

**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



# 2025 Overview & Risk Assessment

Washington D.C. trip for  
Department Voice of Democracy  
winners



**Adjutant Generals Office**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since 1947, the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) premier youth efforts focusing on education of America and the principles of American Freedom have been conducted through a youth scholarship program known as the Voice of Democracy (VOD) audio essay contest. Open to any students in grades 9-12 that reside in the United States, territories, or its possessions, VOD is a time-honored contest that the VFW is proud of and will continue well into the future. This report will speak directly about what is known as the Washington D.C. trip that is afforded to all Department winners and the liability risk associated with the trip.

For more than 25 years, the VFW VOD winner's trip has recognized each Department's top VOD winner with an all-expense paid sightseeing experience to our nation's capital escorted by VFW Staff and volunteers. While a great trip for the winners, it has in recent years exposed the VFW to significant financial, reputational, health and safety, workforce and operational risks that require analysis of the future of the winner's trip and if modification, elimination or enhancement is required.

## About the Voice of Democracy audio essay program.

The VFW VOD audio essay program provides high school students with the opportunity to express their views on a patriotic theme through a recorded essay, with the national first-place winner receiving a significant scholarship towards their education; this program aims to foster democratic ideals and encourage critical thinking among young people.

Key points about the program's history:

- **Origin:**

The Voice of Democracy (VOD) Program began in 1946 and was originally sponsored by the National Association of Broadcasters specifically to provide a platform for high school students to share their thoughts on democratic principles through an audio essay format.

Initially, there were four winners selected, representing the North, South, East and West regions of the country. Each winner received a \$500 savings bond and a wristwatch.

According to the book “VFW Our First Century the VFW started sponsoring one or more of these scholarships in 1958 and assumed sole sponsorship of the program in 1961. From 1972 through 1998 VOD winners attended the American Academy of Achievement’s “Salute to Excellence” seminars held in a different city each year.

- **Eligibility:**

Open to students in grades 9-12, allowing them to participate and compete for scholarships.

- **Theme-based competition:**

Each year, a new patriotic theme is chosen for the essays, encouraging diverse perspectives while maintaining a focus on American values.

- **National competition:**

Students submit their recorded essays to their local VFW post, progressing through state-level competitions until a national winner is selected.

- **Scholarship awards:**

The national first-place winner receives a substantial scholarship, with additional awards given to state winners and other top competitors.

- **Washington D.C. Trip:**

Prior to 2000, each Department's first-place winner received an all-expense-paid trip to Washington, D.C. in March to participate in the VOD Banquet. Due to cost considerations and attendance, this banquet was cancelled, and the winners now receive a field trip to Washington D.C. receiving a five-day/four-night all-expense-paid experience that includes visits to historical landmarks, Smithsonian museums, and National War Memorials, as well as a riverboat dinner cruise and a visit to the public area of the White House if available. Trip includes air and ground transportation, food, snacks, and lodging.

During this trip they participate in an event called the Parade of Winners in which each participant is escorted into a room and presented on a stage and introduced before a crowd of several hundred VFW and Auxiliary members and guests. Once all Department winners have been introduced, the roll call of scholarships is announced one at a time starting with the lowest (\$1,000) to the highest scholarship of \$35,000.00. Additionally, the first-place winner is invited to attend the National Convention where they give their essay to approximately 4,000+ attendees.

While in D.C. on this trip, VFW Staff and volunteers serve as chaperones and guides for the 52 Department winners and provide all logistics related to transportation, lodging, and meals.

Below is a copy of the current winner's itinerary for the five days.

### **VOD D.C. Trip Itinerary.**

#### **Day 1 - Saturday**

Student Arrivals, Registration & Hospitality Rooms

All-Day Student Registration

12:00 PM – 4:00 PM Sandwich and Salad Lunch Buffet

4:00 PM – 7:00 PM Snacks

7:00 PM Italian Dinner Buffet at the Hilton

8:00 PM Orientation at Holiday Inn Hotel

9:00 – 11:00 PM Social time and snacks at the hotel

11:00 PM Room Check

#### **Day 2 - Sunday**

7:00 AM Breakfast and Morning Briefing

8:30 AM Board Bus; The bus must depart the hotel no later than 8:45 AM

9:15 AM Arrive at Mount Vernon - Be sure you stay in a group of at least 3 or 4 VOD students minimum at all times during our visit.

Mt. Vernon Schedule:

9:15 – 9:45 AM visit the orientation center and mansion grounds.

10:00 – 10:50 AM mansion tour.

10:50 – 11:00 AM visit Washington's tomb and additional outbuildings/sites.

11:00 – 11:45 AM visit Mt. Vernon Museum and Educational Center. Eat lunch. (students will be given prepaid meal tickets upon arrival) and the opportunity to shop at gift shop.

Noon Board Bus; must depart Mt. Vernon no later than 12:15.

1:00 PM Arrive at the Holocaust Memorial Museum for a 1:30 PM tour.

Lunch at food trucks adjacent to the museum before entering.

3:30 PM Meet in the lobby of the Holocaust Museum – then board the bus.

3:45 PM Bus departs.

4:00 PM Spy Museum

6:00 PM Board the bus for a nighttime bus tour of the Jefferson

Memorial, Martin Luther King Memorial, U.S. Capitol, Iwo Jima Memorial & (Dinner will be picked up from Shake Shack Before leaving for the tour)

8:15 PM Arrive back at Hilton Crystal City for social time and snacks.  
11:00 PM. Room Check

#### DRESS DURING THE DAY

Dress comfortably - nice jeans/casual slacks/Dockers/khakis or dress slacks. Comfortable sports shoes are acceptable. Please wear your red name badge (will be mailed to you), and wear your Voice of Democracy jacket that we will provide upon your arrival in DC if weather permits. Please feel free to wear a heavier coat that you bring or whatever is best for your comfort and according to weather conditions.

#### DRESS DURING THE EVENING SOCIAL TIME

Casual. Pajamas or swimwear are not allowed to be worn in the Adams and Club Lounge

#### **Day 3 - Monday**

7:00 AM Breakfast & Morning Briefing  
8:30 AM Board Bus; The bus must depart no later than 8:45 AM  
9:15 AM Arrive at Arlington National Cemetery  
10:00 AM Witness the Changing of the Guard at the Tomb of the Unknowns at Arlington National Cemetery. Before or after the Changing of the Guard, you can also visit gravesites of your choice (i.e. Challenger, Kennedy.)  
12:00 PM Board bus to go to the mall and eat at food trucks.  
12:30 PM Board bus back to the hotel.  
1:15 PM Arrive back at hotel to dress for Parade of Winners  
4:20 PM Board bus from Hilton for the Hyatt Crystal City; bus must depart no later than 4:30 PM  
5:00 PM Students arrive at Hyatt Crystal City Hotel for a restricted briefing session before the start of the “Parade of Winners.” Students will be paired with their Department Commander and President for the parade. Only students, Voice of Democracy staff, department commanders, and Presidents are allowed in this session.  
LOCATION: Washington Ballroom, Hyatt Crystal City.  
6:00 PM “Parade of Winners” This is where all National Voice of Democracy Scholarship winners will be announced and the first-place winner will deliver their essay in person; therefore, all students should bring a copy of their essay.

\*\*Please read the below instructions regarding the Parade. LOCATION: Regency Ballroom, Hyatt Crystal City. NOTE: The event will be live-streamed on [www.vfw.org](http://www.vfw.org).

7:30 – 8:00 PM Photo opportunity; board bus back to hotel at 8:00 PM

8:15 PM Arrive back at Hilton for dinner & social time  
11:00 PM Room Check

**Day 4 - Tuesday**

7:00 AM Breakfast & Morning Briefing.  
8:15 AM Board Bus for the White House Tour. Must depart no later than  
8:30 AM  
8:45 AM Arrive at the east side of the White House to line up for  
9:30 AM 9:30 AM tour.  
Begin White House Tour.  
10:15 AM Board Bus on the north side of the White House after the tour  
for departure to the “Mall” area.  
10:30 AM Arrive at the “Mall” (Smithsonian Museum) Visit your choice of  
museums. Choose from the National Archives, American History  
Museum, Natural History Museum, Air & Space Museum,  
American Indian Museum, or the National Gallery of Art. Students  
should bring cash for lunch at one of the locations; some open at  
10 & some open at 11.  
3:15 PM Gather in the predesignated area for departure from the “Mall”.  
Visit by Past VOD winners who are congressional staffers  
3:25 PM Board bus at “Mall”; must depart “Mall” area by 3:30 PM  
3:45 PM Bus Arrival to visit the “Wall” area (Vietnam War Veterans,  
Korean War Veterans, Lincoln, and WWII Memorials.)  
4:30 PM Board the bus from the “Wall” area for the boat cruise in  
Alexandria, VA; the bus must depart no later than 4:50 PM  
5:20 PM Boarding Time for 5:45 pm Evening Riverboat Cruise &  
Taco Bar (Travel up the Potomac River from Alexandria to the  
Georgetown area and back to Alexandria.)  
8:15 PM Board bus back to Hilton.  
8:45 PM Social Time & Snacks at the hotel  
11:00 PM Room Check

**Day 5 - Wednesday**

Student Departure Day

IMPORTANT: Please bring your luggage down to the at your assigned time. This specific time will verbally be given to you by a director on Tuesday night.

6:00 AM - 9:00 AM.....Breakfast & Hospitality Room  
DRESS: (Casual)



## 2024 Cost of the winner's trip to D.C.

<u>Company</u>	<u>Type</u>	<u>Actual cost 2024</u>
Hilton	Hotel and Food	\$68,421.44
Student Watchers	Security	\$1,856.00
TSE.Live & Video Works	Production	\$35,002.00
RMA Transportation	Buses	\$15,703.00
Veterans Travel Service	Travel Expenses	\$33,807.00
Shake Shack	Food at Spy Museum	\$907.30
Spy Museum	Spy Museum	\$1,106.00
Mt. Vernon Ladies' Association	Mt. Vernon Tour	\$2,211.00
City Cruises by Hornblower	Cruise	\$7,725.00
VFW Store	Judges Gifts	\$411.00
VFW Store	Jackets	\$3,755.25
Hyatt Regency	Parade of Winners	\$19,878.00
Total (Actual)		<b>\$191,413.49</b>

The cost for this trip in recent years has been underwritten by Prasad Reddy, owner and founder of Twisted X footwear. Mr. Reddy is a legal immigrant to the United States who has gained his citizenship as an American and is grateful to the VFW as a VFW Post assisted him and provided him a copy of the U.S. Constitution for his own use. His commitment to America and the VFW is without question and should be recognized as often as possible.

Prior to Mr. Reddy's generous contribution, we had to find sponsors that would underwrite all or a portion of the program and many times resulted in the VFW spending its own funds to ensure the success of the winner's trip. While Mr. Reddy has informed us that he will continue to underwrite the program for the time being there will come a time where we will need to find another sponsor or budget funds from our general account to ensure future viability and success.

For the last 25+ years the VFW Voice of Democracy winner's trip has recognized the top Department VOD winners with an all-expense sightseeing trip to our nation's capital escorted by VFW Staff and volunteers. While a great trip for the winners it has in recent years exposed the VFW to significant financial, reputational, health & safety, workforce and operational risks that require analysis of the future of the winner's trip and if modification, elimination or enhancement is required.

## **Legal risks associated with non-school sponsored trips with minors include:**

### **Liability**

Both the business and the person in charge of the trip can be held liable for injuries that occur. The business is responsible for keeping its premises safe, while the person in charge is responsible for supervising the children.

### **Negligence**

The defendant failed to use reasonable care under the circumstances.

### **Waivers**

Many state courts refuse to uphold waivers for anything other than the activity's inherent risks.

### **Gross Negligence**

A waiver won't protect against a lawsuit if gross negligence can be proven. Gross negligence is when an injury results from "extreme indifference to or disregard for the safety of others".

### **Insurance**

Insurance for transportation, travel, and health may be needed. Many health insurance plans don't cover injuries that happen abroad. Tour companies may limit their liability, so it's important to review their policies and coverage limits.

### **Hazards**

The person in charge should anticipate potential hazards and develop a plan to protect the children. For example, a trip to a manufacturing plant might have dangerous machinery or slip hazards.

### **Sample of current risks**

Transportation – Accidents and or delays of air/ground transportation.

Environmental - Accidents due to a natural or manmade disaster.

Government Shutdown – This would close access to most if not all of the trip stops.

Alcohol/Drug/Tobacco/Vape – Being brought or obtained and used by the minor.

Weapons – Being brought, obtained and used by the minor or against the minor.

Sexual advances/harassment – Made by or too the minor by an adult or other minor.

Disabilities - Mental and physical, minor fails to disclose or we cannot handle.

Food allergies – Minor fails to disclose, ignores or discovers a new one.

Medical conditions – Minor forgets or fails to bring or take required medications.

Transgender minors – How to address and provide lodging for, interaction with others.

Racism, Bullying, Cyberbullying – Minor fails to inform or is a participant.

Injuries - Depending on the activity, injuries could include falls, cuts, bruises, broken bones, drowning, heatstroke, animal bites, or even more serious traumas depending on the circumstances.

Training for volunteers/chaperones – Is not all inclusive for the above or other issues that might develop. VFW Employees have extremely limited training in working with minors as it is not part of their main duties and responsibilities and volunteer chaperones generally have no formal training in working with minors.

### **VFW VOD Waiver currently used as part of the VOD entry form.**

Participant Agreement for Students Advancing to National Level If selected as a first-place state winner, I have the consent of my parent/guardian and school to attend the Voice of Democracy National Finals in Washington, D.C. as a guest of the VFW National Organization. In consideration for permission to participate in the National Voice of Democracy Competition (“Competition”) I do hereby, for myself, for my heirs, executors, administrators and assignees, waive, release and discharge all rights and claims which I have or which may hereafter accrue against the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States (VFW) and/or the Departments (state organizations) of the Veterans of Foreign Wars and their respective officers, agents, successors and assigns from any damages which may be sustained by me in connection with my participation in or association with the Competition and/or arising out of any travel related to the Competition. In the event of sickness, accident or injury in connection with the Competition, I consent to and accept the services of a duly licensed medical, surgical or dental specialist selected on my behalf and for such treatments, as they may deem necessary. I understand that VFW will not be liable for such treatment. I further understand that the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States retains non-exclusive rights to use my audio file, essay, name and likeness in the promotion and execution of the organization’s programs and activities. I Have Read and Understand the Rules and Participant Agreement I certify that I am the sole author of the enclosed audio/essay entry and that I have not inappropriately used any AI tools or Chat GPT. I have only entered the competition once yearly if otherwise eligible. I understand that if it is found that I have entered any other Post’s competition or used this essay for another VFW competition, I face elimination from the competition and will return any and all prizes or incentives awarded.

### **Recent issues we have experienced.**

A male winner communicated persistent unwanted sexual innuendos and advances to a female winner. Female called parents and parents called VFW Programs Director. Program Director investigated and found the allegations credible, male student sent home and forfeited scholarship, his parents were not surprised at his actions and hinted he may have had a history of such behavior that was not disclosed.

A female winner was allegedly pressured by her VFW Department escort in the staging area to eat a cookie labeled as a peanut butter cookie by the hotel banquets. Female has a peanut allergy and started to feel bad and collapsed. While waiting for an ambulance to arrive she

communicated about her peanut allergy and eating a peanut butter cookie and program Director was able to ensure administration of an Epi-pen to treat the allergy. Winner was transported to hospital via ambulance with a VFW staff member and was later released that same night.

Last year, we had eighteen (18) different sets of parents that followed the student schedule interfering with VFW staff and volunteers with questions, requests, and accommodations for their own special needs and wants not to mention the drama that divorced and non-cooperative parents bring with them. There is also a very concerning issue of some parents by court order not authorized to be with or near minors not of their own biological offspring as we do not conduct criminal history checks on parents of winners.

Another issue that we have had complaints about from the winners and several parents is VFW and/or Auxiliary members who insist on hugging winners or putting their arms around or hands on the small of the backs of winners during photographs.

In recent years we have had to add an additional layer of security to act as hall monitors in the hotel to ensure students remain in their assigned rooms and not go visit other students rooms as we have had happen in the past.

### **Recent lawsuits experienced by other groups similar to what we are experiencing that resulted in monetary damages not covered by insurance.**

#### Severe Allergic Reaction during a Field Trip

**\*\*Incident\*\***: A student with a known severe peanut allergy experienced an anaphylactic reaction during a school field trip. The student had informed the school about the allergy, but during the trip, the student was exposed to peanuts due to a lack of proper communication and precautions.

**\*\*Lawsuit\*\***: The family filed a lawsuit against the school district, alleging negligence. They claimed that the school failed to ensure safe food options and did not adequately communicate the student's allergy to all chaperones and staff involved in the trip.

**\*\*Outcome\*\***: The case was settled out of court. The school district agreed to pay a substantial monetary settlement to cover medical expenses, pain and suffering, and ongoing care for the student. Additionally, the school district implemented improved training for staff on managing food allergies, including:

- Developing clear protocols for food safety during school events.
- Ensuring all staff and chaperones are aware of students' allergies.
- Providing training on the use of emergency medications like EpiPens.

#### Medical Emergency during a Field Trip

**\*\*Incident\*\***: A high school student with a known severe asthma condition suffered a critical asthma attack during a field trip to a national park. The student had informed

the school about the condition, but during the trip, the chaperones did not have immediate access to the student's medication, and there was a delay in administering emergency care.

**\*\*Lawsuit\*\***: The family filed a lawsuit against the school district, alleging negligence. They claimed that the school failed to ensure that the student's medical needs were adequately prepared for and that the chaperones were not properly trained to handle such emergencies.

**\*\*Outcome\*\***: The case was settled out of court. The school district agreed to pay a substantial monetary settlement to cover the student's medical expenses, pain and suffering, and any long-term care needs. Additionally, the school district implemented several changes, including:

- Improved training for staff and chaperones on handling medical emergencies.
- Development of specific action plans for students with known medical conditions.
- Ensuring that all necessary medications and emergency equipment are readily accessible during field trips.

#### Sexual harassment/assault during a high school field trip:

**\*\*Incident\*\***: In 2018, a student identified as Jane Doe was sexually assaulted by an older classmate during the first night of a five-day band trip organized by Oakton High School in Fairfax County, Virginia. Despite reports of the assault to school administrators and employees, the school failed to take immediate action to ensure Jane's safety or provide necessary support.

**\*\*Lawsuit\*\***: Jane Doe's family filed a Title IX lawsuit against Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS), alleging that the school district's response to the assault was grossly inadequate. The lawsuit claimed that FCPS ignored the reports during the trip, failed to offer assistance or medical attention, and did not inform Jane's parents about the incident. Instead, school officials interrogated Jane with victim-blaming questions and discouraged her from reporting the assault to the police[1]([https://www.publicjustice.net/case\\_brief/doe-v-fairfax-county-school-board/](https://www.publicjustice.net/case_brief/doe-v-fairfax-county-school-board/)).

**\*\*Outcome\*\***: The case proceeded to trial, where testimony revealed that school officials made inappropriate jokes about the assault and mishandled evidence. The district court denied FCPS's motion for summary judgment, allowing the case to go to trial. The trial highlighted systemic issues within the school district's handling of sexual harassment and assault cases. The outcome emphasized the need for schools to take immediate and appropriate action to protect students and comply with Title IX requirements

This case underscores the critical importance of proper supervision, immediate response, and support for students who report sexual harassment or assault during school trips.

## Death of Minor during a Field Trip

**\*\*Incident\*\***: After a day visiting such sites as the Washington Monument and Arlington National Cemetery trouble began around midnight at the hotel the tour group was in when a high school student started vomiting and then began to cry holding his stomach and screaming in pain. The groups assigned Physician Assistant blamed the boys distress on Kidney Stones or a stomach bug and instead of sending the boy to the hospital gave vague instructions to the groups chaperones. The boy collapsed later that morning with an intestinal obstruction resulting in hypovolemic shock, a condition that deprives the heart of its ability to move blood through the body. He never regained consciousness.

**\*\*Lawsuit\*\***: The family filed a lawsuit against the tour group, alleging negligence. They claimed that the tour group had promised a doctor would be on call for any medical emergency. When their son fell ill the company sent an unlicensed medical assistant instead of a doctor who misdiagnosed the child and failed to ensure that the student's medical needs were adequately prepared for and that the chaperones were not properly trained to handle such emergencies.

**\*\*Outcome\*\***: The case was settled out of court. The tour company agreed to pay a \$5 million payment to the family to settle the wrongful death lawsuit. The company has since laid off more than 50 employees and filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy and now only advertises telehealth access if needed for its tours.

### **Other litigation examples.**

Rhodes v. Guarricino – Involved search of minor’s hotel room by chaperone for alcohol and tobacco products banned on the trip.

Munn v. Hotchkiss – Involved the duty of the tour group to warn the minors of the risk of insect-borne illnesses.

Class Action v. Jefferson School District – Currently involves minors sharing the same hotel room, with separate beds, where one minor identifies as a member of the opposite sex they were born as.

Soloviev v. Ross School – Currently involves a minor allegedly becoming the target of bullying by other minors and trip chaperones for refusing to consume alcohol to which he was then intimidated and ostracized for the remainder of the trip causing pain, suffering and emotional distress.

Class Action v. New York City Department of Education – Involved the duty of the School to ensure students with a diagnosis of Diabetes could participate in school and school sponsored field trips without parents having to attend to provide medical care, often multiple times a day.

## **Risk mitigation options.**

While the above lawsuits can be scary the VFW has been fortunate in that we have not experienced an issue to such extreme as to require a lawsuit, this due in large part to a dedicated team of VFW staffers and volunteers. As there is a risk that could jeopardize the purpose and intent of the winner's trip, it is our responsibility to take a hard look at it and determine what and how much risk we are comfortable with and how best to mitigate that risk if at all possible. There are options available to us.

**Option #1.** - Do nothing and continue as we always have.

Estimated cost - \$192,000.00

We would continue to conduct the same programs within the restrictions of accessibility to D.C. landmarks, institutions including transportation and of course heighten awareness of potential risks that our staff and volunteers need to be aware of and trained in. Costs for this would not change dramatically and we would continue to expect a 3-5% increase across the board as we currently do. At some point we will need to prepare for reduced funding from Twisted X or acquire another funding source.

**Option #2.** – Cancel the winner's trip and conduct a virtual Parade of Winners.

Estimated cost - \$50,000.00

We did this for two years during COVID. This would practically eliminate all the risks currently associated with the winner's trip and would have a significant reduction in overall costs. The Commander-in-Chief, Prasad Reddy or his representative, VFW Program Director and National Auxiliary President would visit the number one winner for announcement and recognition as well as reading and recording of their essay that would later be broadcast through VFW communication channels that would also feature a virtual Parade of Winners with all winners and the scholarship they each received.

**Option #3.** – Exchange the D.C. Winners trip for the “Founding Forward” trip.

Estimated cost - \$107,000.00

Formally known as the “Freedoms Foundation” trip, many Department VOD winners participated in at cost to the Departments. The Commander-in-Chief, Prasad Reddy or his representative, VFW Program Director and National Auxiliary President would visit the number one winner for announcement and recognition as well as reading and recording of their essay that would later be broadcast through VFW communication channels that would also feature a virtual Parade of Winners with all winners and the scholarship, they each received . Additionally, each winner would receive all-expense paid four day trip tailored for high school students to Founding Forward campus in Valley Forge, Pennsylvania.

The Founding Forward trip will include a variety of components designed to create a comprehensive educational experience:

- Thought-Provoking Lectures: Expert speakers will deliver engaging presentations on topics related to democracy and citizenship, providing students with valuable insights and knowledge.

- **Historical Tours:** Participants will explore significant sites in Valley Forge and Philadelphia, gaining firsthand experience of America’s history and the sacrifices made for freedom and democracy.
- **Experiential Workshops:** Hands-on workshops will focus on developing practical skills such as public speaking, critical thinking, and collaboration, equipping students to become effective leaders in their communities.
- **Interactive Discussions:** Facilitated discussions will allow students to engage with the material and with each other, promoting a deeper understanding of the issues at hand

Founding Forward provides enhanced understanding of key concepts: citizenship, democracy, free enterprise system, judicial system, and American political process that will develop leadership skills through experimental learning, foster engagement with experts and peers.

By participating in the Founding Forward trip, students will:

- Develop a stronger grasp of their rights and responsibilities as citizens.
- Enhance their leadership capabilities through practical experiences and mentorship.
- Build a network of peers and experts passionate about civic engagement and democracy.
- Leave with actionable knowledge and skills that they can apply in their communities.

Founding Forward as part of its business operations assumes all the risks of the students attending the seminar and special dietary constraints are handled one-on-one with each student with a professional on-site chef.

**Testimonials from several Department winners.**

“I am beyond grateful for the opportunity to have attended the Spirit of America Youth Leadership Program at Valley Forge because of the camaraderie I shared with other patriotic students, the long-term connections we made, and (most of all) the opportunity to learn the importance of strong leadership, character, and perseverance through the events at Valley Forge. I left with a new respect for the leadership of George Washington and for the struggles that early Americans faced as they fought for freedom. Experiencing this turning point in America’s history taught me that the most unfavorable and harsh conditions and experiences can be transformed into unity and success through great leadership. I carry this powerful lesson of history as I forge my way to practice better leadership as a citizen.”

Best,  
Grayson Campbell National VOD winner

"Growing up, colonial American history was always my favorite subject. But as an Arizona girl reading about events that happened far away on the East Coast, it might as well have been another planet. Visiting Valley Forge and Philadelphia through the VFW gave me a first-hand look at places I’d only heard about and made the events in my textbook come to life. I’m



grateful to the VFW and their partnership with Valley Forge for giving a Western gal the opportunity to walk in the Founders' footsteps."

-- Madeline Peltzer, Department of Arizona VOD Winner 2016

### **Logistics planning if adopted**

Dates are available to move the Founding Forward trip at Valley Forge to next March 2026 timeframe (More students will be able to attend as they do know) based on the time frame instead of during late June when there is competition with school finals and onboarding at university and family trips.

No change in VOD program deadlines due to award timelines for midwinters and the Founding Forward trip.

Of the last several years in a straw poll of winners, an average of 75% of students had already visited Washington D.C. as part of a school or family trip.

This option provides the benefits of a focused and immersive educational experience about being an American citizen more so than what we currently offer. It also greatly mitigates legal risk to VFW and will provide financial savings to the Departments, National and our generous funder, Mr. Prasad Reddy.

It should also be mentioned that during preliminary discussions Mr. Reddy has expressed an interest in shifting to this option as he believes the students would get a more intense education into the responsibilities of being a United States Citizen.

### **Conclusion.**

This report is designed to bring awareness to the Council of Administration about the issues we are facing as an organization that sponsors and handles an all-expense paid trip for 52 minors to Washington D.C. as part of the Voice of Democracy experience. Over the last several years we have had several issues that very easily could have escalated to lawsuits detrimental to the VFW had it not been for the VFW Programs Director, his staff and the VFW/Auxiliary volunteers that help chaperone the 52 Department Winners while they are in D.C.

As the Adjutant General it is my duty and obligation to bring this issue to the attention of the National Council of Administration for their information and final decision pursuant to Section 622 (b)(1) and Section 618 (f)(6) of the National Bylaws.



## 2025 Overview & Risk Assessment Supplement

Washington D.C. trip for  
Department Voice of Democracy  
winners



**Adjutant General's Office**

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*This supplement is meant to augment the 2025 VOD Overview and Risk Assessment based on questions asked and information received.*

### **Questions related to adding additional chaperones and the cost associated.**

Average Cost of a Chaperone is \$3000-\$4500 depending on the travel of the chaperone (Lodging, Per Diem, Airfare, OT, and Comp Time). We have cut the employees down to 2 (Programs Director & Programs Coordinator) to trim the cost and is budgeted under the Program's travel budget. The Commander in Chief has 2 appointed chaperones which are a husband-and-wife team this year as the Programs Chairman. The auxiliary appointed 1 this year as the scholarship ambassador. I have recruited a retired Sheriff officer and his wife to assist (2 Years of assisting). NVS has appointed 2 service officers, one with her husband, to attend. Overall total is ten (10) total.

### **Questions on Founding Forward policies.**

**Founding Forward Overview & Policies:** The VFW Founding Forward Spirit of America program.

A transformative, four-day residential program that engages high school students with the first principles of freedom. This one-of-a-kind immersive experience allows students to find common ground, explore and understand history in the place where it happened, and develop their leadership skills. Through an inspiring four-day program at our Valley Forge campus, students experience mock congressional debates, participate in a free enterprise challenge, visit historical sites, and engage in interactive educational activities. This immersive experience allows students to develop their critical thinking and leadership skills while understanding their responsibilities as citizens. Students live on campus during the program, identifying opportunities for future contributions to society while creating new, lasting friendships and finding common ground as Americans with peers from across the country.

**Rules:** Rules are set in place to ensure a safe and exciting environment for you to live and learn. The staff of Founding Forward take the rules very seriously. Upon your first offense, you will be sent home immediately. There are no exceptions. You will be responsible for your own travel costs if sent home from the program. Rules are expected to be followed upon your arrival at the airport in Philadelphia throughout your stay. Please read and thoroughly understand the rules before you arrive.

- **Drugs or Alcohol:** Use of these items is strictly prohibited. If for any reason you have doctor-prescribed medication, please notify a staff member upon arrival.
- **Lights Out:** Lights out will be announced at the conclusion of the evening activities. During lights out, you must be in your room with the lights out.
- **Dormitory Restrictions:** At NO TIME are women allowed in men's dorms/hotel rooms or vice versa.
- **Attendance:** Your attendance is required at every session. If you are unable to attend due to

illness, you must notify the Program Director immediately.

- **Honor Code:** All students are expected to sign and return the Honor Code to Founding Forward prior to their arrival on campus.

**Student Insurance and Medical Information:** Founding Forward requires that each student submit a medical form completed with medical history and insurance information prior to arrival on campus. Should a medical emergency arise, Founding Forward will assume the authority to administer medical treatment in the absence of a parental guardian. Founding Forward will assume **NO** financial responsibility for medical treatment. Please notify us well in advance of the program date if there are any medical needs you have.

**Housing:** There are three residence Halls on campus (MacArthur, Hamilton & Franklin). Each room is carpeted and fully equipped with a bathroom. Participants are provided with an adequate supply of towels, soap, and bed linens for the conference. Wireless Internet is available in dormitories. There are **NO** vending machines in the dorms.

**Meals:** Three meals per day are served in the MacArthur dining facility. The first meal will be dinner on Thursday evening. Meals are served in a cafeteria-style serving manner, and each participant is asked to clear their own table. On Saturday evening, there is a formal banquet to end the conference. During breaks and free time, the Founding Forward Gift Shop in MacArthur sells soda and snacks. You are allowed to have drinks and snacks in the classroom and your dorm, but you are expected to clean up after yourself.

## **Comparison of Pros & Cons**

### **Founding Forward Philadelphia**

#### **Pros:**

**Immersive Historical Experience:** Students can visit key historical sites such as Independence Hall, the Liberty Bell, and the National Constitution Center. This hands-on learning can make history come alive.

**Focused Civic Education:** Founding Forward offers programs that emphasize civic responsibility, leadership, and the principles of American democracy. This can be particularly beneficial for fostering informed and engaged citizens.

**Thought-Provoking Lectures:** Expert speakers will deliver engaging presentations on topics related to democracy and citizenship, providing students with valuable insights and knowledge.

**Smaller Crowds:** Philadelphia may have fewer tourists compared to Washington D.C., potentially allowing for a more intimate and less rushed experience.

By participating in the Founding Forward trip, students will:

- Develop a stronger grasp of their rights and responsibilities as citizens.
- Enhance their leadership capabilities through practical experiences and mentorship.
- Build a network of peers and experts passionate about civic engagement and democracy.

- Leave with actionable knowledge and skills that they can apply in their communities.

\*Founding Forward assumes all the risks of the students attending the seminar.

\*Special dietary constraints are handled 1 on 1 with the student. Top-notch chef on staff

**Cons:**

Limited Scope: While Philadelphia is rich in early American history, it may not offer as broad a range of historical and cultural experiences as Washington D.C.

Travel Logistics: Depending on your location, traveling to Philadelphia might be less convenient or more costly compared to Washington D.C.

**VFW Parade of Winners Washington D.C.**

**Pros:**

Diverse Opportunities: Washington D.C. offers a wide array of museums, monuments, and government buildings, including the Smithsonian museums, the National Archives, and the U.S. Capitol. This variety can cater to different interests and subjects. Students attended a riverboat Pizza party the last night on the Potomac River.

This includes visits to watching change of Guard of Tomb of Unknown soldier, Tours of capital, White House tour, Mt. Vernon tour. At the Parade of winners each student can display Department pride. They can also use the Parade of Winners as a base for building relationships/comparing themselves with other students.

Political and Governmental Insight: Students can gain firsthand experience of the U.S. political system by visiting the Capitol, the Supreme Court, and the White House. This can provide a deeper understanding of how the government functions.

Every year 3 past Department winners who work on the hill as staffers are invited throughout the week to address the current year's winner's express appreciation for their experience and explain what they do now and how the Washington DC trip shaped their mindset and goals.

Prasad Reddy attends the nightly dinner for the VOD winners after the parade of winners. Able to hear from the winners personally their gratitude to Twisted X.

**Cons:**

Crowds and Security: Washington D.C. is a major tourist destination, which can mean larger crowds and stricter security measures, potentially making the experience less personal.

Overwhelming Options: The sheer number of sites and activities in D.C. can be overwhelming, making it challenging to cover everything in a limited time.

Zero educational formal opportunities except for visiting museums and students must take the initiative to seek out learning opportunities.

## Summary

Both destinations offer unique and valuable experiential/educational experiences. The choice may depend on our specific educational goals, budget, risk, and logistical considerations. We had several recommendations that came in that were listed as Pro's that were in fact not substantiated by facts and were not included in this report.

### **Overall assessment from Lockton Insurance.**

Below is a synopsis of the meeting Quartermaster General Marc Garduno had with Lockton Insurance. Regardless of the option we choose, the goal should be to offload as much liability as possible. Lockton applauds us for identifying the risk associated with this program and for taking measures to incorporate corrective actions. - Marc Garduno.

After receiving and reading the 2025 VOD Overview & Risk Assessment document:

**“Kristen smiled and said Well this just has all the things, doesn't it? You know, kids, travel, overnight, all the things that cause flashing red lights all around.” – Nathan Borghardt, Vice President Lockton Affinity**

Recap of the meeting with Lockton, our insurance carrier held on February 13, 2025:

- The current VFW VOD winner's trip to DC that we administer involves minors, traveling, and overnight stays, therefore there's a high degree of liability we're assuming.
- We are covered for potential liability from lawsuits, but medical and travel insurance is not part of the coverage.
- Using in-house chaperones or night watchers adds to potential liability on the organization. We must do what we can to offload liability.
- Preparing waivers is a good thing, but repeated emphasis on expectations and obtaining signatures from child and parents would be better.
- The organization should work towards offloading liability whenever possible instead of running the program ourselves.
- If the organization chooses option #1 (stay in DC), the trip portion of the program should be handed off to a third-party tour and travel company such as EF Tours, who works with children and can indemnify the organization.

### **Additional Information on EF Tours since it was mentioned by Lockton.**

EF Tours to Washington, D.C. can cost around \$3,055 for students on average. The price may include airfare, transportation, and visits to museums and other attractions. This equates to a price tag starting at \$158,860.00 +/-.

What's included

- Airfare and transportation
- Safety and support, including 24-hour emergency assistance
- Visits to museums and other attractions

#### Optional upgrades

- Premium show upgrades
- Visits to specific museums, such as the 9/11 Tribute Museum, the Museum of African American History and Culture, and the Spy Museum

#### Additional information

- EF Tours reserves seats with major airlines, including American, British Airways, Delta, and United
- EF Tours offers the EF Method, which includes learning that makes an impact

#### Visiting Washington, D.C.

Many museums and attractions in Washington, D.C. are free to visit, including the National Zoo, Smithsonian Museums, monuments, and memorials.

### **Testimonials from several Department winners about the Freedoms Foundation trip to Valley Forge, Pennsylvania**

VFW Winner Chris Hernandez:

Valley Forge

Hi Lynn! Thanks for connecting with the network about the Valley Forge trip.

The tardy response here, but I was living in Europe as a military-dependent, high-school child at the time and the trip to Valley Forge was a special part of the recognition!

I can think of three reasons:

1. The trip was very special, I didn't know any of the other winners (nor myself) **who** had visited before. This was a jump-start into traveling independently and for good cause to somewhere we wouldn't have had an opportunity to go on our own. This was a real REWARD for the VFW award win which helped cement the confidence boost of the accomplishment and the purpose behind the words we wrote and spoke together.

2. Networking. While I don't maintain relationships with fellow winners from the trip, I know others likely do! I joined the military, so I built a network there - but it was meaningful to spend real time with others who were intellectually inclined toward the same values people like you and I hold dear. The visual and geographic confirmation that these values lived and live in America's people continues to be valuable!

3. VFW recognition and familiarity. There happens to be a lot of work to do together on the veteran support front, and the VFW is perhaps the premier organization for that! My parents, my colleagues, and I have lasting impressions (resulting in some life memberships, donations, and volunteer roles!) built upon the experience I had in high school winning and learning in DC and Valley Forge. When I think of where to turn for support, or where to point fellow vets - it's the

VFW.

I'll continue this effort! I'd welcome the chance to discuss this further if desired and not too delayed. Thank you very much!

### **VFW National Winner testimonials**

Grayson Campbell VOD winner: "I am beyond grateful for the opportunity to have attended the Spirit of America Youth Leadership Program at Valley Forge because of the camaraderie I shared with other patriotic students, the long-term connections we made, and (most of all) the opportunity to learn the importance of strong leadership, character, and perseverance through the events at Valley Forge. I left with a new respect for the leadership of George Washington and for the struggles that early Americans faced as they fought for freedom. Experiencing this turning point in America's history taught me that the most unfavorable and harsh conditions and experiences can be transformed into unity and success through great leadership. I carry this powerful lesson of history as I forge my way to practice better leadership as a citizen.

Madeline Peltzer, Department of Arizona VOD Winner 2016: "Growing up, colonial American history was always my favorite subject. But as an Arizona girl reading about events that happened far away on the East Coast, it might as well have been another planet. Visiting Valley Forge and Philadelphia through the VFW gave me a first-hand look at places I'd only heard about and made the events in my textbook come to life. I'm grateful to the VFW and their partnership with Valley Forge for giving a Western gal the opportunity to walk in the Founders' footsteps."

### **Testimonials on Washington DC VOD Parade of Winners trip**

Charles Kuralt at 14 years old won the trip to Washington DC: He was quoted "I was only 14. We got a trip to Washington. We read our speeches in the House of Burgesses in Williamsburg, where Patrick Henry delivered some of his speeches and went on to Washington DC to meet the President. I still have, of course, a photograph of a very congenial President Harry Truman with my mother and I, both of us wearing neat blue, double-breasted suits, the fashion of 1948. That contest and to my surprise, doing well in it, added to my confidence. It made me think, 'I Can do this, I can write and speak with anybody my age.' It was a great builder of confidence. It did affect my life, I think."

Jeff Golimowski 1998 Oregon Winner: "I don't believe I could have had the success I've been blessed with if I had not been part of Voice of Democracy"

Kristin Lindholm 1985 Missouri Winner & National Winner: "I got to go in the White House, I am extremely grateful for all that the program contributed to my life."

Spencer Driscoll 2005 Utah Winner: "The entire experience helped me gain a greater appreciation for the sacrifices our Veterans make." Upon graduation from college, I moved to Washington DC to attend Law School at Georgetown.

Karli Abbott 2020 Maryland Winner: I'm Karli Abbott, I was the VOD Maryland representative in 2020. Our trip to D.C. was one of the best leadership trips I have ever been on. I wrote my essay as a school assignment for my NJROTC class (funny story I rewrote it completely the day it was due) and was chosen as the State Representative while I was on another trip in Arizona, so I



ended up facetimeing into the awards program and reading my speech. I loved spending time in D.C., and meeting so many amazing individuals I still talk to now.

### **Current Student Medical and Travel Coordination that we are aware of**

**Medical Conditions Overview** A total of 19 students have reported medical conditions, with 30 total medical conditions documented. Five students have multiple conditions, and one condition has been identified as life-threatening. Additionally, five students listed conditions or medications without specifying their purpose, and these instances have been highlighted for further clarification. Due to privacy concerns, specific states for each condition could not be disclosed.

**Parent/Family Member Travel Accommodations** Thirty additional parents or family members are traveling with students to Washington, D.C., either by flight or drive, to attend at least the Parade of Winners. Of these, at least four parents are traveling specifically due to their child's medical condition.

**Communication and Travel Issues** Numerous phone calls and emails were exchanged to address communication issues and travel-related concerns. The most significant challenges arose from Arizona, Oregon, and Guam:

- **Oregon:** A custody battle was brought to our attention when the mother called, expressing frustration that the other parent was involved.
- **Guam:** Challenges with underage and overseas travel required additional coordination.
- **Arizona:** A parent insisted that their student remain in their hotel room instead of the designated accommodations. To accommodate this, it was emphasized that students would be available first thing in the morning, remain with the group during the day, and be released to their parents each night after the final scheduled event.

**Parental Concerns and Coordination** Numerous phone calls and emails were required to address overprotective parents, students who had never flown before, and logistical coordination of student and family member flights. Approximately 15 parents required direct coordination via phone and email to resolve these matters efficiently.

**Conclusion** Managing medical conditions and coordinating travel logistics for students and their families has been a complex and intensive process that is becoming more intense year after year. Our staff are not hired to treat medical issues nor are they trained to deal with medical issues above basic here's a "band aid" issue. They are not trained in conflict de-escalation techniques that have started to surface due to parental intervention and insistence that their child always needs their presence or those involving custody disputes between the parents.