system to enhance financial accuracy and transparency. Continued improving our workspace in the Codington County War Memorial and Courthouse building, our home since 1928.

Our Headquarters team remains small but exceptionally dedicated with **Mrs. Judy Greenfield**, Membership and Bookkeeper who has been with the Department for 33 years, **Mrs. MaryJo Boner**, Executive Assistant and Programs Coordinator with 8 years of service and myself completing my third year in June. Judy and MaryJo are the backbone of our operations. Their professionalism, institutional knowledge, and commitment ensure the Department functions smoothly every day. I am deeply grateful for their partnership and support.

Commander, with most committee and officer reports submitted, the activities of the Department have been well documented. I congratulate you on a successful year of leadership. It

has been a privilege to serve as your Adjutant, and your tenure has set a high standard for those who follow.

Respectfully submitted,

C.P. Van Delist

Department Adjutant

The American Legion, Department of South Dakota

ANNUAL REPORT OF THE NATIONAL EXECUTIVE COMMITTEEMAN

Department Commander Hempel and fellow Legionnaires,

It is an honor to serve as your National Executive Committeeman (NEC) and to represent the Department of South Dakota at the national level of The American Legion. This report reflects not only participation but also the impact of our collective voice in shaping national priorities, programs, and advocacy over the past year.

National Convention – Tampa

The 106th National Convention in Tampa, Florida, brought together thousands of delegates from across the nation to establish the direction of our organization for the coming year. South Dakota's delegation was actively engaged throughout the convention, participating in committee work, contributing to national resolutions, and ensuring our department's perspectives were present in key discussions.

The convention resulted in the election of Dan Wiley as National Commander. Under his leadership, the organization continues to prioritize veteran advocacy, community engagement, and national visibility. The decisions made at this convention will directly influence programs and legislative priorities impacting veterans in South Dakota and across the nation.

NEC Duties and Committee Involvement

In my role as your NEC, I represented South Dakota during National Executive Committee meetings following the National Convention and at the Fall Meetings. These sessions guide the operational, financial, and policy direction of The American Legion nationwide.

Your voice was present in deliberations that shaped national program funding, policy positions, and organizational priorities. The outcomes of these meetings influence how resources are allocated, how programs like veteran support services are delivered, and how The American Legion positions itself on issues affecting millions of veterans.

I also participated in the 2026 American Legion Washington Conference, where we reinforced The American Legion's presence on Capitol Hill. The South Dakota delegation included 11 members of the South Dakota American Legion and 4 members of the South Dakota American Legion Auxiliary, demonstrating strong participation and unified support for our mission.

During this conference, members of the delegation met with John Thune and Mike Rounds to discuss The American Legion's legislative priorities and advocate on behalf of our veterans. Dusty Johnson was out of the area during our visit.

Discussions focused on the status of the Hot Springs VA Medical Center and the critical importance of maintaining its operations for veterans in our region. We also addressed the broader need for accessible community-based healthcare, the importance of maintaining a strong and capable military, and other key national priorities impacting veterans and service members. These conversations ensured that the unique needs of South Dakota veterans were clearly communicated at the federal level.

I will continue to advance your priorities at the Spring NEC Meeting as we evaluate resolutions and set the direction for the organization's future.

Legislative Advocacy

The American Legion's legislative efforts continue to produce meaningful national impact, with advocacy influencing policy discussions and legislative action affecting veterans across the country. This year's priorities included:

- The GI Bill Parity Act, advancing equity for National Guard and Reserve members
- The Major Richard Star Act, addressing concurrent receipt for disabled retirees
- Protection of Coast Guard funding during government shutdowns
- Expanded focus on mental health resources and suicide prevention

Through coordinated national and grassroots efforts, The American Legion maintains one of the most respected voices in Washington, D.C. South Dakota's engagement strengthens that voice and ensures our veterans are included in these outcomes.

America 250 and National Mission Alignment

As our nation approaches its 250th anniversary, The American Legion has taken an active role in encouraging nationwide participation in America 250 efforts. This initiative represents a significant opportunity to elevate patriotism, civic engagement, and public awareness of our mission. Through America 250, Posts can expand their impact by leading community-based programs, educational outreach, and commemorative events. These efforts not only honor our nation's founding but also strengthen the connection between our communities and those who have served.

Aligned with this effort is the continued emphasis on the Be the One initiative, which remains a top priority across all levels of The American Legion. Nationally, this initiative has expanded awareness, increased training opportunities, and driven thousands of community engagements focused on preventing veteran suicide.

Together, these efforts have a broader impact. They demonstrate that The American Legion is not only preserving our nation's legacy but actively improving the lives of veterans today.

Looking Ahead

As we move forward, the strength of The American Legion continues to depend on engaged members and active Posts.

I encourage all Legionnaires to:

- Advance the Be the One mission through direct engagement and awareness
- Take a leadership role in America 250 activities within your communities
- Strengthening our organization through membership growth and mentorship
- Maintain visibility through service, advocacy, and community involvement
- Actively share the mission and impact of The American Legion with fellow veterans, ensuring they understand the value of membership, the support we provide, and the opportunity to continue serving their communities

Every new member strengthens our voice and expands our ability to serve. The future of our organization depends on our willingness to reach out, tell our story, and invite others to be part of something larger than themselves. The work being done at the national level has real impact, but it is the work at the Post level that brings that impact home.

Thank you for the opportunity to represent the Department of South Dakota. It is a responsibility I take seriously, and I remain committed to ensuring your voice continues to be heard at the national level.

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

ANNUAL DEPARTMENT FINANCE COMMISSION CHAIRMAN REPORT

Commander Hempel,

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, Jeff Merchant, 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 2025 to prepare a budget for the Fiscal Year 2025-2026 which was then presented to the Department Executive Committee for their approval. The DEC approved a 2025-2026 budget of \$358,231.35. 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. It should be noted that this DEC approved budget did exceed estimated income for this Fiscal Year.

As of April 31, 2026, income for the Department from membership has been \$274,539.03 (102.86% of budgeted). Outside income received to date has been \$54,001.28. This includes AGIA Mones of \$17,140.18; Emblem Royalty \$3,294.77; USAA Royalty (2025) \$1,337.00; American Legion Foundation \$13,323.33; Sweepstakes monies to date have been \$11,419.26 from Midwinter and currently \$5,885.34 from Convention raffle.

As of April 31, 2026, Department expenditures total \$261,200.02 (72.91% of projected budget) with a remaining budget of \$97,031.33. The April Cash Balance Report indicated a balance of \$1,420,241.34. It should be noted that that amount includes the Edward Jones Account (formally listed as Trust Fund Account) which has gone from \$969,656.04 to \$1,192,990.87.

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

ANNUAL DEPARTMENT AMERICANISM COMMISSION CHAIRMAN REPORT

Commander Hempel,

Thank you for the opportunity to serve as the South Dakota American Legion Americanism Commission Chair.

South Dakota has long placed strong emphasis on our core Americanism programs: the Oratorical Contest, Boys State, and Youth Trooper Academy. This year, with the addition and growth of Junior Shooting Sports, we are recognizing these efforts together as "The Big 4" Americanism Programs. Each program gives our Posts a meaningful way to reach young people across South Dakota and teach leadership, citizenship, patriotism, discipline, and service.

The South Dakota Oratorical Contest was a strong success this year. We had an outstanding recruiting effort, with seven of the eight Districts holding competitions. Our 2026 Department Champion was Lewis Carlyle, a senior from Stevens High School in District 2, who received a \$1,500 scholarship and will represent South Dakota at the National American Legion Oratorical Contest at Hillsdale College in Michigan. Emma Andrews of Beresford High School placed second, Ian Cho of Spearfish High School placed third, and state finalists from Districts 3, 4, 6, and 8 also earned scholarships. Every student who prepares and speaks on the United States Constitution shows courage, knowledge, and commitment to our Republic.

Boys State remains one of our strongest leadership and citizenship programs. At the time of the Boys State report, applications were tracking close to last year. The 2025 program had approximately 150 applications and 135 attendees, and the report emphasized the importance of Posts staying in contact with selected boys to help ensure they attend. Planning continues for the 83rd session at Northern State University in Aberdeen, with a long-term goal of rebuilding attendance to approximately 200 participants. Boys State will also award seven \$1,000 scholarships to participants seeking high office and demonstrating the spirit of Boys State. Boys State Blue Cap Day will be Thursday, May 28, and we encourage as many Legionnaires as possible to attend and see this program in action.

The Youth Trooper Academy continues to give young people a rigorous, hands-on look at law enforcement, discipline, and public service. Recruits participate in marching, physical training, traffic stops, drug interdiction, crash investigations, emergency vehicle operations, and firearms training. This year's program also included former graduates serving as mentors, which speaks highly of the program's lasting impact. The American Legion's \$750 Outstanding Graduate Scholarship was awarded to Emma Niles of Hot Springs, who enlisted in the South Dakota National Guard and left for Basic Combat Training shortly after graduation. The 14th Annual Youth Trooper Academy will be held June 22-26, 2026, with Blue Cap Day scheduled for June 25.

This was also a landmark year for Junior Shooting Sports in South Dakota. Under Commander Hempel's leadership, the Department advanced the American Legion Junior 3-Position Sporter Air Rifle Program and added a South Dakota American Legion Shooting Sports Scholarship Program. Two scholarships were awarded: Emma Dissing received the J1 Division \$500 scholarship, and Stazy Sass received the J2 Division \$300 scholarship. South Dakota was well represented nationally, with 50 of 504 Round 1 competitors coming from our state. Four athletes and two teams advanced to Round 2, and three competitors -- Emma Dissing of Post 174 in Lennox, Austin Crawford of Post 80 in Britton, and Mason Stoesser of Post 8 in Pierre -- advanced to the national in-person competition. The Pierre Junior Shooters also earned an outstanding 4th-place national finish.

We did not hold an Americanism Commission meeting in January this year. Our next Americanism Commission meeting is scheduled for June 2 in Pierre, where the Commission will grade the annual Americanism reports submitted by Posts across the Department and discuss the status of our Americanism programs. I appreciate the work Posts put into those reports, because they reflect the true Americanism work being done in our communities.

Finally, America 250 gives us a special opportunity to celebrate our nation's 250th anniversary throughout 2026, not just on the Fourth of July. Several Posts had strong America 250 kickoffs, including South Dakota America 250 ceremonial flag raisings with local public officials, American Legion members, other veterans, and, most importantly, school-aged children. These events honored our history and heritage while helping pass that pride and responsibility to the next generation.

Posts across the state are also working with city councils, city commissions, schools, and community partners on projects such as time capsule burials and historical Liberty Tree plantings. These efforts can create lasting public reminders of our founding principles and provide civic and government classes with a meaningful way to connect students to the history of the original Liberty Tree in Boston. The Department also partnered with the America 250 South Dakota Commission, attended virtual town halls, and helped share information on how people can get involved. Posts have already woven America 250 into Memorial Day, Flag Day, and Fourth of July events, and we should continue carrying that theme into Veterans Day and beyond.

In closing, Americanism is not just one program, one ceremony, or one report. It is how we teach young people to understand freedom, to respect the Constitution, to serve their communities, and to love this nation. Thank you to every Post, District, volunteer, educator, parent, and Legion Family member who helped carry that mission forward this year.

Respectfully submitted,
Carol Howitz
Americanism Commission Chair

ANNUAL DEPARTMENT ATHLETIC COMMISSION CHAIRMAN REPORT

Commander Kevin Hempel,

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.

After much consideration, the SD American Legion Athletic Commission has agreed to implement a Class "B" (14U) baseball program. Clearly it has generated tremendous interest, as there are multiple American Legion Posts that have already registered a (14U) team. With this being the inaugural season, it just seemed fitting to have American Legion Post #1 in Vermillion, SD be this year's host site for the Class "B" (14U) state tournament.

The 2026 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 (2026) are:

- Class "A" Senior – Rapid City, SD, Post #22 (July 28 – August 1)
- Class "B" Senior – Madison, SD, Post #25 (July 31 – August 4)
- Class "A" Junior – Sioux Falls, SD, Post #15 (July 30 – August 2)
- Class "B" Junior – Redfield, SD, Post #92 (August 7 – 9)
- Class "B" (14U) – Vermillion, SD, Post #1 (July 14 – 26)

On January 11th, 2026, selections were made for the 2027 state championship host sites. They are as follows:

- Class "A" Senior – Pierre, SD, Post #8
- Class "B" Senior – Parkston, SD, Post #194
- Class "A" Junior – Brandon Valley, SD, Post #131
- Class "B" Junior – Clark/Willow Lake, SD, Post #60
- Class "B" (14U) – Sisseton, SD, Post #50

This year's American Legion Golf Tournament will be hosted by Rapid City Post #22 on September 26th, 2026. This tournament will be a one-day event held at Meadowbrook Golf Course in Rapid City, SD. The host/chairperson is Jackie Miller of Rapid City, Post #22, along with Commissioner's Beau Garcia and Lyle Tolsma.

The SDHSAA has completed its study of sanctioning baseball as a High School sport. The study has concluded that the SDHSAA will not sanction baseball as a High School sport at the present time.

SD American Legion Baseball is stronger than it's ever been with over 100 teams already registered.

Commander Hempel, 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

To my fellow Legionnaires, greetings from SD Boys State. At the time of this report, Boys State is about on track with the previous year in terms of numbers. That is not exactly good news though, since our final number of applications for 2025 was approximately 150 and the number of attendees was 135. This 15-person difference is due to multiple factors, but I believe one of the biggest problems is the failure to “stay in touch” with the boys prior to the beginning of the program. It is exceptionally important to maintain contact with your boys to ensure they are on track to attend. The second biggest problem is the tendency of the South Dakota High School Athletic Association to schedule the State High School (HS) Track meet during the week of Boys State. This is the second year in a row that has happened. It becomes harder every year to compete with HS sports. Unfortunately, I do not have a solution to this. If you do, please contact me.

Planning for 2026 Boys State continues apace, and we expect to have a successful 83rd session. Support from Northern State University in Aberdeen has been amazing, and we cannot thank them enough for continuing to host us. The campus has undergone significant changes since my participation in Boys State in 1978. We now have amazing facilities for every one of our activities. Due to outstanding support from our alumni and generous organizations, we have seven (7) \$1,000 scholarships to hand out to those boys who work towards the highest offices and demonstrate the “spirit of Boys State”. Please contact me if you would like to sponsor a scholarship.

As the new Director of SD Boys State, I will continue to work with the Posts, High Schools, and Legionnaires to keep this amazing program in existence for decades to come. With your help, I believe we can get the numbers back up to a sustainable level of around two hundred. This will ensure the financial health of the program while providing this opportunity to more of our young people. Thank you to our amazing staff members and the Post Americanism Officers who continue to reach out to our South Dakota youth. You really do make a difference in their lives!

Douglas D. Harris, Director SD Boys State

ANNUAL DEPARTMENT CHAPLAIN REPORT

I was honored and humbled by the appointment by Department Commander Kevin Hempel to serve as Department Chaplain for the coming year following the State Convention in June 2025.

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'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 part of the presentation.

Regarding Department Services, we were honored at the Memorial Service at the State Convention with the presence of Senator John Thune who was very impressed with our dedication to past leaders within the American Legion. 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, and I am proud that we have accomplished that.

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.

I attended the National Convention this past year and had the privilege of attending the National Chaplain's Prayer Breakfast, as well as two separate training sessions for Chaplains. I was able to interact with a number of Department and post Chaplains from around the nation.

I have been called on occasion, to visit and provide pastoral care to members within the department who did not have a local pastor. I am pleased to do so and consider it a privilege to meet with those in need.

God continues to bless us, and our great nation beyond deserving. For that I give him many thanks.

Respectfully Submitted,
Rev. Michael Kumm, Ph.D
Chaplain
American Legion Department of South Dakota

ANNUAL DEPARTMENT CHILDREN AND YOUTH CHAIRMAN REPORT

Commander Hempel,

The South Dakota American Legion Children & Youth (C&Y) Program kept me busy this year. Thank you for your leadership and for helping guide my efforts—your support is greatly appreciated.

Over the past several years, I have worked closely with the Department's C&Y initiatives and with many dedicated American Legion Family members across the state. Together, we supported fundraising and service efforts benefiting Children's Miracle Network, Special Olympics, the Holiday Meal gift card program for young service members and their families, and Operation Homefront.

Department Service Activities

At the start of each Legion year, the Department supports several key service programs:

- **Backpack Distribution Program (Ellsworth AFB):**

Held the last weekend of July and coordinated by the Family Readiness Department at Ellsworth Air Force Base, this event continues to grow. This past July, 20 American Legion, Auxiliary, SAL, and Rider members from three Districts distributed 400 donated backpacks filled with school supplies and small toys. The event was featured in the *Up to Now*, *The Rising Son*, and *The Legionette*. Additional Department support is anticipated for the coming year.

- **Dollar Tree School Supply and Toy Collection:**

Volunteers assisted with collecting donated school supplies during the summer and toys in November. These items are currently in storage as we, The American Legion Family, wishes to develop a program with the South Dakota National Guard to distribute supplies-filled backpacks, and to hand them out to any National Guard member who can use the assistance, during annual "Summer Camp" readiness drill weekends, SDR's.

Both programs provide meaningful assistance to military and veteran families, and I hope the American Legion continues its involvement in the years ahead.

Temporary Financial Assistance (TFA)

The 2025–2026 Legion year began with assisting veterans who have children at home through the Temporary Financial Assistance (TFA) grant application process.

Key points regarding TFA:

- Emergency needs affecting children should be brought to the attention of the Department Adjutant or C&Y Chairman as early as possible, as limited assistance may sometimes be provided before the full application is completed.
- TFA eligibility is limited to minor children who belong to the veteran or are under their legal guardianship, in accordance with American Legion Resolution No. 5 (May 2022). Grandchildren only qualify if the veteran has legal guardianship or has adopted them.

Eligible children include:

- Biological children
- Legally adopted children
- Stepchildren by marriage
- Children under legal guardianship

Resolution link: <https://archive.legion.org/node/7887>

TFA forms: www.sdlegion.org/sdal-tfa-form

This year, I received five TFA requests but only one completed application. In each case, I asked the veteran's local Post to provide assistance and inform the veteran of available local resources. One veteran later reported not being contacted by their Post, and although I attempted to work directly with them, the veteran did not follow through. This highlights the need for additional Posts-level training on the TFA process to improve follow-up and case completion. Helping veterans' children must remain a priority.

I have also submitted suggested updates to Department TFA supporting documents. In situations where National TFA denies a request based on fund usage, Department-level assistance may be possible. I believe greater flexibility would have allowed four of the five requests this year to receive assistance. I welcome discussion on potential improvements to this process.

Budget and Program Planning

Only a small portion of the available C&Y budget has been used this year, primarily for:

- Travel related to the Ellsworth AFB Backpack Program \$484
- Mileage reimbursement for Dollar Tree donation pickups \$64

I am currently seeking approval from the National Guard to expand backpack distribution to Guard families in need. The remaining \$1500 funds are intended for purchasing backpacks and supplies. I am awaiting pricing responses from two vendors for discounted or donated backpacks. As the program grows, future funds may also be used to purchase discounted surplus school supplies for storage for distribution before the following school year.

Closing

I intend to continue applying what I have learned while working as, or alongside, future C&Y leadership for the American Legion, Department of South Dakota.

Thank you again for selecting me as the State Children & Youth Chairman for the 2025–2026 Legion year. It has been an honor working with you, and I greatly appreciate your mentorship and guidance. I wish you continued success in the years ahead.

Respectfully Submitted,
Harry Boner, Children and Youth Chair
The American Legion, Department of South Dakota

ANNUAL DEPARTMENT EDUCATIONAL SCHOLARSHIP COMMITTEE CHAIRMAN REPORT

State Commander Kevin R, Hempel,

The Education Committee is currently composed of the following members: Philip A. Egeberg, Chair, Perry Schmidt, Mike Pauling, and Hugh Holmes.

The Education Scholarship Fund remains self-sustaining through investment performance and donations. According to the South Dakota Community Foundation fund statement (7/1/2025–4/23/2026), the fund experienced a net increase of \$4,611.14 during the reporting period with no additional revenue:

- Beginning Fund Balance: \$169,416.78
- Investment Gains: \$12,774.25
- Total Expenses: \$8,163.11
 - Scholarships: \$6,850.00
 - Administrative Fees: \$1,313.11
- Ending Fund Balance: \$174,027.92
- Available to Spend: \$6,013.80

A total of 12 applications were received through two channels: mailed submissions to Department Headquarters (Adobe PDF Form) and online submissions through the South Dakota Community Foundation portal

The committee is working in partnership with Kelly Nelson from the South Dakota Community Foundation (SDCF) to transition scholarship applications to an exclusively online format by 2027. This initiative will reduce administrative burdens for both the Department and the Scholarship Committee, while also improving applicant eligibility verification, standardizing application content, and ensuring thoroughness in submission processes.

The committee will also work with the Department to update the scholarship brochure to ensure clarity and alignment with current practice.

Scholarship Awards for 2026 were awarded to: Bryce Larson (Letcher) \$2500.00, Megan Linke (Watertown) \$1,500.00, Ava Couser (Brookings) \$1,000.00, Kennedy Bryant (Madison) \$1,000.00.

The 2025 Educator of the Year was Kattie Bland of Piedmont. At the time of this writing, the 2026 packets had not yet been received. The committee will review and forward a recommendation upon receipt.

The committee recommends exploring a fully online submission process for Educator of the Year applications in 2027. This would: improve consistency, reduce administrative burden, and align both major Education Committee programs under a unified digital workflow.

The Education Committee remains committed to strengthening the scholarship program, improving administrative efficiency, and ensuring that our processes serve the South Dakota American Legion Family with clarity, fairness, and long-term sustainability.

Respectfully submitted,

Philip A. Egeberg
Chair, Education Committee

ANNUAL DEPARTMENT 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.

A National Standard of Excellence: The most notable and exciting achievement to report this year is that one of our very own nominees, Black Hills Energy, was selected as the national winner for The American Legion's National Employer of Veterans Award in the Large Business category. This stellar achievement showcases the high caliber of people and organizations we have working in South Dakota.

As a cornerstone of our regional economy, Black Hills Energy provides critical utility services across our state. Beyond that, they have truly established themselves as a premier employer of choice for those who have served in our nation's Armed Forces. The evidence of their commitment is comprehensive and sets a benchmark for employers nationwide:

- **Veteran Workforce:** They maintain a dedicated veteran workforce exceeding 10%.
- **Progressive Policies:** They provide 120 hours of annual paid military leave, ensure benefits continuity during deployment, and count prior military service toward PTO accrual.
- **Internal Support:** Their Veterans Engagement Team (VET) provides a robust internal support system through mentorship and advocacy.
- **Community Outreach:** Their culture of genuine gratitude is reflected in visible community actions, including R.E.D. Shirt Fridays and participation in the Rapid City Veterans Day Parade.
- **Sustained Recognition:** This national award builds upon their multi-year HIRE Vets Platinum Medallions and high-tier VETS Indexes recognitions.

We are exceptionally proud to have Black Hills Energy as a partner in South Dakota, and their national recognition is richly deserved.

A Call to Action for Local Posts: While we celebrate this incredible national victory, we must address a persistent challenge: we continue to receive far too few nominations from across the state. 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, actively identify and celebrate these employers who provide good-paying jobs, positive work environments, and comprehensive benefits to our fellow veterans.

I am asking that posts throughout the state take a hard look at the organizations within their local areas to identify and recognize them. As a reminder, the Department offers the following employment awards to acknowledge different aspects of veteran support:

- **Employer of Veterans Awards (Small, Medium, and Large Employer):** Acknowledges employers of varying sizes who demonstrate outstanding commitment to hiring and supporting veterans.
- **Employer of Older Workers Award:** Honors employers who demonstrate a commitment to hiring and retaining older workers, including 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.
- **Michael Guty Homeless Veterans Outreach Award:** Recognizes individuals or organizations making a significant impact in assisting homeless veterans.
- **The Employment Service Awards:** Recognizes individuals or organizations providing exceptional employment services to veterans:
 - Local Office
 - Local Veterans Employment Representative (LVER)

○ Disabled Veterans Outreach Program (DVOP) Specialist

Detailed information regarding criteria and forms 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 within their communities. I am readily available to provide hands-on assistance with the application process, and my contact information can be obtained through the Department Adjutant.

With a concerted effort across our local posts, we can build a strong pool of nominations for the upcoming cycle and appropriately recognize those who champion employment opportunities for our South Dakota veterans.

Respectfully,
Gregory K. Dias
Employment Committee Chair
Department of South Dakota

ANNUAL REPORT OF THE SOUTH DAKOTA AMERICAN LEGION FOUNDATION

The South Dakota American Legion Foundation began in 2010 as a 501(C)(3) non-profit corporation. 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, so do the returns that come back to the Legion.

Donations can be in many forms: gifts of cash or property; bequests through estates; naming the SD AL Foundation in your will; memorials; naming the SD AL Foundation as the beneficiary of a life insurance policy that will pay out upon death; and through an IRS Charitable Rollover Gift to name a few. Please let the Foundation know if you would like assistance in structuring a donation. Gifts of \$10,000 or more entitle the donor to name the specific Legion program that he/she wishes to support. All of these gifts help assure that the American Legion programs that you care about will continue to be supported forever.

The Foundation is working! As of this writing, the balance in the accounts total \$429,643.91, with \$14,682.97 available to “Grant” back to support children and veteran programs. In the past few years, over \$104,000 has come back to the Legion to support programs of children and youth.

Our Department Commander named the Foundation as one of his two main initiatives to support during his term. The Legion Riders’ 605 Ride has grown to be a very significant fundraiser for the Foundation. In order to support the efforts in this year’s Ride and our Commander’s initiative, and because we are celebrating the 250th Anniversary of our Country this year, the SD AL Foundation is challenging each Post in SD by suggesting donations to the Ride of \$250, or whatever they can. As a reward, each donating Post, all individual donors, and all Ride participants will be entered into a drawing for a beautiful original oil painting of the Vietnam War, done by the artist John Green, and donated to the Foundation by Hugh (Homer) and Linda Holmes. The drawing will be held during the Department Convention. A huge thank you to the organizers and participants in the Ride, and all who donate.

The By-Laws to the SD AL Foundation were amended during the Department Convention in June of 2025. Revisions include: changes to the voting ability of the five board members that serve on the Foundation Board due to their position within the SDAL Department; continued emphasis on the geographical distribution of the 5-7 at-large Board members; add clarity to the depositing of monies received; and updating the process of applying for and the granting of spendable funds to meet the needs of veterans and children. A completely new, but significant change to the By-Laws, adds the ability of your Foundation to act as a conduit for a potential donor who wishes to donate to a 501(C)(3) non-profit corporation but then have the donation forwarded to a named, qualified Recipient.

It is important that when using the “conduit” abilities of the Foundation, that the Foundation be notified of the intent of the donation prior to receiving the funds. This will allow the transaction to be handled properly and not inadvertently deposited into the endowed fund where it would not be readily accessible.

A huge thank you to all of the individuals, Legion Posts, veterans’ organizations and businesses who have made donations to the Foundation over the years! Many Posts and individuals regularly give memorials to honor friends, fellow veterans and Legion members who have passed on, helping their legacy to continue. Many Posts have made significant donations to the Foundation. Your support of fund raisers such as the Fun Auction, the Ride 605, and raffles held over the years help tremendously! Thank you all very much!

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

ANNUAL DEPARTMENT HISTORIAN REPORT

Commander Hempel,

It has been a privilege and an honor 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 Aberdeen. There will be winners in each category (scrapbook and narrative) and 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 now be found on the American Legion site and searching "history book". Next, look for "Questions, answers on post history books/The American Legion". This should give you a basic plan for your History book.

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. 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 consistent. 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 19th 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

ANNUAL DEPARTMENT INTERNAL AFFAIRS COMMISSION CHAIRMAN REPORT

The Department Internal Affairs Commission met on May 11th. The Commission reviewed all submitted resolutions to determine whether they should be forwarded to Convention, and whether they fall under Internal Affairs jurisdiction (Constitutional changes) or Resolutions Committee jurisdiction (Bylaws or policy changes).

Resolution 2026-001 – Replace “Surety Bond” with “Fidelity Bond”

Subject: Update terminology in bylaws regarding bonding of Adjutant and Finance Officer.

Discussion Notes:

- Fidelity bonds better reflect modern financial protection
- Clarification needed on bond amounts; potential future amendment anticipated.

Action: Forward to Resolutions Committee.

Motion: Brian Dean **Second:** Andy Lyngen **Outcome:** Approved.

Resolution 2026-002 – Rename Trust Committee to Investment Advisory Committee

Subject: Update constitutional references to reflect actual function.

Discussion Notes:

- The department does not operate a legal trust; the committee functions as an investment advisory body.

Action: Forward to Convention with DO PASS recommendation.

Motion: Brian Dean **Second:** Andy Lyngen **Outcome:** Approved unanimously.

Resolution 2026-003 – Eagle Scout of the Year Eligibility Update

Subject: Update terminology from “Boy Scouts of America” to “Scouting America” and adjust eligibility window.

Action: Forward to Resolutions Committee.

Motion: Andy Lyngen **Second:** Brian Dean **Outcome:** Approved.

Resolution 2026-004 – Allow Beer & Wine Sales at Legion Baseball Games

Subject: Permit alcohol sales at Legion baseball events under local law.

Discussion Notes:

- Mixed opinions; Commission acknowledges controversy

Action: Forward to Resolutions Committee.

Motion: Brian Dean **Second:** Andy Lyngen **Outcome:** Approved.

Resolution 2026-005 – Finance Operations Overhaul

Subject: Major restructuring of finance officer authority, bookkeeper role, and financial controls.

Discussion Notes:

- Conflicts with Constitution by subordinating Executive Committee authority to the Finance Commission- Direct violation of National and Department Constitution
- Imposes structural changes requiring additional staffing
- Overly broad; combines multiple unrelated changes
- National Adjutant informally advised against it (per transcript: “*his answer was, yikes, this person needs their head checked.*”)

Action: Forward to Convention with DO NOT PASS recommendation.

Motion: Jay Leibel **Second:** Andy Lyngen **Outcome:** Approved.

Resolution 2026-006 – Delegate Allocation to National Convention

Subject: Adjust delegate selection due to declining membership.

Discussion Notes:

- Current Constitution authorizes more delegates than membership allows
- Proposal prioritizes districts by membership percentage
- DEC previously endorsed the resolution unanimously

Action: Forward to Convention with DO PASS recommendation.

Motion: Andy Lyngen **Second:** Brian Dean **Outcome:** Approved.

Resolution 2026-007 – District Meeting Location Requirements

Subject: Restrict district meetings to within district boundaries; prohibit combined district meetings.

Discussion Notes:

- Considered overly restrictive
- Removes flexibility from districts
- Conflicts with Commander's authority to call meetings
- Better suited for policy manual, not Constitution
- Commission members expressed strong concerns

Action: Forward to Convention with DO NOT PASS recommendation.

Motion (Substitute): Jay Leibel **Second:** Andy Lyngen **Outcome:** Approved.

Respectfully Submitted,
Byron Callies, Chairman

ANNUAL DEPARTMENT AMERICAN LEGION RIDERS REPORT

Department Commander Hempel and Fellow Legionnaires,

It is an honor to serve as the Department Commander's Liaison to the American Legion Riders. The ALR remains one of the most visible and impactful programs within the American Legion Family, with its strength rooted at the post level through dedicated Legionnaires, Auxiliary members, and Sons of the American Legion.

Guided by the Four Pillars, Riders across South Dakota continue to make a meaningful impact.

Veterans Affairs and Rehabilitation: Riders continue to provide funeral escorts and flag lines, ensuring our fallen veterans are honored with dignity. Quarterly services for unaccompanied veterans at Black Hills National Cemetery remain a priority. Chapters actively support VA facilities at Fort Meade and Hot Springs, as well as the State Veterans Home, and maintain a strong presence at Memorial Day and Veterans Day ceremonies statewide.

National Security: Chapters promote POW/MIA awareness and support deployed service members through escorts, flag lines, and care packages. Several Chapters conduct annual blood drives, helping to ensure blood is always available.

Americanism: Riders remain engaged in promoting patriotism and proper flag etiquette through school and community outreach. Flag Day and Veterans Day presentations continue to leave a lasting impression.

Children and Youth: Chapters support children and families through programs such as CASA, school supply drives, and assistance to military families. Youth-focused events remain strong, including the Warner Chapter's Teddy Bear Ride, Trunk-and-Treat events hosted by Chapters 22, 71, and 164, and various Easter activities across the state.

Community Impact: ALR participation remains strong, with Riders highly visible at events across South Dakota, including the Sturgis Rally and the Black Hills State University Jacket Ride. The 2025 Ride 605 was another success, raising over \$10,000 in support of our programs, with all proceeds directed to the South Dakota American Legion Foundation to benefit veterans and children. Planning is underway for the 2026 Ride 605, scheduled for June 5–8, which will include stops at more than 20 Posts and cover approximately 1,000 miles across the state.

At the national level, the 2025 American Legion Legacy Run brought in \$855,785 for the American Legion Veterans and Children's Foundation, demonstrating the continued impact of Riders nationwide.

Statewide Coordination: Midwinter, Convention, and the ALR River Rendezvous in Pierre continue to provide valuable opportunities for collaboration and shared planning. This year, efforts are underway to introduce a Black Hills ALR Rendezvous, including a ride to Mount Rushmore and Devils Tower.

Looking Ahead: With 18 chapters, including new chapters in Madison, Gregory, and Piedmont, the ALR continues to grow. Posts without a chapter are encouraged to consider the value Riders bring to their communities and the Legion Family.

The American Legion Riders continue to represent the very best of our organization through service, visibility, and commitment.

Respectfully Submitted,
Fred Nelson
Department ALR Liaison

ANNUAL DEPARTMENT MEMBERSHIP CHAIRMAN REPORT

The 2025 and 2026 membership years have been defined by commitment, discipline, and results across the Department of South Dakota. Through the leadership of our District Commanders, Post Commanders, and dedicated Legionnaires, we have continued to demonstrate what can be accomplished when we operate as one unified team.

Our focus has remained consistent: strengthening retention, growing membership, supporting our Posts, and competing at the highest level nationally.

The 2025 membership year reflected steady growth and engagement across the Department. Posts strengthened their renewal efforts, increased communication with members, and built a solid foundation that positioned South Dakota for national competitiveness.

MEMBERSHIP PERFORMANCE – 2026 As of 4-29-2026

Department Goal: 15,200; Current Membership: 14,342

Percentage of Goal: Approximately 94.36%

National Standing: Top 10 (reaching #1 during the year)

Retention Rate: Among the highest in the nation at 92.6%

South Dakota has remained a top-performing department nationwide, reflecting dedication and effort at every level.

NATIONAL ACHIEVEMENTS: BIG 12 MEMBERSHIP CONTEST:

1st Place – Three Consecutive Years; Category 4 Leader

Final Standing: 92.07%

This three-peat accomplishment highlights the strength, consistency, and determination of our Department. Also, demonstrating Retention Excellence, we had multiple Posts achieve 90%+ retention – which puts us in competitive standing for National Retention recognition. Key strategies for these achievements include: early renewal initiative, district leadership engagement, personal contact – 'Feet on the Street', training & support (MyLegion), DMS Transfers to local Posts.

This success belongs to our District Commanders, Vice Commanders, Post leadership, membership teams, and Department leadership. Your commitment continues to drive this Department forward.

I also want to thank the Department Membership Committee for their continued work and support throughout the year—especially Kevin Morello, Phil Egeberg, and Melanie McDonald for their work on the 21st Century Membership plan that was presented at the Mid-Winter Conference in February.

Membership represents impact. Through our members, we provide Honor Guard services, support veterans and families, promote youth programs, and strengthen communities.

CHALLENGES & OPPORTUNITIES

Achieving 100% membership goals

Reducing expired members

Supporting struggling Posts

Maintaining momentum through year-end

The final push is here. Every Post matters. Every renewal matters. Every member counts. We are within reach of finishing strong once again.

As I complete my third year as Department Membership Chairman, I want to thank everyone for your support, teamwork, and dedication to The American Legion and to our veterans throughout South Dakota.

TEAM: Together Everyone Accomplishes More
Better Together. Stronger Together.
Bill Peters, 2025-2026 Membership Chairman

ANNUAL DEPARTMENT PUBLIC SAFETY COMMITTEE 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 of attending 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 13th SDYTA. 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 Jordan Melius 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 \$750 “Outstanding Graduate Scholarship” winner was Emma Niles, from Hot Springs. Congratulations to Emma!! Emma enlisted into the South Dakota National Guard and left for Basic Combat Training the Monday after graduation.

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 MaryJo, and the District Commanders or their designees, who work hard with Posts, applicants, scheduling and conducting interviews. Good work!! The 14th Annual YTA will be held June 22nd -26th 2026. Announcement: “BLUE CAP DAY” 25 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 your 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" Steve Rowe from Madison: The "Firefighter of the Year" is Dale Ringenberg from Groton and the "EMT of the Year" is Weston Dinger from Groton .

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 Aberdeen. We look forward to an even better year in 2027.

Thank you,
Larry Price, Chairman
SDAL Public Safety Committee

ANNUAL DEPARTMENT SCOUTING COMMITTEE REPORT

Commander,

As Chairman of the Department Scouting Committee this past year, I have been fortunate to work alongside a dedicated team of committee members, Matt Lagerstrom, Fred Nelson, Sweet P. Keierleber, and Richard MacDonald. These legionnaires' commitment to youth development through Scouting has been unwavering.

Scouting in South Dakota reached a significant milestone on February 23, of this year when the Black Hills Area Council and the Sioux Council officially merged into one unified council. This newly formed council now serves nearly all of South Dakota, along with several counties in Wyoming, Minnesota, and Iowa, strengthening the reach and impact of Scouting across the region.

This year's American Legion Scout of the Year for the Department of South Dakota is Cooper Rey from Troop 346 in Sioux Falls. His Eagle Scout project established a standardized process for documenting identifiable veterans in both public and private cemeteries. Using data collection and geotagged photographs from four local cemeteries, his work will continue to benefit the South Dakota Military Heritage Alliance and help recover missing historical records for veterans who are not easily identified through existing online databases or traditional methods.

Guided by the vision of our Past Department Commander, the Scouting Committee established and implemented the South Dakota American Legion Scouting Campership program. This year, we awarded four scholarships totaling \$1,600. One parent shared that their son has been diagnosed with a behavioral disorder, making it difficult for him to form friendships, feel a sense of belonging, and participate in traditional settings. The campership program provides a meaningful opportunity for growth through the experiences and mentorship found in Scouting. The potential this Scout will have to foster resilience, independence, and a strong sense of community is unlimited.

The Scouting Committee remains committed to advancing the American Legion's mission through continued support for Scouting programs and youth development initiatives.

Chris Rendon
Scouting Committee Chairman

ANNUAL DEPARTMENT SONS OF THE AMERICAN LEGION REPORT

Commander-

The 2025-2026 year for the Sons of the American Legion Detachment of South Dakota continues the tradition of being one of the top in the nation. We will be securing our 5th straight triple nickel with new squadrons in Tabor, Volga, Kimball, Vermillion and Colton. And hitting 105% of membership goal with 85% of renewals.

National has also adopted the "Got one for the Legion" polo program that started here in South Dakota. This program has been a great tool for helping the legion recruit new members. To date SD sons have recruited over 80 members and Shane has made over 50 polos for our members. Our members continue to support and honor our veterans at all levels and events.

We currently have approx. 2,500 members and 57 squadrons in the state, which all do amazing work! My commander's challenge has raised a total of over \$4,000 to be split between two projects: The Michael Fitzmaurice statue that will be placed in front of the Veterans Hospital in Sioux Falls and the Code talker's memorial that is being planned for the state capitol grounds in Pierre.

I, Vice Commander Dan Wyatt, NEC Terry, Alt. NEC and PDC Shane along with PDC Casey attended the National Convention in Tampa Fl. South Dakota brought home several awards with the culmination of the James A. Drain award which is achieved by donating the most money per capita of a detachment in support of the American Legions Children and youth and Veterans affairs and Rehabilitation programs. What an honor to receive this and it proves our dedication to how our members truly support our veterans and children.

The Americanism officer A.J. Lutt and I attended the Washington D.C. conference in February, what a fantastic trip! We visited WWI, Vietnam, Korea, WWII, Iwo Jima memorial, and Arlington. AJ was asked to help National Commander Bill Clancy place the son's wreath at the WWI and Arlington cemetery at the tomb of the unknown soldier! What an opportunity of a lifetime for him. It was a trip we will never forget and an emotional one as I visited the Vietnam wall with over 58,000 names including my cousin Peter Ommen.

I also attended fall and spring meetings here in SD, This year was by far the best turnout for our sons' members of attending these, What a fantastic way to get info and see all our blue caps in attendance.

I would like to thank the detachment team for ALL the work they have done this past year. Vice-Dan, Adj. Bob, Nec and Alt Nec. Terry and Shane. All our district commanders: Grant, Jace, Bob, Ward, Bill, Tom, Historian- Chris, Chaplin- Doug, Sgt at Arms -Allen, Americanism- A.J., C&Y-Harry and last but definitely not least and the heartbeat of our Detachment- ALL of our 2,500 members, I cannot express enough the gratitude I have for all of you, the dedication you have to our veterans, children and our communities, It is top notch and what an honor to be the commander of this great detachment. You all go above and beyond to support our fundraising efforts and represent your veteran who made you eligible. Keep up the great work!

Respectfully Submitted and "Representing more than me",
Wyatt Reis SAL SD Detachment Commander 2025-2026

STRATEGIC PLANNING COMMITTEE CHAIRMAN REPORT

Commander Hempel,

Thanks for the opportunity to have continued serving 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, Ad-hoc Strategic Planning Committee has formally been active for 15 months. The committee's initial meeting held via MS Teams in April 2025 reviewed initial guidance plus assigned inherent tasks to establish a path forward through a formal "Five Step Strategic Planning Process"

The committee's first in-person meeting took place Wednesday, 18 June 2025, prior to Department's 2025 Convention. The committee and guests, re-examined the five-step process, plus worked a matrix to evaluate and track the Department of South Dakota's implementation and compliance against The National American Legion's approved 2019 "21st Century Ad hoc Committee" findings and requirements which reaffirmed "The National American Legion's 1997 Strategic Plan's 21st Century Report."

The Department leadership in attendance reinforced the Strategic Planning Committee's guidance to assess and evaluate the Department's organization, structure, functions, plus relationships throughout the Department's organization and components in concert with The National American Legion's "21st Century Report" to ensure continued future relevancy of the American Legion to veterans, families, and communities as encompassed by "The National American Legion's mission, vision, goals, and values."

During the Committee's 2026 Mid-winter Conference Face-to-Face Meeting, the committee dived deeper into Step One strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats and began initial focus on Step Two and Three, exploring goals and objectives for the near term, which encompasses present day to five (5) years out, and included long term, five (5) years to ten (10) years and beyond.

The Strategic Planning Committee's 2025 Budget of \$3,000.00 was approved through the Department's Budget Process. To date most of the committee members have donated their costs and have not submitted for reimbursement. To date, only \$153.60 has been expended.

Thank you, Commander Hempel 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

ANNUAL DEPARTMENT TRAINING COMMITTEE REPORT

The Department of South Dakota American Legion Training Committee met regularly throughout 2025–2026 to plan and deliver training. The committees' efforts focused on developing Mid-Winter training sessions, updating course materials, and coordinating the Fourth Annual South Dakota American Legion College (SDALC). The committee assigned instructors, refine content, and ensured all logistics, materials, and technology were in place to deliver successful training.

Overall, the Mid-Winter training was well received across all sessions, with the majority of participants rating instruction, useful, and overall experience as “Very Good (5)”. Attendees consistently highlighted the value of practical content, peer discussion, and real-world application. Participants also identified opportunities for improvement, including additional time for sessions, more structured discussions, and deeper coverage of key topics.

The Fourth Annual SDALC was successfully conducted April 18–19, 2026, in Chamberlain. The program included instruction in mentorship, running a meeting, resolution writing, train-the-trainer, organizational structure, and a capstone project. The College provided a structured leadership development experience, combining classroom instruction with practical application and group problem-solving.

Looking ahead, the Training Committee will focus on expanding and refining core classes based on the feedback received from Mid-Winter. Some of the classes requested were Community Service & Engagement, Train-the-Trainer, Leadership Development, Membership Strategy & Growth Tactics, A deeper dive into Awards & Recognition, Adjutant & Officer Training, “How to Say No” / Boundaries & Leadership, Working with Tribal Communities, and Flag Ceremonies & Protocol.

The committee remains committed to providing practical, relevant, and actionable training that strengthens leadership and supports the continued success of American Legion posts across South Dakota.

Respectfully submitted,
Jack French
Chairman, Training Committee

ANNUAL DEPARTMENT TRUST FUND COMMITTEE REPORT

Portfolio Summary. The Department's Trust Fund is an investment portfolio with five accounts each designed with a specific purpose. The current value of the entire portfolio is \$1,182,732. The asset allocation for the subaccounts is appropriate for those types of accounts. The equity (stock) holdings provide growth opportunities while the fixed income (bond) holdings provide some downside protection. An overview of each subaccount follows:

(1) Main Trust Fund (3011). This is our largest subaccount with a current value of \$1,064,395. The value 1 year ago was \$904,462, that is an increase of \$159,432. Our rate of return was an impressive 17%. The current asset allocation is 71% equities and 29% fixed income providing balanced growth. (The Investment Policy Statement allows a 10% variance from the 60/40 target allocation.) Strong market performance is driving solid growth in this account. No changes are necessary at this point.

(2) Emergency Relief Fund (4779). The current value is \$5,219. The value 1 year ago was \$4,522, that is an increase of \$696. The asset allocation is 53% equities and 47% fixed income. This account is intended for urgent needs. No changes are necessary.

(3) Vehicle Fund (4780). The current value is \$44,962. The value 1 year ago was \$33,620, that is an increase of \$11,341. However, a \$6,500 contribution was made to this account in September 2025. The asset allocation is 52/48, a nice balanced approach that enables growth while minimizing downside risk.

(4) New Scouting Campership Account (5475). The current value is \$52,599. The asset allocation is 52/48, a balanced allocation that provides growth opportunities with downside protection. Expect funds to transfer in/out of this account each year to support the Scouting program across the state. This new account was established in July 2025 with an initial contribution of \$48,439.

(5) New Temporary Financial Assistance Subaccount (5717). The current value is \$15,567. The asset allocation is 52/48, a balanced allocation that is appropriate for this type of account. This new account was established in September 2025 with an initial contribution of \$14,974.

Resolution to Rename the Committee The Trust Committee primarily provides oversight of the Department's investment account. That is much different from a Trust, which is a legally binding agreement that does not relate to this Committee's purpose, duties, or responsibilities. The Trust Committee fully supports the Resolution to rename the "American Legion Trust Committee" to "Investment Advisory Committee" that has been submitted via Spearfish Post 164. Recommend approval of same.

Comments Over the last 12 months, the stock market has experienced solid growth with all major indices reaching record highs. Stronger-than-expected corporate earnings and continued momentum in sectors like artificial intelligence and technology are driving this rally. The 2026 outlook remains bullish with analysts projecting the S&P 500 will reach fresh record highs. The ongoing tensions in the Middle East and international trade negotiations remain areas of concern. Likewise, the November midterm elections are historically associated with increased market volatility. Regardless, the Department's Trust Fund is diversified, balanced, and well positioned to weather these challenges while continuing to take advantage of a strong performing stock market. The Committee has reviewed the Investment Policy Statement, and no changes are necessary.

Respectfully submitted,
Jeff Merchant
Jeff Merchant, Committee Chair

ANNUAL V.A.V.S. COMMITTEE CHAIRMAN REPORT

I would like to thank Commander Kevin Hempel 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 VA Hospice facility at Sioux Falls has opened up and I was there for the grand opening. Each room has a theme and a fireplace and TV. It also has an area for relative to be with the individual on hospice.

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, etc.

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! You are fulfilling one of our Legion Pillars of assisting veterans.

Respectfully submitted,
Charemon Dunham
VAVS Committee Chairman

ANNUAL SOUTH DAKOTA VETERANS COUNCIL LIAISON REPORT

Department Commander Hempel and Fellow Legionnaires,

It has been another active year serving on the South Dakota Veterans Council. I appreciate the opportunity to represent The American Legion while working alongside our partner organizations to support veterans across South Dakota.

The Council continues to bring together representatives from The American Legion, DAV, VFW, PVA, VVA, MOPH, and this year welcomed the National American Indian Veterans as a member organization. Meetings are held both in person and virtually across the state, helping improve participation and maintain a strong connection to veterans in all regions.

The Council remained engaged in legislative priorities, with continued focus on long-term care, transportation, and veterans' education. Legislative roundtables and coordination with state and federal leaders remain key to advancing these issues. Funding was also approved to support upcoming legislative engagement efforts.

Standing committees for Cemetery, Long-Term Care, Transportation, and Legislation were established to improve focus and follow-through. The Transportation Committee has already acted by advancing recommendations to improve access for veterans.

Regular updates from the VA and South Dakota Department of Veterans Affairs highlighted progress in claims processing, home-based care, and outreach, while also identifying ongoing concerns with travel reimbursement, medication delivery, and access to care. The Veterans Cemetery Endowment Fund remains strong at approximately \$3.6 million, ensuring continued support for the cemetery.

Challenges remain in several areas, including staffing at the State Veterans Home, rural transportation, access to claims assistance, and overall responsiveness in healthcare. These issues continue to drive the Council's priorities moving forward.

It remains an honor to serve on the South Dakota Veterans Council. Progress continues, and through continued collaboration, we will keep working to improve support and services for South Dakota veterans and their families.

Respectfully submitted,
Fred Nelson, SDVC Representative
The American Legion Department of South Dakota