

## 'Buddy Checks' Can Motivate Lapsed Members

Annual members often let their dues lapse for various reasons. Posts should be aware of those veterans and check in on them from time to time.

BY JANIE DYHOUSE

In the 2020-2021 membership year, the Department of Arkansas signed up more than 600 lapsed members. According to Christine Oldham, adjutant/quartermaster for the Department, a "very motivated" state commander came up with the plan to reach out.

Since most of the Posts in Arkansas were closed due to COVID-19 guidelines, Commander Dan Barnes encouraged Posts to do buddy checks on all veterans. He reviewed Post rosters showing lapsed members.

On two occasions during the pandemic, Oldham said, the Department's leadership gathered in person. They manned phone banks to call at-large members in Arkansas and worked to transfer them to a Post.

"We definitely had members ready to transfer into the Post and give support in their communities," said Oldham, a 20-year Army veteran. "Commander Barnes was very engaged in all of his Posts which got everyone enthused."

### 'HEY, THIS IS HOME'

VFW Membership Deputy Director Rick McKenna said calling on lapsed members to see if they need anything is the VFW way.

"We consistently talk about buddy checks on our lapsed members, whether it be a phone call or knock at the door," McKenna said. "Usually the response is amazing with appreciation of us checking in on them."

McKenna said he knows of several instances of once-lapsed members getting invited back into a VFW Post and flourishing as members.

This was exactly the case for James Blevins, 2020-2021 All-American

commander for Post 10630 in Hope Mills, N.C.

Blevins first joined VFW in 1995 after he returned from serving in the Air Force in Korea. He said that eventually his membership expired.

When Blevins retired from the Air force in 2010, he served on the Veterans Affairs Committee in Hope Mills. A rep from the VFW Post asked Blevins to consider VFW again.

"I went out and met the guys at the Post and was like 'Hey, this is home,'" Blevins recalled. "I became a life member in 2017."

Blevins was elected commander for the 2020-2021 year and achieved All-American status, which, he says, was not an easy task.

He said just inviting folks back to the Post to hang out and re-engaging the community proved successful for the Post.

"We were fortunate that we have come across several people who want to be part of something" he said. "I would suggest finding activities to bring out the younger generation of veterans."

### 'GIVE IT ANOTHER SHOT'

That mindset is exactly what brought Marcus Gonzalez back to the VFW. He signed up years ago after volunteering to help build a veterans memorial wall in Seneca, Kan. Once the memorial was built, he saw that particular Post wasn't doing much in the community.

He let his membership lapse. Years later, the Iraq War veteran moved to Sabetha, Kan., where he was invited to visit Post 7285 by a friend with whom he had served in the military.

"The Post and canteen were going in a bad direction and they were looking for new leadership," he said. "I was elected



PHOTO COURTESY OF JAMES BLEVINS

VFW Post 10630 Commander James Blevins speaks at a Memorial Day ceremony in 2021 in Hope Mills, N.C. Blevins is an example of a vet whose membership had lapsed, but later rejoined and earned All-American honors as Post commander.

junior vice commander and also took a position on the house committee."

In 2020, Gonzalez was elected as Post commander and attained All-American honors.

"We've changed directions and are involved in the community," Gonzales said. "People are reaching out to us to help with projects and our members are fired up."

He encourages anyone who lets his or her membership lapse for one reason or another to come back.

"Give it another shot and try to implement positive change," he said.

McKenna said that both Blevins and Gonzalez are "great examples" of what it means to never give up on lapsed members.

"A call or personal visit can make all the difference," McKenna said. "One of those lapsed members may just be a future leader of the VFW." ★

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