



National Convention Remarks

National Commander Dennis R. Nixon

August 3, 2019

Hello everyone! Welcome to Orlando!

I don't know about all of you, but I am excited to get this 98th national convention underway. If you are, let me hear it!

Adjutant Burgess, Executive Director Jesinoski, Executive Director Reese, fellow veterans, families, friends and honored guests—thank you so much for giving up some of your time to be here and for that great welcome.

A lot has changed since Judge Robert Marx and his fellow World War I veterans started DAV in 1920, but one thing has remained the same: our steadfast commitment to the single purpose of empowering veterans to lead high-quality lives with respect and dignity.

The work we have accomplished this past year and throughout our nearly 100-year history is important, but not done.

Before I go any further, I want to highlight the people who are out there on the front lines each and every day.

If you're a national, chapter, department or transition service officer, please raise your hand.

Hospital service coordinators, community volunteers and DAV Transportation Network drivers, **let me hear you!**

Thank you so much for your hard work. And thank you to all of our chapter and department leaders. You keep DAV strong and your service to veterans and families is *vital* to our mission.

When I first took the reins as national commander in Reno last August, I spoke about DAV's mission of service, and it's humbling to see the continuous hard work by our national staff; our members; and all of our leaders at the chapter, department and national levels. And it's inspiring to witness what we can do when we band together. Thank you.

Last year, with the help of DAV, service members, veterans and their families received more than **20 billion dollars** in benefits!

Can we take a moment to allow that to register?

Statistics can get tossed around a lot and not always given the amount of thought they deserve. They can be hard to put into context, but the folks in this room understand the significance of that particular figure. It represents justice. It represents promises being kept. It substantively changes lives and allows veterans to care for themselves and their families. That wouldn't be possible without you, our services officers and members nationwide.

In spite of the operational tempo and hazards our fighting men and women face, the size of the U.S. military decreased from just over 2 million in 1990 to just under 1.3 million by 2017. Less than one-half of 1% of the U.S. population on any given day is responsible for the defense of our nation and the values we hold dear.

This downward trend is expected to continue in the decades ahead, meaning less and less of the American public will have friends and family who have served, let alone worn the uniform of service themselves. And the burden of defending our freedom will be placed on the shoulders of the few.

To help bridge the "military-civilian gap," DAV worked diligently in 2018 to promote the organization through our public service announcement campaign.

In 2018, our program grew to 90.8 **million** dollars in estimated media value, representing a 3% growth from 2017.

This program relies on donated media from television, radio, print, outdoor and transit outlets. The extensive media exposure resulted in more than **8.2 billion** impressions.

This was made possible by national television outlets ABC, CBS and ESPN; national print placements in the Wall Street Journal as well as First for Women and Ebony magazines; and regional placements by TIME, Money and Golf Digest.

As the gap between our military and civilian populations continues to widen, these messages help to serve as a conduit to connect the American public with the sacrifices of men and women in uniform.

DAV has also promised that we would continue to be the leading voice for unique issues concerning our sisters-in-arms. Several bills— based upon recommendations from our 2018 report: *Women Veterans: The Journey Ahead*—have been introduced to improve services for women veterans and fully recognize their military service.

On May 2, 2019, DAV testified before the Subcommittee on Health of the House Veterans' Affairs Committee regarding cultural barriers impacting women veterans' access to health care.

And lawmakers are listening. In May, the House Veterans' Affairs Committee convened a bipartisan women veterans task force, based in large part on the research and recommendations we highlight in our report, aimed at identifying and tackling inequities faced by women veterans.

Another important service is the DAV Transportation Network. There are many veterans in your communities who are ill and injured—unable to drive or get a ride—who need help getting to their VA medical appointments.

While we have a great number of volunteer drivers, we still need more. The challenges are still there. Many of our volunteers are getting older. The baby-boom generation is working much longer. Consider working with your communities and speak with citizens about becoming volunteer drivers.

Last year, DAV launched a new site called Volunteer-for-Veterans-dot-org to give veterans and volunteers a new platform to request and give assistance. This nationwide resource is designed to connect volunteers with opportunities to lend a helping hand to veterans, their families, caregivers and survivors. It's essentially a database to match volunteers with volunteer opportunities serving veterans.

Those opportunities are as limitless and varied as the needs of our nation's veterans, particularly those changed by wartime service. While the program is gaining traction in our community, we need more individuals to sign up—especially those who have volunteer requests.

Veterans, caregivers and survivors in need of assistance or mentoring can post opportunities based on their specific needs. Individuals who know veterans, caregivers and survivors who are in need of help can act as their advocates to populate opportunities on their behalf. So please, visit Volunteer-for-Veterans-dot-org and sign up today. While you're at it, please encourage others in your community to do the same.

Another major legislative priority was—and remains—full and faithful implementation of the VA MISSION Act, which was signed into law last June.

The new Veterans Community Care Program replaced the Veterans Choice Program. The law is intended to expand access, improve quality and strengthen veterans health care by requiring the VA to develop integrated health care networks, be the coordinator and primary provider of care for enrolled veterans, and maintain oversight over the whole patient to ensure quality at every step of the individual's health care.

During my decades working as a service officer, I saw firsthand how critical VA benefits and services are, not just for disabled veterans but also to their families and caregivers who sacrifice so much. My own wife, Maxine, has selflessly dedicated so much of herself to me and our family; I want to ensure that she—and the many others—have adequate support when I'm gone.

Another major victory—made possible with all of your help—is the Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act, now the law of the land.

In June, the Senate unanimously passed legislation to grant presumption of exposure to Agent Orange Blue Water Vietnam veterans, and the President signed this critical and long overdue bill into law on June 25, with an effective date of January 1, 2020.

However, within a week of the bill becoming law, the VA issued an order a stay of all Blue Water Navy claims until January. DAV strongly disagrees with this decision, and has called on the VA to end the stay, and begin processing and adjudicating these claims **immediately** to help veterans get the health care and benefits they have earned—before it's too late.

Righting this wrong for Blue Water Navy veterans is long overdue. I thank everyone in this room today for their continued support and determination to see this bill got passed, and for your support as we press the VA to end the stay.

Over the last year, we have been busy people. Thanks to our members, DAV has a lot to be proud of, but there is still much more work to do.

We must continue our efforts in addressing **veteran employment**, especially employment for disabled veterans and their spouses, and veteran under-employment.

I hope you leave Orlando with the goal of recruiting other veterans into our organization. The camaraderie we enjoyed in uniform is here in this room. It's a feeling that only we can understand, but we can share it with our fellow veterans.

Leading an organization like DAV isn't easy, but it is one of the greatest honors of my life. It has been a very gratifying experience, and I made a lot friends in the past year. The memories of my year as your commander will last a lifetime.

I am proud of what we have accomplished together, but we remain hungry for more.

We will march forward to meet the needs of our returning veterans and their families.

Barry Jesinoski, Randy Reese and Marc Burgess, I am incredibly proud of you and your teams both in Cold Spring and in Washington. I hope you share in that sense of pride, because what you and your teams do every single day is second to none. The hard work that goes into supporting the DAV mission isn't easy, but that hasn't slowed any one of you down one bit.

We must continue to fight so Congress will take these issues seriously. Please, take this message home with you. Encourage your fellow members and veterans to join DAV-CAN-dot-org—the Commander's Action Network. We saw success last year because we kept talking and kept pushing. Let's aim to do it again; let's continue to fight.

In keeping with tradition, I hope you will allow me to honor you with my final salute for all you do to maintain our mission of providing a lifetime of support for our veterans, their families and survivors.

May God bless all the young men and women currently in harm's way, his mercy shine upon those changed in military service, and may God bless the USA.

Semper fi and let's get to work.