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Royal Canadian Legion offers free 2026 membership to bring new faces and supporters

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The Royal Canadian Legion is marking its 100-year anniversary in 2026 with an ambitious recruitment drive that offers free memberships for the year, aiming to bring new people into the organization and reintroduce it to the wider community.

Legion representatives from Branch 220 in Shelburne have been setting up displays at events such as the Orangeville Gun & Militaria Show on March 22, where they collected donations and signed up new members using a QR code system that allows visitors to join on the spot. The branch plans to appear at several more events throughout the year to maintain momentum.

Chris Skalozub, Deputy Zone Commander with the Legion, said that the push for new members comes at a time when the Legion's traditional base is shrinking. Many older veterans are passing away, and fewer younger members are stepping in to carry the organization forward.

?Veterans are passing, and we're getting to the end of our Korean veterans now, which was from ?51 to ?53, that conflict,? he said. ?Then we got the Cold War guys like myself? that's all we got left, really.?

Veterans of more recent conflicts, such as Afghanistan, often face different challenges and are sometimes less inclined to participate in branch life, even as their need for support remains high.

?There's the Afghanistan war veterans now, but they don't like coming out,? Skalozub said. ?They're a different breed, those boys and girls. So trying to get them to come out, it's been pretty tough. They've been through a much different war from the veterans before them. It changes you in so many ways.?

This demographic shift has placed pressure on the Legion to reach out to the community more actively and explain its role to the next generation.

While the Shelburne Legion's membership based has declined over the years, there are currently 300 members. Of those members, there are a dwindling number of veterans, with just 20 remaining.

Despite these challenges, the Legion continues to operate as a critical support system for both veterans and the broader community. It assists veterans and their spouses through Department of Veterans Affairs programs, the poppy fund, and educational bursaries for post-secondary students.

Skalozub said that initiatives such as ?Leave the Streets Behind? focus on helping homeless veterans, connecting them with branches that can coordinate assistance once their service status is confirmed.

?If you're traveling and you see someone laying on a bench, and it just doesn't look right, all you have to do is ask them, are you a veteran,? he said. ?You find out this guy, this individual, is a veteran, and you give us a call, the nearest branch, and we'll make sure they get help. We'll find their service history, and see if we can't get a pension moving for them among other things.?

Beyond direct veteran support, the Legion donates to food banks and shelters, and sustains youth programs like local air cadet squadrons, often stepping in where government funding falls short.

It also sponsors school-based remembrance posters, poetry, and story contests, as well as public speaking competitions that can carry

winners all the way to national recognition in Ottawa.

The organization also remains deeply involved in remembrance activities, from street banners honouring the fallen to ongoing efforts to keep the history and sacrifices of past conflicts visible amid rapid social change.

To keep that support, however, the Legion needs support now more than ever.

?There's no one else that's going to be there,? Skalozub said. ?We're reaching out to keep our society going, to make sure that someone is there. We're here for the community and we're here for events, and that's what we want to keep doing.?

Branch 220 will be operating more booths at the upcoming Gun and Militaria shows at the Orangeville Fairgrounds. Those dates are May 10, July 26, Sept. 27 and Dec. 6.

Skalozub said that the Legion represents far more than stereotypes suggest.

?The Legion is not a place where people get drunk, old people get together and have their yap sessions. That just? that doesn't exist anymore. We look after each other. Every branch looks after each other? because we have to, and because it's the right thing to do. That's who the Legion is.?

For 100 years, the Royal Canadian Legion has supported veterans, their families and the wider community across Canada. Now they're asking for some community support to carry the Legion forward into the next generation.