

# The biggest little convention in the world



New national commander elected at 97th DAV and Auxiliary National Convention amid adoption of new resolutions, celebration of caregiver benefits expansion

It's easy to be distracted by the sights and sounds of a casino town and its nightlife, but for those attending the 2018 DAV and Auxiliary National Convention in Reno, Nev., it was just as much about business as entertainment.

One of the most important tasks at hand was choosing a new national commander, and members unanimously elected Dennis R. Nixon, a combat-wounded Marine, to hold the office.

In his acceptance speech, the Vietnam veteran from Texas described how he felt defeated and useless after becoming an above-knee amputee as a result of a 1969 land mine explosion in Danang, but becoming a DAV service officer nearly five decades ago gave him purpose once again.

"Suddenly, I was back in the fight," said Nixon. "I was making sure my fellow veterans weren't left behind."



Past National Commander Delphine Metcalf-Foster (right) presents the national commander's pin to National Commander Dennis Nixon during the introduction of national officers on the final night of the convention.

“DAV gives us the unique opportunity to empower and improve the lives of our fellow veterans,” he continued. “It helps us ensure promises are kept.”

Nixon then credited members and supporters with carrying forth the organization's important mission with thoughtfulness and dedication, but also asked them to consider their individual DAV legacies.

“The seeds we plant today contribute to the legacy of our mission,” Nixon declared. “If the organization is to continue and the work we're doing today is to endure, we need to be a voice of encouragement. We need to inspire.”

He simply concluded, "Let's get to work."

Along with Nixon's election, convention delegates chose other national officers, including Senior Vice Commander Stephen "Butch" Whitehead, 1st Junior Vice Commander Donald Day, 2nd Junior Vice Commander Andy Marshall, 3rd Junior Vice Commander Joseph Parsetich and 4th Junior Vice Commander Nancy Espinosa. Delegates also re-elected National Judge Advocate Michael Dobmeier and National Chaplain Michael Dover.

The DAV Auxiliary elected Ellen Timmerman, who ran on the theme "Together, we can achieve more," as national commander. Other newly elected Auxiliary national officers include Senior Vice Commander Diane Franz, 1st Junior Vice Commander Lynn Helms Prosser, 2nd Junior Vice Commander Darlene Spence, 3rd Junior Vice Commander Julie Weissman-Steinbaugh, 4th Junior Vice Commander AnnMarie Hurley and Judge Advocate Paula Raymond.

In her final statements and report to the convention, outgoing National Commander Delphine Metcalf-Foster noted the tremendous work done during her time leading the organization by members and supporters on behalf of caregivers and women veterans, both of which will continue to remain top legislative priorities for the organization during Nixon's tenure at the helm.

"I'm proud of what we have accomplished together," she said, "but remain hungry for more."

Metcalf-Foster detailed DAV's co-sponsorship of the 2017 National Women Veterans Summit and efforts working with Congress to enact the remaining recommendations from the organization's groundbreaking 2014 report Women Veterans: The Long Journey Home.

"I am pleased to announce that DAV will be releasing a follow-up report on women veterans in September and hosting an event on Capitol Hill," she revealed. "We will remain steadfast and

dedicated to these causes until women have the support they earned through service.”

Metcalf-Foster went on to describe the organization’s efforts to expand the Department of Veterans Affairs’ comprehensive caregiver assistance program to veterans of all eras, which came to fruition when the president signed the VA MISSION Act of 2018 in June.



Auxiliary National Commander Ellen Timmerman speaks during the Introduction of line officers ceremony. Timmerman joined the Auxiliary in 2005 and is a member of Unit 32 in Albuquerque, N.M., and Unit 21 in Denver.

“This is a major milestone,” she said, “but we will not slow down or flinch in our unwavering support and will ensure the swift implementation of this new law.”

While the legislation extends caregiver benefits to veterans severely injured before 9/11, it omits those whose injuries are a result of serious illnesses, such as Past National Commander Dave Riley, who contracted a bacterial infection that led to him becoming a quadruple amputee during his service. DAV will continue to fight for equitable caregiver benefits for Riley and countless veterans like him.

“Leading an organization like DAV isn’t easy,” Metcalf-Foster admitted. “But it remains one of the greatest honors of my life.”

As Metcalf-Foster closed her remarks and her time as national commander, the crowd marked her service to veterans and their families with a standing ovation.

Then-acting Secretary of Veterans Affairs Peter O’Rourke, a Navy and Air Force veteran, delivered remarks to DAV members during the joint opening session, focusing on the department’s recent modernization efforts and the relationship between the VA and DAV. (VA Secretary Robert Wilkie was confirmed by the Senate the following week and sworn in as the department’s 10th secretary of Veterans Affairs on July 30.)

“Your work with DAV is so important to the VA, and you, the members, are essential to bridging the gap between the veteran and their local community,” said O’Rourke. “Whether you’re one of thousands of DAV drivers who transport veterans to their appointments or one of the hundreds of veteran service officers who fight daily for your fellow brothers or sisters, your continued commitment to the mission of DAV stands as true today as it has for nearly a century.”

Citing “historic and transformative improvements” at the VA, O’Rourke then touted a new health record system designed to seamlessly share health records between the Department of Defense and the VA, saying it will “bring transparency to veterans and caregivers and enable the veteran to be in the driver’s seat for their health care.”

He also noted that the department’s appeals modernization, mandated by the Veterans Appeals Improvement and Modernization Act of 2017, is on track to be completed by February 2019, due in part to the success of the Rapid Appeals Modernization Program (RAMP).

“While RAMP is beginning to deliver results, we know there are

opportunities to continuously improve,” he said. “We ask for your continued help in this effort.”

O’Rourke stated that more than 40,000 appeals had gone through RAMP by the time of his remarks, with over \$30 million in retroactive benefits being paid in an average of 80 days.

“RAMP is making tremendous strides in helping cut down the appeals backlog,” said National Service Director Jim Marszalek. “DAV will continue advocating for it and other appeals modernization efforts until the backlog is eliminated. And even when that happens, we’ll do everything in our power to keep it that way.”



Dr. Phil Roe (center), chairman of the House Veterans' Affairs Committee, speaks with National Legislative Director Joy Ilem (right) and then-acting Secretary of Veterans Affairs Peter O'Rourke (left) during DAV's Service and Legislative Seminar, which was moderated by

Ilem and National  
Service Director  
Jim Marszalek.

Following the joint opening session—which included the national adjutant’s annual report and presentation of the 2018 Outstanding Disabled Veteran of the Year award to Army veteran and military sexual trauma survivor Callie Rios—O’Rourke joined Chairman of the House Veterans’ Affairs Committee Dr. Phil Roe for DAV’s Service and Legislative Seminar, moderated by Marszalek and National Legislative Director Joy Ilem.

“The service and legislative forum presents our members with important information from legislators, policymakers and other top government officials, while allowing the panelists to convey their messages in a more relaxed atmosphere,” said Ilem.

The event was kicked off by a welcome video from Sens. Johnny Isakson and Jon Tester, the chairman and ranking member, respectively, of the Senate Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, in which they thanked DAV for its efforts in getting the VA MISSION Act signed but also implored members to help ensure the new law is properly implemented.

The forum focused on numerous topics, including the VA MISSION Act, which Roe called one of the most transformative pieces of legislation in VA history; RAMP; caregiver benefits expansion; VA infrastructure realignment; women veterans; veteran suicide; VA employee accountability; Agent Orange exposure for Blue Water Navy veterans; and possible future benefits reviews.

One of the 165 organizational resolutions adopted by members at the 97th national convention was DAV Resolution 002, which calls for vigorous opposition of any recommendations made for the purpose of reducing, adding limitations on or eliminating benefits for service-connected disabled veterans and their

families.

Other notable resolutions that were adopted at this year's convention include DAV Resolution 023, which calls for more comprehensive and scientifically rigorous research by the VA into the therapeutic benefits and risks of cannabis and cannabis-derived products as a possible treatment for service-connected disabled veterans, and DAV Resolution 300, which recommends that Congress separates all programs related to economic opportunity from the Veterans Benefits Administration and creates a new administration appropriately funded and administered by an undersecretary for economic opportunity.

"Our members consistently put forth and adopt forward-thinking resolutions that allow us to properly advocate for our nation's heroes and their families, in accordance with our national bylaws," said National Adjutant Marc Burgess. "This type of thought leadership illustrates why DAV is one of the country's premier veterans service organizations. I'm extremely proud to be part of it."

DAV also received nearly \$1 million in donations from corporate sponsors during the convention.

Ford Motor Co. donated eight new Ford Flex vehicles to the DAV Transportation Network, bringing the total number to 223 vehicles donated to DAV since 1996—a value of nearly \$6 million. Additionally, Ford presented a check for \$45,000 to the Jesse Brown Memorial Youth Scholarship.

USAA, the nationwide series sponsor of the DAV 5K, presented a \$500,000 check to support DAV programs and services.

Hankook Tire America Corp. presented a \$175,000 check, representing its largest-ever donation, and announced it would double the number of mobile service office stops it sponsors this coming year.

A&W Restaurants also announced it would again collect

donations nationwide for DAV on National Root Beer Float Day. A&W collected \$100,000 on behalf of the organization last year and raised its goal to \$150,000 for this year. The company then treated convention participants with free root beer floats following the opening business session.

DAV also gave back as it presented a \$654,000 check to Camp Corral, a nonprofit organization that provides free, one-of-a-kind summer camp experiences for children of injured, ill and fallen military service members. The funds, which were raised by chapters, departments and the Auxiliary through DAV's Just B Kids Scholarship program and then matched by the national organization, will allow more than 1,000 children to attend the camps.

It wasn't all work and no play for conventiongoers, though. As part of the event's evening activities, members were once again treated to the entertainment of longtime DAV friend Gary Sinise and the Lt. Dan Band during Fun Night.

Musical icon Frankie Valli also treated guests to a complimentary performance, but not before retired NFL star and 2017 Pro Football Hall of Fame inductee LaDanian Tomlinson spoke to the crowd about why he supports DAV as an ambassador, and the upcoming release of "God Bless the Broken Road," in which he makes his feature film debut as a pastor trying to help a Gold Star mother and a disabled veteran. The movie will open in theaters Sept. 7, and a portion of the proceeds will benefit DAV.

The 98th DAV and Auxiliary National Convention will convene Aug. 3-6, 2019, at the Rosen Shingle Creek Hotel in Orlando, Fla.

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