Share the Legacy. Be part of the Vision

“The American Legion wishes to call to the attention of the American people the record of achievements that have been accomplished by The American Legion during the 100 years since its founding, to emphasize the impact the organization has had upon the American society, and the extent of its contributions to the national security and the welfare of military veterans, their families and their communities ...

The American Legion wishes to set forth the objectives and the aims that will motivate its programs and activities during the years ahead and to illustrate the contribution made to the future of our country as intended by these programs and activities ....”

Resolution No. 31, Spring 2011, National Executive Committee

Legacy and vision.

These are the two primary planks in The American Legion’s 100th Anniversary Celebration platform. Since The American Legion National Executive Committee passed Resolution 31 in 2011, plans for the organization’s centennial celebration in 2018 and 2019 have followed two related paths: legacy of the last 100 years and vision for the next 100.

At the national level, The American Legion centennial will be honored in multiple ways – including a Gift to the Nation, an illustrated history, major centennial conventions in 2018 and 2019 and other initiatives.

The heart of The American Legion beats loudest, as we all know, at the local post. Every major program of the organization, from Boys State to American Legion Riders, was born at a local post. Whether your post was chartered in 1919 or 2016, whether it’s an American Legion Baseball powerhouse or a beacon of hope for needy children at winter – or more – it has a story that needs to be told in your community during the centennial.

The opportunity to share your post’s legacy and its vision is upon you, and all of us as an organization, as the centennial spotlight is cast on our time-honored place in American society.

The 100th anniversary is a perfect time to chart a course for your post’s second century. New generations of veterans will depend on the kind of vision shared, expressed and executed by the Legion’s World War I-era founders, a vision that has proven timeless. How will your post extend a similarly impactful vision and values to future generations?
As the centennial nears, we should be wrapping up the gathering and documentation of our post history and sharing it on our interactive website at www.legion.org/centennial. Once that’s complete, it’s time to share those stories and celebrate them in our communities. This toolkit aims to help you do just that, with easy-to-use templates, suggestions and resources. The goal is to get the message out beyond the post, in front of the public, using all media tools available.

**Continue Gathering Your Post Story**

The American Legion centennial window will soon open. Across the country, in every department, committees have been collecting, scanning, writing, interpreting and presenting their unique legacies. Nearly 3,000 post profiles have been started at www.legion.org/centennial.

If your post has not yet started gathering and documenting, there’s still time, but it’s running short.

The first step is to organize a centennial committee to plan and execute local activities, from the collection and dissemination of history to public events to celebrate and raise awareness of the the organization. How that works is as unique as each post. Whether it’s one individual leading the charge, a committee, or the entire local Legion Family working from a master strategic plan, how you do that is up to you and how your organization best operates.

The “Legacy & Vision” booklet on the centennial celebration website (www.legion.org/centennial/legacy) is a good resource for committee organization ideas, including a local honorary committee that might consist of prominent area residents whose lives have been improved by the Legion – youth program alumni, scholarship recipients, etc. That kind of committee can put your post on the right path for greater public reach.

The American Legion Centennial Celebration website (www.legion.org/centennial) was designed for posts to display their history – no matter their age – with photos, timelines and more.

The Centennial Celebration Workbook (www.legion.org/centennial/workbook) walks a post through the process of gathering history it doesn’t already have, and then uploading it to the website. The site was designed so you can add to it as you find more information. Material from the site will soon be presented on a new national centennial web platform to celebrate the 100th anniversary, as well as in printed materials.

**Carry the Celebration into the Next 100 Years**

As we reflect on The American Legion’s legacy, it’s also the perfect time to think about its future. It takes a deliberate effort to think of strategies to drive membership and awareness of the organization as it enters its second century.

Post 60 in Cascade, Idaho, has done a masterful job of setting itself up for the future by examining its activities and community needs, then crafting a strategic plan to carry it forward and sticking to it. Over the last 10 years, membership has nearly doubled, and hundreds of lives have been made better by the post’s plan.
A story about Post 60 (www.legion.org/centennial/headlines/10667/centennial-post-revitalized-and-energized-second-century) describes “a self-made revitalization effort centered on community outreach” that played to post strengths and fulfilled unmet community needs. Any post can do the same.

The first step is to sit down and map out everything your post does right now, both internally and externally. Think about what the post does for its members, military personnel, local veterans, youth and families. What is it doing to memorialize the past, plant roots for the future and meet today’s changing needs? As you do that, be honest about how well those efforts are going. Has a longtime activity seen a drop in attendance? Have you been trying to start something new that just isn’t getting off the ground?

Once that is assessed, look at the community. Ask questions at the schools, among law enforcement officers, social workers and others who understand who – or what – needs help from the Legion.

The American Legion Membership Public Relations Guide (www.legion.org/publications/218256/american-legion-membership-public-relations-guide) is an excellent source for anyone wanting to understand how to convert American Legion service and advocacy into media attention and public awareness. It includes a list of questions (Page 36) that can help:

- What are the needs of veterans in the community? Are they being met? Does the community know what those needs are?
- What is, and who is in, the power structure of the community?
- What is the community’s attitude toward, and knowledge of, The American Legion?
- What are the community clubs and organizations, and what do they do?
- What are the mutual needs and interests of the community and the Legion?
- What is the history of relations between the post and the community?

Another related question to ask: what is the Legion’s brand in your community? What do residents with no personal connection to your post think of when they hear the words “American Legion”? Do they think of a regular presence on patriotic holidays? A network of youth support through programs and scholarships? A social club for veterans to meet and have fun? Or some combination of these? When it comes to community relations, as with public relations, perception is often reality. If you are doing many good things but nobody really knows about them, improvement in that area needs to be a priority of your strategic plan.

The next step is to bring the community’s needs and the Legion’s goals together. Set milestones and timelines. Think of concrete (yet flexible) initiatives to help meet community needs. They can be based on what has worked for over 90 years, or be a completely new direction.
A robust public awareness program is vital, especially during the centennial. The more members and eligible veterans know about what the post is doing, and how they can help, the more likely they are to join, get involved and renew their memberships. The Membership Public Relations Guide is a valuable tool to learn about internal media like websites and social media, external press releases, public events and more.

These efforts can lead to a vision statement – a succinct description of how your post plans to serve its community for the next 100 years. This vision statement can be used when publicizing the centennial in your local community, right alongside the story of your post’s legacy.

**Plan to Celebrate Your Story with Special Events**

What kinds of events is your post known for putting on? Outdoor festivals? Open houses? Assemblies? Forums? Job fairs? The 100th anniversary is an opportunity to continue the traditions you’ve become known for, and a perfect opportunity to make a special effort to put yourself top of mind in your community. It may be useful to piggy-back centennial events or messaging on traditional post activities, such as Memorial Day ceremonies, job fairs and membership rallies.

Planning is essential. In planning your post centennial activities, remember that:

- Other activities in your community during that time (such as September 2018, March 2019 or November 2019) that might draw away people’s attention must be considered.
- Resources (such as people, money, facilities, etc.) are finite, and you have to understand what you have available through the post, business relationships, strategic alliances with schools or even sponsorships with others in your community.

A suggested timeline for centennial event planning is as follows:

1. Meet with key event planners as soon as possible to lock in the dates and discuss the opportunities.
2. Draft a simple mission statement of no more than three or four sentences to maintain focus.
3. Brainstorm events you can produce to celebrate the centennial, whether they extend throughout the 15-month celebration window or conducted all at once at a particular time.
4. Develop an overall outline for all the centennial events, and separate outline for each individual event, making sure to answer the 5 Ws and H: Who, What, When, Where, Why and How.
5. Contact other community entities to invite their participation and support. These may include the local chamber of commerce, city and county officials, schools, churches, other veterans groups, youth organizations such as Boy Scouts, and others.
6. Seek help and support from those alliances. Support doesn’t necessarily need to be about money. Volunteer commitments, promotional support and facility use are good examples of non-monetary contributions that can come from community relationships.

7. Plan the local public-relations program and share it with community media channels.

8. Develop a step-by-step script of the event(s) itself, including suggested remarks for the master of ceremonies, and timing estimations to keep the event(s) flowing.

9. Conduct the event or events, and quickly follow up with a separate after-action discussion to go over what worked and what did not in order to improve future efforts.

Some American Legion departments are already planning centennial celebration events. The Department of Minnesota, host of the 2018 National Convention in Minneapolis to kick off the centennial, is planning an activity to use period military vehicles, re-enactors and more. The Department of Connecticut is planning a large centennial parade for 2019. The Department of Arkansas will have special centennial events at its conventions through 2019.

The earlier you start putting the pieces together, the more likely it will be successful.

**Share Your Story through a Media Campaign**

Reaching out through public and media relations ensures that people know all the good things you’re doing, which stimulates support and even membership.

You may have reached out to community entities while gathering your post history. Maintaining those connections as the centennial draws near is vital. Key alliances in the local centennial effort include:

- Schools
- The business community
- Churches
- Local historical societies and museums
- Local government entities
- Other local service organizations
- Alumni of post youth programs

An essential connection is with community media – newspapers, websites, social channels, radio, TV, etc., to include military base media outlets. Local media are eager to deliver interesting content that appeals to their audiences, and the Legion centennial has multiple opportunities.

Your post’s Centennial Celebration profile page can be a valuable focal point. It distills the legacy of your post’s good works in one place in an easily navigated format. It also provides one place for links to all your
PR connections. When you click the Edit tab to add elements to the front page, the lower part includes fields to insert links to websites and the most popular social media platforms.

The post’s regular website can and should feature messaging about the centennial, including interesting facts from the post chronology, bios of past members and youth program alumni of note, along with a strong message about the post’s vision for the next 100 years.

Social media is an outstanding forum for centennial message-sharing and celebration. Some of the most significant channels of social media the Legion can use include:

- **Facebook** In the third quarter of 2016, Facebook had 1.79 billion (yes, billion) monthly active users. Legion Family members are avid users of this social media channel, and when they see centennial information, they can convey it to their friends and followers, expanding the post message exponentially.

- **Twitter** Adweek listed Twitter’s monthly active user count at 320 million in March 2016. Although restricted to 140 characters, Twitter is a great place to share links and deliver short messages about the Legion centennial.

- **Photo-dominant social media channels such as Flickr, Pinterest and Instagram** provide excellent platforms to upload and share images of your post’s history and identity. Consider, for instance, a Pinterest campaign to “pin” images of historical and unique artifacts found inside your post home.

- **YouTube** is a video-sharing website that has been ranked as the third-most-visited web page behind only Google.com and Facebook. Consider making a mini-documentary about your post history and uploading it to YouTube, or perhaps a tour of memorials and monuments in your district, many of which were probably funded or built by members of your post.

No matter the social media platform, make sure to include links back to your centennial celebration web profile and your post’s website. Always link back to your site so the visitor can dig deeper, learn more and join the excitement.

The American Legion centennial information campaign is a hundred-year event that can be indexed according to three key elements:

1. The post history and legacy – its stories, characters, accomplishments and notable beneficiaries through the past 100 years

2. The present, or current good works, that your post delivers every day in its community

3. The future, or vision, of your post, to include testimonial voices of young veteran members, their reasons for joining and their commitment to continue serving
To assist you in your centennial campaign, National Headquarters has created a set of templates that can help get the word out in your local community. When accessed online, you can customize the templates with information specific to your post and its events. Delivering these to media outlets, with background on who your post is and what the Legion does, can solidify your post’s status as a go-to resource for the media when it comes to veterans issues, children and youth programs, Americanism and support for the military.