SSGT CHRISTIAN ENGELDRUM
FDNY VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS POST # 12033

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1 October 2026

SUBJECT: 2026–2027 VFW Patriot's Pen, Voice of Democracy, and Smart/Maher Citizenship Education Teacher Award

To Members of the Department, Families members of FDNY, and Unions,

The Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States has long believed that service to our country includes investing in the young people who will inherit it and recognize the educators who prepare them for that responsibility. For the 2026–2027 school year, SSgt Chris Engeldrum FDNY VFW Post 12033, invites your children to participate in three nationally recognized VFW programs: Patriot's Pen, for children in grades 6–8; Voice of Democracy, for children in grades 9–12; and for any FDNY family members who are educators there is the Smart/Maher VFW National Citizenship Education Teacher Award, recognizing outstanding teachers in grades K–5, 6–8, and 9–12.
For 2026–2027, both student competitions share the theme, "*What a Veteran Taught Me About America*"
This theme gives students considerable freedom. Their work may be inspired by a family member, neighbor, teacher, community veteran, historical figure, or another meaningful encounter with the experiences and lessons of America's veterans. The purpose is not to produce a particular political or historical viewpoint. It is to encourage children to think, write, speak, and reflect on citizenship, service, sacrifice, American history, democratic values, and what those ideas mean to them.

- **Patriot's Pen** is a written essay competition for eligible children in grades 6, 7, and 8. Contestants prepare an original 300–400 word essay addressing the annual theme. Entries are first submitted to a participating local VFW Post and may advance through Post, District, Department of New York, and National competition. The national first-place award is currently $5,000, with additional recognition and awards available at multiple levels.
- **Voice of Democracy** is the VFW's premier high-school scholarship competition and is open to eligible children in grades 9–12. Contestants write an original essay and record themselves delivering it as a 3–5 minute audio essay in MP3 format. A typed copy of the essay is submitted with the recording and entry form. The national first-place scholarship is currently $35,000, with additional scholarships and awards offered throughout the competition. First-place Department winners also participate in the VFW's national-level program associated with the competition.

Our third program recognizes the people helping prepare these students for citizenship.

- The **Smart/Maher VFW National Citizenship Education Teacher Award** honors current certified or licensed K–12 educators who demonstrate exceptional commitment to citizenship education, civic responsibility, American history and traditions, community involvement, patriotism, and the development of responsible citizens. Teachers compete in three categories: K–5, grades 6–8, and grades 9–12. Candidates may be nominated by fellow educators, supervisors, family members, students, community members, or themselves. National Teacher Award recipients in each category receive a $1,000 Smart/Maher award for professional development, their school receives a $1,000 award, and the program includes commemorative recognition and an all-expenses-paid trip to the VFW National Convention.

If your spouse or any family member is an educator, they could incorporate these programs into their English language arts, social studies, history, civics, public speaking, or other classroom activities, or offered as independent and extracurricular opportunities. Schools, classes, and youth groups with substantial participation in Patriot's Pen or Voice of Democracy may conduct an initial competition and forward eligible winners to their participating VFW Post. We ask that you reach out to us if you are interested in utilizing these programs in your classroom.

All three programs begin locally. Entries and nominations must be received by a participating VFW Post, which our Post 12033 is, **no later than midnight, October 31, 2026.** Entries should not be sent directly to VFW National Headquarters. We respectfully ask that you share these opportunities with children/students, teachers, counselors, department chairs, and family members that are educators and consider incorporating these student programs into appropriate classroom instruction during the fall semester or your children can participate independently of their school.

Because the SSgt Chris Engeldrum FDNY VFW Post is a "Post at large", if your child has interest in participating in these programs they do not have to participate through their local school. As members of the FDNY community, your children have the option to submit their entries directly to our FDNY VFW Post 12033, regardless of where you live. We just ask that you submit one entry with a VFW Post either with the our FDNY VFW Post, your local VFW Post where you live or if with your child's local school that are already participating.

These are grassroots programs. The veterans evaluating and recognizing your students and teachers are members of our FDNY community, in addition to your local communities and schools you live and serve in. Every entry begins locally, and every student or teacher who reaches the national stage gets there because someone in their hometown and or the FDNY first gave them an opportunity to compete.

Official program brochures and entry forms can be found on our website for download at https://www.FDNYVFW.com

and all entries should be emailed to FDNYVFWComms@gmail.com

Thank you for helping us share these programs.

Respectfully,

William C. Hayes

Commander

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