

VFW 2026–27 Guide to Membership Retention

Purpose

This talking paper explains the VFW's 2026–27 80% membership-retention requirement in simple form. It is intended to help Commanders, Quartermasters, Membership Chairmen, and other membership volunteers understand what retention means, how it is calculated, and why retention is different from recruiting, reinstatement, and overall membership growth.

The VFW Retention Formula

The 2026–27 National Membership Program publishes the following retention formula:

$$\frac{(\text{Prior Year Annual Members in Good Standing} - \text{Expired Members})}{\text{Prior Year Annual Members in Good Standing}} = \text{Retention Percentage}$$

The most important point for training purposes is that the calculation is based on the Annual members who paid dues in the most recent prior membership year, rather than simply looking at the Post's current total membership.

What Does “Prior Year Annual Members in Good Standing” Mean?

Think of this as the starting pool. These are the members who were Annual members and had paid their dues during the immediately preceding membership year.

For example:

- 2025–26 is the prior membership year.
- 2026–27 is the current membership year.

The retention calculation begins with the Annual members who paid during 2025–26. It is **not** simply the Post's total membership on a particular day or the number of people paid annual membership at the end of 2026–27.

What Is Retention Actually Measuring?

Retention is a measure of membership continuity, not simply membership size. It answers one basic question:

Of the Annual members we had in the previous membership year, how many have we retained in current membership year?

A Post can have the same number of members from one year to the next and still have poor retention if it loses existing members out the back door and replaced them with new members.

Example

If in the 2025–26 (prior membership year) you finished with 100 annual members-in good-standing, 20 expire during the 2026–27 (current membership year), and you recruited 21 new members, the Post still has 100 members but retention is calculated as $(100 - 20) \div 100 = 80\%$.

The new members help with membership growth $(100 - 20 + 21) \div 100 = 101\%$, but they do not erase the fact that 20 previous Annual members were lost.

Not Every Change in Membership Status Is a Retention Loss

A prior-year Annual member who:

- converts to Life Membership,
- is a paying transfer to another VFW Post, or
- becomes deceased prior to their expiration date

is not treated as a retention loss in the same manner as an annual member who simply allows membership to expire. The Retention percentage shown in MemStats will only go down if an annual member's dues expire at the end of a given month and does not renew.

Life Membership

When an Annual member converts to Life Membership, the member has not been lost to the VFW. They have changed membership status. For retention purposes, the Annual member who converts to Life should not be treated as an Annual member who simply failed to renew.

Transfers

A member who transfers from your Post to another VFW Post has not necessarily left the VFW. The member has changed Posts. Therefore, a transfer should not simply be counted as an expiration or retention failure.

Deceased Members

A deceased member should not be treated as a member whom the Post failed to retain. Death is not a membership-retention failure. Therefore, deceased Annual members are not treated as ordinary expiration losses for retention purposes.

Training Message

- An Annual member who converts to Life Membership has been retained and will count towards the Retention percentage.
- A transfer is a movement within the VFW, not necessarily a loss of the member to the organization.
- Posts should make sure membership transactions are properly recorded so the member's status is accurately reflected.
- We measure our ability to retain members—not our ability to prevent circumstances beyond the Post's control.

Raising Your Retention Percentage

A Post's Retention percentage can never go above 100% - you cannot retain more members than you started with. Retention percentage will decrease if a member's dues have expired at the end of a given month. To raise the Retention percentage, one or more of those members whose dues have expired in the current membership year must pay their dues and regain their good standing.

Example

A Post has 100 prior-year Annual members. During the current year 25 expire, bringing the Retention percentage to 75%, below the 80% threshold. Six of those expired members pay their dues before the end of the year, bringing the Retention percentage up to 81% (100-19/100).

Recovering these lapsed members who expire during the current membership year is the only way to raise a Retention percentage that has fallen below 100%.

New and Reinstated Members Are Not Retention

A new member is important to membership growth, but a new member cannot replace a lost member for purposes of retention. Similarly, a Reinstated member (defined as a member whose dues have been lapsed for more than two years) is not figured in the Retention totals.

New and Reinstated members will increase a Post's overall membership percentage, but will not affect the Retention percentage as they are not part of the Prior Year Annual total."

Example

A Post has 100 prior-year Annual members. In the current year, 15 expire, 25 new members join, and 10 former members reinstate their membership. The 25 new members and 10 Reinstated members may improve the Post's overall membership position to 120%, but the Post still lost 15% of its prior-year Annual members. The Post retention is 85%.

This is why VFW treats retention and growth as separate membership objectives.

The 80% Threshold

The Post must achieve at least 80% retention to satisfy the National retention requirement.

A quick way to understand 80% is:

A Post can lose no more than 20% of its applicable prior-year Annual membership through expiration and still be at 80%.

Examples

Prior-Year Members	● Retention Goal	● Maximum Loss	● Below 80% At
50	40 retained	10 expired	11 expired
100	80 retained	20 expired	21 expired
150	120 retained	30 expired	31 expired
200	160 retained	40 expired	41 expired
500	400 retained	100 expired	101 expired

Why Posts Should Monitor Retention Throughout the Year

Retention should not be treated as an end-of-year mathematical exercise. By the time the final retention percentage is known, it may be too late to recover members.

A strong Post should continually:

1. Identify Annual members approaching expiration.
2. Contact members before they lapse.
3. Find out why members are not participating.
4. Make renewal easy.
5. Encourage Annual members to consider Life Membership.
6. Welcome new members and integrate them into the Post.
7. Follow up with members who have become inactive.
8. Track expired members for possible future reinstatement.

The Membership Chairman's Mindset

Retention is ultimately about relationships. Members are more likely to renew when they feel welcome, understand the VFW mission, participate in Post activities, see the Post serving veterans, know and connect with other members, and believe their membership makes a meaningful difference.

Retention Memory Aid

Retention Made Easy	
1. Start	
Prior-year Annual Members Who Paid	
↓	
2. Remove Exclusions	
Life Conversions • Paying Transfers • Deceased	
↓	
3. Retention Population	
Members the Post is Expected to Retain	
↓	
4. Subtract Expirations	
Expired members are retention losses	
↓	
5. Calculate	
$\text{Retained} \div \text{Retention Population} \times 100$	
GOAL: 80% OR HIGHER	

The Message

“Don’t confuse having members with retaining members. A new member is growth. A reinstated member is growth. A Life conversion is a change in membership status. A transfer is a move to another Post. A deceased member is not a retention failure. Retention is about the members we started with and whether we kept them from expiring. Our target is at least 80%.”

VFW 2026–27 Membership Retention

Frequently Asked Questions

Q. What is the VFW's Published Retention Formula?

A. The 2026–27 National Membership Program publishes:

$$\frac{(\text{Prior Year Annual Members in Good Standing} - \text{Expired Members})}{\text{Prior Year Annual Members in Good Standing}} = \text{Retention Percentage}$$

The target is 80% or higher.

Q. What is the Denominator?

A. The denominator is the Prior Year Annual Members in Good Standing. For practical training purposes, this means the Annual members who paid their dues during the most recent prior membership year. It is not simply the Post's total membership.

Q. Does a Life Conversion Count as Losing a Member?

A. No. An Annual member who converts to Life Membership has not been lost to the VFW. The member has changed membership status. A Life conversion will be counted for retention purposes.

Q. Does a Transfer to Another Post Count Against Retention?

A. No. A transfer is a movement of the member to another VFW Post. It should not be treated as the same thing as an Annual member simply allowing their membership to expire.

Q. Does the Death of an Annual Member Count Against Retention?

A. No. A deceased member is not a retention failure.

Q. Do New or Reinstated Members Count as Retention?

A. No. These members were not part of the Prior Year Annual Members In Good Standing, and so will not have any effect on the Retention percentage. New and Reinstated members improve the Post's membership and may contribute to membership growth, but they do not replace expired prior-year Annual members in the retention calculation.

Q. Does an Annual Member whose Dues Expire but Recovered During the Year Count for Retention?

A. Yes. If an Annual member's dues expire, the Post's Retention percentage will go down. If that member is recovered and pays their dues before the end of the membership year, the Post's Retention percentage will increase, as that member has now been successfully retained.

Q. Does Transferring a Member into the Post Improve the Retention Percentage?

A. No. Members who transfer into a Post were not part of that Post's Prior Year Annual Members In Good Standing, and so will not have any effect on the Retention percentage. If they are dues-paying transfers, they will increase the Post's total membership but will not replace expired members for the Retention calculation.

Q. If we Lose 20 Members but Recruit 20 New Members, Did we Retain Everyone?

A. No. You replaced the members you lost.

For example:

- 100 prior-year Annual members
- 20 expire
- 20 new members join

Retention remains: $(100 - 20) \div 100 = 80\%$

The Post may have 100 members again, which is 100% membership, but it retained only 80% of its original Annual membership.

Q. If an Annual Member Converts to Life, Did we Lose an Annual Member?

A. No, not for retention purposes. The member has been retained. Their status changed from Annual membership to Life Membership, but they remain a member. This is one reason Posts should not calculate retention simply by comparing the number of Annual members at two points in time.

Q. What if an Annual Member Transfers to Another Post?

A. The member should not be treated as an expiration simply because they are no longer on your Post's roster. The member remains part of the VFW, although they are now affiliated with another Post.

Q. What if an Annual Member Dies Before Renewing?

A. A deceased member is not treated as a normal retention loss. The Post did not "fail to retain" the member.

Q. Can a Post Maintain the Same Total Membership and Still Fail Retention?

A. Yes. A Post could start with 100 members, lose 25 existing members, and recruit 25 new members. It would still have 100 members. But retention would be 75%. The Post therefore would not meet the 80% retention threshold.

Q. Should the Post Wait Until Members Expire Before Contacting Them?

A. No. Retention should be proactive. The Post should identify members approaching expiration and make personal contact before they lapse.

Q. Should Every Post Member Receive the Same Renewal Message?

A. No. Retention, at the Post level, is about building relationships, so the message should reflect each member's involvement and needs. Regular attendees may just need a reminder, while inactive or new members may need a personal invitation or conversation. The best approach is to get to know your members and communicate with them accordingly.

Q. How can a Post stay on top of retention?

A. Monitor retention by regularly tracking key membership numbers, including renewals, expirations, Life conversions, transfers, deceased and expired members, reinstatements, and new members. The Membership Chairman should also monitor members approaching expiration and the Post's current retention percentage. This allows the Post to identify and address potential retention problems early—before retention falls below 80%.