

## **HOW TO ORGANIZE A VETERANS IN COMMUNITY SCHOOLS EVENT**

### **Committee:**

Education

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### **Background Information on *Veterans in Community Schools*:**

Veterans in Community Schools is an activity endorsed by The American Legion that brings history to life by connecting military veterans with students in classrooms or at school assemblies in conjunction with history lessons about World War II, The Korean War, The Vietnam War or Operation Enduring Freedom/Operation Iraqi Freedom. The ever-decreasing numbers of healthy veterans from World War II points to the fleeting nature of the opportunity to pass on these important lessons.

Veterans are important pieces of American history. The American Legion Family believes accounts of their experiences while in uniform and as a result of their military service should be preserved and shared with others. Veterans have witnessed monumental events in history. They can help students learn from and appreciate the sacrifices individuals and their families have made.

In addition to sharing their experiences, veterans may also discuss a wide range of topics including how to help a family who has a deployed military service member, how to show support for the troops, proper respect for the flag, or why The American Legion Family was formed and what it stands for. Also, veterans' sharing of their military experience with an appreciative audience can help them heal psychological wounds from combat, deployment or family separation. Veterans who have spoken to students generally describe the experience as a rewarding and personally satisfying experience.

### **Steps for Organizing a Veterans in Community Schools Activity:**

Participation in The American Legion's Veterans in Community Schools program is a suggested activity in the American Legion Auxiliary's Education Programs Action Plan. It can be reported for either the Education or VA&R program. Please only report each program one time.

Follow these steps to organize a Veterans in Community Schools event at a school(s) in your community.

#### **1) Identify and Contact School(s)**

- a. Contact a school or schools in your local community and offer to organize a Veterans in Community Schools event for a classroom, grade level, or student-body assembly. Reach out to the school principal first, either by an in-person visit,

telephone or email. You may choose to select an elementary, middle or high school; you can alter your activities to accommodate a wide range of age groups. The most effective way is to have someone connected to the school (a parent or friend of a teacher,) make the approach.

## **2) Propose an Activity Plan**

- a. The school official may refer you to a classroom teacher or to a department chair. If so, work with the teacher or chair to develop the activity into an educational program for students. Discuss with them how veterans can contribute to the students' understanding of military service and/or U.S. history. Provide additional resources (found below) for teachers, as they may want to introduce key concepts to students in their lesson plans in preparation for the activity.
- b. Work with the school to identify the most suitable time, venue, and format of the activity. You could host the event in a classroom, cafeteria, auditorium, or gymnasium. The size of the venue will depend on the number of veterans and the size of the audience.
- c. Propose to hold the Veterans in Community Schools activity on or around Veterans Day (November 11 each year) or Memorial Day, but do not limit yourself to those time periods if that time frame does not suit the school calendar.
- d. Depending on the average age of the audience, you may want to develop a set of guidelines for the event. In addition to hearing about veteran experiences, different age groups may be interested in other information as well. Elementary/middle school students may be interested in flag education and citizenship; high school students may be interested in the role of the military in today's society, a more in-depth exploration of the veteran's experience, the Veterans History Project of the Library of Congress, and volunteer service opportunities that are offered by the Legion Family.
- e. Offer to create handouts or supplemental materials about veterans for students to take home for themselves and their family members. Note that the school official will likely need to review and approve the materials being proposed for distribution to students or family members. Materials can contain information about the Legion Family (such as a web address), but should not overtly promote membership since that is not the purpose of this activity.
- f. Identify and assign roles to participants, such as greeter, ALA or Legion representative and moderator. While servicemembers don't necessarily expect civilians to address them by their military title, it is a nice courtesy to know the proper address.

## **3) Identify Veterans for Speaking Roles**

- a. Once the possible dates have been selected with the school, identify one veteran or group of veterans from the appropriate war era who would be willing to speak about their experiences, or other topics suggested by the school. Note that some veterans may prefer to speak to older or younger audiences depending on how the activity is structured.

- b. There are many ways to find veterans who may be willing to participate. First, ask the family member(s) of those who belong to the American Legion Auxiliary. Second, contact the commander or a commission chairman of the Legion post. Third, ask the school if a staff member is a veteran and wishes to speak, or if they are aware of a parent or family member with military experience.
- c. Try to connect specific historical incidents with those veterans who may have served in that theater or at that time in history.
- d. Try to invite veterans from more than one branch of the armed forces and different periods of conflict. A wide array of speakers will give students an opportunity to hear many kinds of experiences.

#### **4) Prepare the Veteran(s) and Audience**

- a. Ask each veteran if there are topics they wish to discuss or not discuss. Work with the teachers to develop guidelines for students to respect the veterans' wishes.
- b. It is common for young people to want to ask a military service member if they have killed anyone. Teachers should discuss this in advance, requesting that students refrain from asking this question out of respect for the servicemember.
- c. Below is a list of potential questions and talking points to review with your veteran(s) in advance. It may even be helpful to assign questions to students at the event.
  - When and where did you serve?
  - Why did you join the service? What branch?
  - Why did you pick the branch that you were in?
  - What did it feel like to be in the service?
  - Would you demonstrate a proper salute?
  - What was boot camp like?
  - What were your job assignments?
  - What are some of your memorable experiences?
  - What did you do for entertainment?
  - Where did you travel during service?
  - Any humorous or unusual events?
  - What did you do in the days and weeks after you returned?
  - Did you form any close friendships, and do you still stay in touch?
  - Are you a part of any veterans' organizations?
  - Did your military experience influence your views on today's military and war?
  - How did the service affect your life?
  - What values did you learn from your experience?

#### **5) Implement the Activity Plan**

- a. Follow the agenda you have laid out through careful planning and consultation with the school official and staff.

- b. If time, space and resources allow, consider hosting a small reception for the veterans, school officials, key faculty, and a representative or a few of the student body to continue their conversations and exchange information.

### **Sample Agenda**

1. Assemble the students and veterans.
  2. Welcome students and veterans to the activity. Give a brief overview of the project's purpose and introduce the veterans.
  3. Say the Pledge of Allegiance and/or have a local ROTC display the U.S. flag.
  4. Allow for a few remarks from any distinguished or notable guests you may have invited (e.g. Mayor, member of Congress, etc.)
  5. Allow the veterans to introduce themselves. After they have given brief introductory remarks, begin the Q&A session.
  6. Thank each veteran for participating and allow for individual remarks if they have any. If you wish to present each veteran with a gift, now would be the best time to do so.
  7. Consider saying the Pledge of Allegiance again to see if you hear the words differently in light of the presentation.
  8. Close out the project or event with a culminating 'Thank You' to all participants.
- 6) Follow-up with Veteran(s) and School(s)**
- a. Send thank-you notes to the school leader and faculty. Ask if they would like to continue with the program in the future.
  - b. Provide the school leader with information about the Legion Family and Legion Family programs and resources for veterans, veteran and military families, and the general community, so that he/she may make referrals of students and their families to Legion Family programs and services.
  - c. Send thank-you notes to veteran speakers. Ask the veterans if they would be willing to be added to a list of willing speakers for future Veterans in Community Schools activities.

### **Promote ALA and Report Your Impact:**

The ALA encourages members to identify themselves as such. When interacting with teachers, parents and veterans, however, it is important that members not push ALA membership aggressively, as that is not the primary purpose of this activity. Please, do feel free to wear ALA apparel and mention why you value association with The American Legion Family. Please also be sure to report your volunteer activities and hours to your unit's Education or VA&R committee chairman.

**Additional Ideas:**

Assign a unit member to take pictures or video during the activity, provided the school and the veterans consent to this documentation.

- Assign a unit member to prepare an article or blog post of the event for the unit and post publications.
- Gather publicity generated by students and schools themselves, such as news articles in the school newspaper or online postings, student essays written for class assignments, or thank you notes from students. Re-publicize this material, with the authors' permissions, in your unit or department communications.
- Be sure to report your Veterans in Community Schools activities in your individual or unit impact report to the unit's Education or VA&R Committee chairman.

**Resources:**

- **America's Veterans Teacher Guide**, *The American Legion*  
<http://www.legion.org/documents/pdf/veterans.pdf>
- **Promoting Historic Preservation in Community Schools**, *The History Channel*  
[http://www.history.com/images/media/interactives/promote\\_historic\\_preservation.pdf](http://www.history.com/images/media/interactives/promote_historic_preservation.pdf)
- **Our Veterans: Sharing Their Stories**, *The History Channel*  
<http://www.history.com/images/media/pdf/OurVeteransOurStories.pdf>
- **Veterans History Project**, *U.S. Library of Congress*  
<http://www.loc.gov/vets/>