



1998-2018

Loud and Proud in the Community



In the period from 1998 to 2018, Elks have embraced the idea of being loud and proud in their service to their communities and publicizing more widely events like the one pictured here. Tempe, Arizona, Lodge Tiler Richard Roser is shown here in 2009 accompanying Julius Jackson

during the lodge's annual children's Christmas event, which involves providing needy children with funds to purchase clothing.

AS THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY BEGAN, the BPO Elks was entering its fourteenth decade of existence, but one stark fact was increasingly evident to the membership and its leaders: the Order was shrinking. This downward trend began in 1980–1981, and by the end of 2016–2017, the Elks' membership stood at less than half of what it had been at its peak in 1979–1980. To fight this declining trend in membership, the Elks decided that it was no longer enough to go quietly about the good work they did, as they had for nearly 150 years, and to instead be loud and proud about being Elks and to be visible as they continued to work to help their neighbors and improve their communities.

The Elks National Foundation Goes Local

One significant element of this strategy was carried out through the Elks National Foundation, which was responsible for helping to fund state- and national-level charitable efforts all across the country. In the middle of the first decade of the twenty-first century, the foundation decided to put some of its resources directly into the hands of

Elks at the local lodge level when it implemented the Community Investments Program.

The Community Investments Program provides grants to local lodges so they can pursue individual projects. The program began in 2005–2006 with \$350,000 in grants and expanded every year after that. In 2016–2017, the Elks National Foundation awarded more than three thousand grants, worth a total of nearly \$10 million.

Perhaps more important than raw numbers, however, was the enthusiasm with which these grants were met. Elks across the nation were now more able than ever to support hundreds of local initiatives and to solve problems that they could see in their communities. The initiatives they have chosen to fund range from helping local schools make school supplies available to their students to projects that provide backpacks full of food to needy schoolchildren on weekends during school and during summer breaks.

One such program, Camp Happiness, is a weeklong day camp for 175 people with intellectual disabilities and developmental disabilities. The camp is located in Niagara County, New York, and was founded in 2008 by members of the Lockport Lodge, who used a \$10,000 ENF Impact Grant to begin the program. Today, the program is also supported by generous donations from the Lockport Lodge, nearby lodges, and the community.

Another local effort that was initially funded using a \$10,000 ENF Impact Grant was launched in Sarasota, Florida, in 2010 by the Bradenton and Lakewood Ranch-Sarasota Lodges. Called Elks Feeding Empty Little Tummies, the program was designed to provide food to needy schoolchildren. The program provided hundreds of meals for needy children to eat during weekends, and as members of the community began to see what the Elks were doing, the program drew support from local charitable foundations and the community.



The Elks National Foundation has sought to bring scholarship recipients into the Elks family through Scholar Service Trips. Elks Scholar Rohini Manickam is pictured helping to renovate a house during the summer 2015 Scholar Service Trip to Manistique, Michigan.

From 1998 to the present, the Elks National Foundation also has been reaching out to bright, young students through its scholarship programs. The programs were expanded in 1999 with the introduction of the Legacy Award scholarships, which are given to the children and grandchildren of Elks. The Most Valuable Student Scholarship program has continued to grow as well and awards increasingly generous scholarships.

Since the late 1990s, the Elks National Foundation has also changed how it relates to its scholarship recipients, working to maintain relationships with the students and build a sense of community among them by letting them know that they are part of an Elks family. This has involved arranging for scholarship recipients, now known as Elks Scholars, to meet with each other. Starting in 2015, the foundation also began offering three Scholar Service Trips each year. These one-week trips have brought Elks Scholars into contact with each other and let them experience the important charitable work local lodges do.

Serving Veterans During the War on Terror

The BPO Elks' pledge that "So long as there are veterans, the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks will never forget them" took on a new importance and urgency after America was attacked on September 11, 2001. As the nation prepared to fight a global war on terror, the Elks stayed true to their pledge and recommitted themselves to supporting the US armed forces.

One area of concern to the Order involved the families of deployed service members. In 2003, Grand Exalted Ruler Roger True called for the Elks to form an Army of Hope to assist the families of those called to serve. Several state associations created formal Army of Hope programs and held regular fund-raising events to provide assistance to the families of deployed service members. Where formal programs were not created, local Elks kept an eye out for service members who needed a hand, and they were always ready to answer a call for help.

While the Elks have been active in supporting those fighting the global war on terror, they also continue to pay tribute to veterans of earlier conflicts. When private contributions were sought to build a monument on the Mall in Washington, DC, to recognize the veterans of World War II, the Elks answered the call and committed to donating one dollar per member—a goal they surpassed when a donation of more than \$1.3 million was delivered in 2002. In the years since the National World War II Memorial in Washington was opened in 2004, lodges across the country have helped World War II veterans make the trip to the nation's capital to see their memorial by supporting the Honor Flight Network and other organizations like it.

As the wars in the Middle East and Afghanistan continued, the problem of homelessness among veterans came increasingly to the fore in the United States. The BPO Elks joined a national effort led by the US Department of Veterans Affairs to respond to this problem. Working in cooperation with programs that sought to provide new



To help homeless veterans who are moving into new housing, lodges throughout the country have been providing Welcome Home Kits containing basic household necessities to veterans. Pictured presenting their 150th Welcome Home Kit to veteran Kevin (middle) are members of the Hopkins, Minnesota, Lodge.

homes to veterans, the Elks have helped newly housed veterans establish themselves by providing them with Welcome Home Kits that contain household essentials such as dishes, cleaning supplies, small household appliances, and bed linens. The Elks National Veterans Service Commission also has established an Emergency Assistance Program to help veterans cover crucial one-time expenses, such as unexpected utility bills, and remain in their homes. As of the end of February 2018, the Elks National Veterans Service Commission has provided nearly eight hundred veterans with emergency assistance and has helped local lodges give nearly one thousand Welcome Home Kits to veterans—and many local lodges are using grants from the Elks National Foundation and other funding sources to greatly expand the number of Welcome Home Kits they can provide to newly housed veterans.

Responding to Crises and Increasing Generosity

When Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast in August 2005, it became one of the most destructive natural disasters to take place during the Order's long history. The BPO Elks responded generously, sending more than \$570,000 in assistance (not including countless hours of volunteer labor) to the affected states during the 2005–2006 Grand Lodge year.

Another major crisis that the Order has been responding to is the opioid epidemic that has been devastating the country. The Elks

National Drug Awareness Program has played a leading role in working with the US Drug Enforcement Administration's 360 Strategy by helping to warn the public about the dangers of prescription drug abuse and by hosting prescription drug take-back days to allow people to empty their medicine cabinets of dangerous and unneeded drugs. In 2017, US Drug Enforcement Administration Acting Administrator Chuck Rosenberg thanked the Elks for their service and told the Grand Lodge Session that "we need good people like you to help us change the culture and defeat this epidemic."

Although the Order's numbers have been declining, its members' generosity has been growing. During the period from 1998 to the present, membership has declined from just under 1.2 million in 1998 to just over 780,000 in 2017; however, the Order's total charitable contributions have grown from \$146 million in 1997–1998 to \$334 million in 2016–2017. Importantly, after decades of annual membership losses, a renewed emphasis on membership retention and growth has begun to show results. In 2016–2017, the loss in membership from the previous year was fewer than six thousand, or less than 1 percent.

As the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks enters its 150th year of existence, it remains a vital force within the nation. Elks in thousands of lodges across the country continue to be active in improving their communities in many different ways, and looking to the future, there should be no doubt that through sharing and caring for their neighbors the Order and its members will continue to demonstrate why Elks truly are the Best People On Earth. ■