Governor, U.S. senators thank veterans during American Legion state convention

By **Elisa Sand** and **Jason Lopez Martinez** - June 23, 2026 in **News**, **Veterans** Reading Time: 4 minutes

South Dakota's U.S. senators and governor extended their gratitude to veterans who gathered in town last weekend.

The South Dakota American Legion State convention was Friday, June 19 through Sunday, June 21 at the Best Western Ramkota Hotel and Convention Center. Sen. John Thune, R-S.D., stopped by Friday, with U.S. Sen. Mike Rounds, R-S.D., and Gov. Larry Rhoden visiting on Saturday, June 22.

Each thanked the American Legion members for their military service, as well as the family members who supported them.



U.S. Sen. John Thune, R-S.D., was a guest speaker Friday, June 19 at the Best Western Ramkota for the South Dakota American Legion state convention. Photo courtesy of Sen. Thune's office.

Rounds, Thune discuss veterans issues

Thune discussed South Dakota's role in keeping the U.S. safe. That includes expanded use of B-21 long-rang bombers at Ellsworth Air Force Base near Rapid City. The stealth bombers are expected to arrive in 2027, he said.



He also noted 20 ongoing construction projects at Ellsworth to prepare for the B-21 mission and a funding appropriation in the National Defense Authorization Act for a new South Dakota National Guard vehicle facility in Watertown.

Thune said there's a $100 million investment in the Defense Community Infrastructure Program, which supports service members, families and the communities they live in. He also emphasized the need to make sure veterans are cared for, which includes fighting to keep Veterans Affairs facilities like the VA medical center in Hot Springs open and staffed appropriately.

MORE: Freedom Fountain in Moccasin Creek dedicated Saturday

Rounds said supporting those who served remains one of his top priorities.

"We really do live in the greatest nation in the world. In South Dakota, men and women have always had a deep pride in our country," he said.

Rounds reflected on the loss of his uncle, Marion Rounds, who died aboard the USS Oklahoma during World War II.

"It impacts not just that individual, but it impacts their entire family, literally for generations," he said.

Rounds also talked about ongoing mail delays affecting veterans who receive medications through the Department of Veterans Affairs. He said his office continues to push for improvements in postal service across South Dakota.

Legislation that would allow certain medically retired service members to receive both military retirement pay and VA disability compensation is being discussed in Washington, D.C., he said.

Rounds also pledged his support to the B-21 bomber program at Ellsworth.



U.S. Sen. Mike Rounds spoke to members of the South Dakota American Legion Saturday, June 20 at the Best Western Ramkota Hotel and Convention Center during the group's convention. Aberdeen Insider photo by Jason Lopez Martinez.

Rhoden proud of his military service

Rhoden spoke separately to American Legion and Auxiliary members, but talked about many of the same topics. He said he takes pride in being the first South Dakota governor who's a veteran to be commander and chief of the South Dakota National Guard since Joe Foss from 1955 to 1959.

He noted the state's Fallen Hero Bridge Dedication Program as a way to honor veterans who died in action. It was launched when he was lieutenant governor to then-Gov. Kristi Noem. Dozens of bridges now honor South Dakota veterans, Rhoden said, with each dedication ceremony being both heartbreaking and inspiring.



Gov. Larry Rhoden speaks to members of the American Legion and American Legion Auxiliary on Saturday, June 20 during the group's state convention at the Best Western Ramkota. Introducing him is, right, South Dakota American Legion Auxiliary Department President Susie Learing. Aberdeen Insider photo by Elisa Sand.



Eighteen bridges are set to be dedicated this year, he said. To date, 78 have been dedicated.

Rhoden served in the National Guard, following in the footsteps of his grandfather, who served in World War I; his father, who served in World War II; and his brother, who served in Vietnam. Rhoden said his son also served in the military, flying Back Hawk helicopters.

"That spirit of service runs deep in my veins, and I know it runs deep in yours," he told women of the auxiliary.

With the nation's 250th anniversary next month, Rhoden noted America's uniqueness as it was founded on a value system rooted in freedom. That freedom, he said, is not guaranteed.

"It must be fought for and protected. That's what all of you are here to do. You help carry freedom forward," he said.