

**MEMORANDUM
DAN WEST
ADJUTANT GENERAL
VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS OF THE UNITED STATES**

March 11, 2025

TO: All VFW Commands
VFW Staff

Change to Voice of Democracy Winners' Trip

Commanders and Comrades,

While no one likes change there are times when it needs to happen, either because it was forced upon us or because something better comes along that will enhance or improve what has always been done. We no longer fight wars with muskets just as we no longer have a VFW Beauty pageant for young women. Yes, Google it.

Our Congressional Charter calls on us to "Extend the Institutions of American Freedom" and through our Voice of Democracy (VOD) program we have fulfilled that mission for generations. Part of our VOD program for Department winners included an all-expense field trip of our Nation's Capital in Washington D.C. This trip over the years has become less of a truly educational experience and more of a field trip to monuments and buildings.

There have also been challenges in the liability exposure of providing overnight stay, travel and supervision of minors that our own insurance company has stated that we should look at reducing as best as possible our liability exposure before it is forced upon us through a lawsuit.

As such and as is my fiduciary duty (Duty of Care, Loyalty and Obedience) to the VFW I brought forward to the Council of Administration in August of this year an issue with our VOD D.C. Field Trip that had serious liability risk that could have significantly impacted our primary mission of helping veterans and caused great loss of reputational standing within our communities. I asked the Council to allow me to put together a risk assessment that also provided options should the decision be made to eliminate the field trip. This document and the supplement for it is not secret and is included in this email. Your Department National Council Member should have brought this to your Department Mid-Winter as a discussion item.

After careful consideration and in-depth discussion at the Council workshop, the VFW National Council of Administration has decided to discontinue the annual Voice of Democracy winners' trip to Washington, D.C. and improve and enhance it with the Founding Forward Spirit of America Youth Leadership program located in Valley Forge Pennsylvania. In doing this the Council also significantly reduced our liability exposure as an organization as well as provided financial relief to those Departments that pay for their winner to attend the program at Valley Forge, they also assisted those Departments that do not pay for their winner to attend as the National will cover all the costs associated with the trip. In addition, our sponsor for the VOD program, Twisted X, has wholeheartedly given their blessing to the change.

While Washington, D.C., remains a premier international tourist destination, lack of availability of executive and congressional leaders, increasing crowds, heightened security, rising costs along with each winner's medical and family considerations have greatly hampered the overall student experience. Additionally, the trip has never offered structured educational opportunities about the duties and responsibilities of being an American citizen and why it was worth fighting for such as the program at Valley Forge does.

As a Past State Commander, I walked our Department winner down the aisle at the Parade of Winners event in D.C. as thousands of Department Commanders have. The Parade of Winners as we know it now is a tradition that we will miss as we look at ways to recognize the winners through a virtual parade once the judging is completed that will include a delegation of VFW leaders.

For those of you unfamiliar with the Spirit of America Youth Leadership program it is a transformative, four-day residential experience designed to immerse high school students in the foundational principles of American freedom. This unique program enables students to connect with history where it happened, build essential leadership skills, and foster a greater understanding of their roles as citizens.

Throughout the program at the Valley Forge campus, students will engage in a variety of enriching activities, including mock congressional debates, a free enterprise challenge, historical site visits, and interactive workshops. These activities are designed to sharpen students' critical thinking and leadership abilities while emphasizing their responsibilities as active citizens.

Living on campus, participants will build meaningful relationships with their peers from across the country and explore opportunities to contribute to society, all while learning to find common ground as Americans. The trip will feature several key components to offer a comprehensive educational experience:

- Engaging Lectures: Expert speakers will provide thought-provoking presentations on democracy, citizenship and American values, equipping students with invaluable insights.
- Historical Tours: Students will visit significant landmarks in Valley Forge and Philadelphia, gaining firsthand knowledge of America's history and the sacrifices made for liberty and democracy.
- Hands-On Workshops: Interactive workshops will focus on developing practical skills such as public speaking, critical thinking and collaboration, preparing students to become effective leaders in their communities.
- Interactive Discussions: Facilitated discussions will allow students to engage with the material and one another, deepening their understanding of the concepts at hand.

The program enhances students' understanding of key concepts like citizenship, democracy, the free enterprise system, the judicial process and the American political system. By fostering experiential learning, the program encourages engagement with experts and peers alike.

This exciting new opportunity promises to shape the next generation of leaders, empowering them with the tools to make meaningful contributions to society.

Change is not easy, especially in the VFW, and this change is designed to improve and enhance our VOD program. Some will lament the old ways of doing things and criticize the change and pound their chests and gnash their teeth and call for the Council to bring back the old ways. My response to those who do so is we don't fight wars with muskets anymore.

Dan West



Adjutant General

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Attachments