



'Be the One' has, and is, saving lives

American Legion National Commander Vincent J. "James" Troiola delivered the following remarks to the National Executive Committee this morning during the annual Spring Meetings in Indianapolis.

Good morning, national officers, past national commanders, members of the NEC and all of our guests,

I don't like to tell stories that are not mine to tell, but we have had some undeniable success with our "Be the One" activities. While a central principle of "Be the One" is removing all stigma associated with suicide treatment, it is not our place to reveal identities or betray the confidences of people who we help. I will say unequivocally, however, that veterans in crisis have approached our "Be the One" team during INDYCAR races this year and asked for help. Naturally, we took these pleas seriously, followed-up and connected the veterans with the help that they need.

And it is not only the race team that is doing its part.

Last month, I was touring stables in Saratoga, N.Y. While there, one of the organizers briefed us about their equine therapy program for veterans and how it was assisting those in crisis. You should have seen her shocked look when I told her about a pledge from the Department of New York. In July, her equine therapy program will receive \$100,000 to be used for disabled and at-risk veterans.

It was just another example of The American Legion Being the One.

The bottom line is that **“Be the One” has and is saving lives.**

Now, I just spoke about veterans in crisis. But how about a nation in crisis?

I am not exaggerating here but never before has the United States defaulted on its economic debt. We do not know the full ramifications of what failure to lift the debt ceiling means, but economists of all political persuasions warn that the consequences would be dire.

Further down the road will be budget negotiations. One common characteristic of every government shutdown over the last few decades is divided government. We currently have a House of Representatives controlled by one party, and the Senate and White House controlled by the other.

The possibility of another government shutdown this year is very real. The American Legion remembers very well the impact of the 2019 shutdown.

It is a false statement to say the Coast Guard was not paid.

They were.

But it was retroactive – meaning that they had to wait until the shutdown ended to receive their pay. Can you imagine the stress of serving on a cutter interdicting drug traffickers or performing search-and-rescue missions while wondering if your family would be able to pay the rent that month?

The American Legion stepped up and provided more than \$1 million of temporary financial assistance to Coast Guard families in need during the last shutdown. We told them to keep the money, but this is not a sustainable option. To date, Congress still has not passed legislation that would appropriate the Coast Guard’s payroll in advance, so they could be protected like the other branches from this uncertainty.

In the polar regions, Coast Guard icebreakers are often the sole U.S. surface presence against increasing encroachments from Russia and China.

Think about that. While politicians stubbornly fight over budgets and ideologies, our U.S. military continues to defend and protect us.

The American Legion is very much in the fight.

Let me be clear. My message to Washington is this: The American Legion will always fight for the respect owed to our military, our veterans and their families.

It is why our National Security Commission is very much engaged with military officials and members of Congress regarding housing conditions in places like Fort Gordon, Walter Reed and water contamination in Hawaii.

It is why we are such a strong voice on Capitol Hill and continue constant dialog with VA.

It is why Operation Comfort Warriors has held six events for wounded, injured and ill veterans in 2023, with another seven pending.

We take care of those who have taken care of our country – in good times and in bad.

In 2022, our National Emergency Fund provided 104 grants totaling nearly \$268,000. According to a report from April 21, the NEF has already provided more than \$318,000 in 2023. Hurricane season has not even started this year, so we can expect this number to go much higher.

The American Legion is not shy about pointing out areas in which the government is failing veterans and their families.

But I am also reminded of a commercial I have seen from a nonprofit organization that cares for first responders. When discussing the toll that 9/11-related illnesses have taken on rescue workers, the group's founder said, quote, "they would do it again."

That's the way our veterans feel. Most would do it again, even when elected leaders fall short of addressing their needs.

Our military has been struggling with recruiting and retention. Our national security director told the *Washington Post* that veterans understand the value and benefits of military service.

He is right. It is our military service that has earned us the right to be in this room and call ourselves "Legionnaires."

I would definitely "do it again" and I think most of you would as well.

That does not mean we are any less committed to ensuring that the quality of life for our military and their families is better than what we experienced.

Vincent J. "Jim" Troiola

National Commander