

Veterans Affairs and Rehabilitation

When the founders of The American Legion met at the St. Louis Caucus, they recognized that a major concern of the organization would be the plight of the disabled veteran. The extent of the concern for these veterans is evident in the final phrase of the preamble, "...to consecrate and sanctify our comradeship by our devotion to mutual helpfulness."

The D'Olier administration completed the organization of the National Service Bureau, which worked with state service bureaus and service officers of individual Posts to assist veterans with problems of war risk insurance, compensation for disabilities, hospital treatment and vocational training. The American Legion received financial assistance in this phase of the program from the American Red Cross.

Immediately after the close of the 1920 convention in Cleveland, Ohio, National Commander Fredrick W. Galbraith Jr. called a conference in Washington, D.C., to consider the plight of disabled veterans resulting from the unwieldy mass of laws and regulations administered by a multitude of government bureaus. Out of that conference came The American Legion's request for a presidential committee to investigate existing conditions. as a result, the Dawes Committee, which included representatives of The American Legion, was appointed. The Dawes Committee report, accompanied by White House recommendations, brought about congressional action consolidating most of the activities dealing with World War I veterans into a new independent agency-The United States Veterans Bureau (now the Department of Veterans Affairs).

The Veterans Bureau continued under careful study by The American Legion during the next two years, and many reforms were suggested by Legion leadership and put into effect, eliminating abuses that deprived veterans of hospital treatment and other rights authorized by Congress. It was in the same period that The American Legion improved its own procedures of handling veterans' matters by organizing the National Rehabilitation Committee to promote better administration of this important and highly complex activity. The National Rehabilitation Committee later became the National Rehabilitation Commission and, as the result of action taken at the 1970 National Convention, was renamed the National Veterans Affairs and Rehabilitation Commission.

Justice for the disabled veteran was now The American Legion's fight in earnest. In 1923, the San Francisco Convention drafted 91 constructive recommendations for liberalization of laws and regulations governing veterans' benefits. Before the next National Convention was to gather, Congress had enacted the World War Veterans Act of 1924, which included many of the American Legion's proposals and extended the presumption of service-connection for certain classes of disability.

Throughout the remainder of the 1920s and early in the 1930s, The American Legion continued to register legislative achievements necessary for the care and rehabilitation of disabled veterans.

On July 21, 1930, the veterans Bureau and other agencies administering veterans' benefits were consolidated into the Veterans Administration, a new independent agency which thereafter handled most veteran benefit programs.

The American Legion's efforts on behalf of disabled veterans' benefits faced one of its greatest challenges during the Great Depression. In 1933, the new administration passed what became notorious as the Economy Act, which wiped out a wide range of programs and benefits that had been won for and by disabled veterans since the end of World War I.

However, The American Legion rallied to the crisis in veterans' affairs. The National Rehabilitation Committee at the convention in Chicago that same year put forth the famous Four-Point Program. This was, briefly, that:

1. no veteran disabled in the line of duty would suffer any reductions in benefits granted legislation in effect prior to March 19, 1933;
2. federal hospitalization be afforded to veterans not dishonorably discharged, who were requiring such care and were unable to afford treatment;
3. presumption of service-connection for all veterans properly granted such service connection under laws that were in effect prior to March 20, 1933, be continued; and
4. benefits provided for dependents by World War Veterans Act be restored and the principle established that in no event should widows and orphans of deceased World War veterans be without government protection.

The American Legion's unceasing fight on of disabled veterans was rewarded March 28, 1934, when Congress enacted Public Law 141, carrying out in full recommendations of the first three provisions of the Four-Point Program. Although this bill met with a presidential veto, Congress overrode the veto. Plus, The American Legion recorded an outstanding accomplishment in the restoration of the major part of the benefits taken from disabled World War veterans by the Economy Act.

From this significant milestone, The American Legion has worked successfully to pass further legislation liberalizing benefits for disabled veterans and bring about the fourth provision of the Four-Point Program concerning protection of widows and orphans. Since that major victory in 1934, the Legion has repeatedly mustered its resources to meet subsequent challenges attempting to reduce the role of the Veterans Administration and its successor- the Department of Veterans Affairs- in their essential missions of providing for our sick and disabled veterans. The increased demand for VA hospital and medical services resulting from the returning Vietnam wounded and disabled not only justified the Legion's earlier position in this matter, but also strengthened its campaign for adequate congressional appropriations to meet the needs of the then-newest generation of disabled war veterans.