

# **‘Changing Lives’ At The VFW National Home**

## **This month marks 100 years since the VFW National Home opened its doors, and its mission of helping veterans and families remains steadfast**

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On March 2, 1925, in Halfway, Michigan, WWI veteran Sgt. Edward Pollett left his home to go pick up his retirement pay at Fort Wayne, Michigan. He was struck by a streetcar in Detroit and died. His wife, Annie, and their six children were left penniless.

The Halfway VFW Post intervened and contacted the VFW Department of Michigan Commander Dr. Clarence Candler to ask about placement for the Pollett family in a newly established home outside Eaton Rapids, Michigan.

Annie and her six children – Lillian, Howard, Mary, Thomas, Woodrow, and Margaret — were the first family to move into the VFW National Home on March 9, 1925.

Thus, a century of serving the families of veterans began by providing a haven where children could thrive.

### **CREATED TO HELP FAMILIES**

The Home’s origins began in the early 1920s when a young Michigan woman noticed the large number of veterans wandering the streets of Detroit looking for work. In 1922, 23-year-old Amy Ross visited Candler to ask for his assistance.

He offered the VFW’s resources to aid Ross’ mission to help vets find employment. The Military Order of the Cootie, meanwhile, proposed at the 1923 VFW National Convention the idea of a home for the displaced children and families of veterans.

That is where Michigan cattleman Corey Spencer came in. A VFW member, Spencer gifted 472 acres near Eaton Rapids to the VFW to build a home for veterans’ families.

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On Jan. 7, 1925, the VFW National Home opened and celebrates its 100th anniversary this year.

The VFW National Home's mission has evolved over the past 100 years. Today, it finds success in assisting veterans and their families with children by creating a foundation of services and resources to achieve their personal and family goals to move forward in a positive, safe and healthy environment.

The National Home's community is open to the families of actively serving military personnel, veterans, and relatives of VFW and VFW Auxiliary members. The family can be one or both parents with one or more children.

### **'PATRIOTISM RUNS THICK HERE'**

Leading the way in this idyllic community is Mike Wilson, executive director of the VFW National Home. A Gold Legacy Life member of VFW Post 1355 in Sturgis, Michigan, Wilson is a retired Army command sergeant major.

During his 27 years of military service, he served in 1991's Persian Gulf War and Operation Iraqi Freedom. Wilson drives 160 miles round-trip to work each day because he believes in the purpose of the Home and understands it is one of a kind.

"There is no organization like the VFW National Home," Wilson said. "Patriotism runs thick here. I remind the residents regularly to take care of the house they are in and to be patriots."

There are 42 single-family homes in the community situated on wide, treelined streets. U.S. flags are prominent throughout this picturesque campus.

A fitness center, gymnasium, game room, computer lab, library, fishing pond, four miles of hiking trails and five playgrounds also are located there.

The Tribute Garden greets visitors to the campus. Sculptures of children playing are surrounded by lush flowers and trees.

A gem of the community is the VFW Auxiliary Child Care and Early Education Center. There, military and veteran families living at the Home receive free child care while working or attending school.

The full-service, state-licensed child care facility has classrooms for infants, toddlers and preschool-aged children.

At the Veteran and Family Resource Center, case managers work with veterans and their families. Veteran employment specialists there help find employment.

“As vets, we are broken but not destroyed,” said Brian Daniels, an Iraq War vet, former National Home resident and current director of Community Development and Alumni Engagement at the Home. “Vets previously were not the priority, but they are now. Mike has changed that.”

### **CHILDREN FEEL SAFE**

Wilson said that goal-setting is a priority for the veterans who come to the National Home with their families. He believes helping vets get on the right path leads to life successes.

“They don’t always know what ‘good’ feels like,” Wilson said. “When they leave the VFW National Home, they feel good.”

To be eligible to live in the rural community, children must be under 18 years old. Most families stay 3-4 years and about 8-10 families move out each year. Wilson said it takes roughly 30 days to get a house ready after it is vacated. Currently, residents represent 12 states.

While Wilson said he is proud of every aspect of the National Home, experiencing the children living carefree means the most to him. He recalled seeing a 5- or 6-year-old boy running barefoot on the pavement during a gentle rain.

“He ran and jumped right into the sandbox,” Wilson said. “To me it said, ‘He feels safe, and he feels okay and doesn’t have a worry in the world.’ Children shouldn’t have to struggle just because mom and dad do.”

Daniels, who said growing up at the National Home was life-changing, agreed: “The VFW National Home is one of the only places in America where kids can just go out and run around without supervision.” (See the September 2020 issue of VFW magazine for more on Daniels and other past residents of the Home.)

Children at the Home also can take piano lessons from long-time employee Rhonda Kennedy. An administrative assistant with the programs department, Kennedy has worked at the Home for 45 years. In that time, she has provided 38,000 piano lessons. The only requirements are that the child is at least 8 years old and has an interest in music.

“To me, it is about more than just music,” Kennedy said. “It is wonderful to be a part of something that changes people’s lives. It just keeps getting better here.”

### **GENEROSITY RUNS DEEP**

Members of the VFW, Auxiliary and Military Order of the Cootie take pride in their National Home. Contributions from Departments, Districts, Posts, Auxiliaries and individual members provide for various needs at the Home.

Departments sponsor the individual houses in the community. Some Departments sponsor multiple houses.

Given its location, the Department of Michigan is especially active at the Home. VFW Department of Michigan Senior Vice Commander Reinhold E. Yahnka said he has played Santa Claus the last few years during the Christmas festivities.

Yahnka, a Vietnam vet who belongs to VFW Post 6056 in Springport, said Michigan's District 8 raises funds for the kids' Christmas wish lists.

"I pass out everything from iPads to Legos," Yahnka said. The Military Order of the Cootie Grand of Michigan and VFW Post 2529 in Sandusky annually send families from the Home to Cedar Point amusement park.

Groups of VFW members regularly visit the Home and are treated to guided tours. In September, VFW Auxiliary members from around the nation visited for the organization's Celebrating America's Freedom Event.

VFW "State" days are annual events residents look forward to. A recent example took place last year when the VFW Departments of Illinois and Indiana visited over one weekend. The Department members participated with Home residents in 1k races, pop-up petting zoos, crafts and picnics.

During the 2024 VFW Junior Vice Commander Conference in Kansas City, Missouri, last October, Department of Alabama Junior Vice Commander Colt Drouillard and VFW Department of Connecticut Junior Vice Commander John Kennedy presented Wilson with a donation to the Home.

As the VFW National Home enters its second century of service, Wilson and his staff are working to keep the Home on a pathway of success for those who will follow in their footsteps.

"This is a remarkable place that you have to see to believe," Wilson said. "No other VSO out there has anything like it. VFW did this."

*This article is featured in the January/February 2025 issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Janie Dyhouse](#), senior editor for VFW magazine.*