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The **Guard and Reserve Support Network (GRSN)** is a Department of Defense partnership of programs supporting the needs of the National Guard and Reserve community. **GRSN** is comprised of:



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Photo by Steve Turner, Reserve Integration

By Maj. Chris Mitchell, FEPP HQ

Army 1st Sgt. John Zagyva's employer lobbied for changes in state law to allow differential pay for deployed Guard and Reserve service members. Tech. Sgt. Daniel Mills' employer participates in Warrior Yoga sessions with his military employees to address PTSD and other service-related issues. Navy Lt. David Nelson's employer refused to sell American and Marine flags to a family gathering to honor their fallen Marine son, and instead donated the flags, poles and flower baskets to the grieving family.

These are stories from just a few of the employers to receive the Department of Defense's highest employer award – the Secretary of Defense Employer Support Freedom Award – in 2016. Of 2,424 organizations nominated by their Guard and Reserve employees, just 15 became recipients this year.

If your organization goes above and beyond in its support for Guardsmen or Reservists, nominate it for the 2017 Secretary of Defense Employer Support Freedom Award! Nomination season opens October 1 and runs through December 31. For more information about the

Freedom Award, or to nominate your employer, visit www.FreedomAward.mil.

Nominations for the Freedom Award must come from a Guard or Reserve member employed by the organization they are nominating, or from a family member. Each year, the nominated organizations represent large and small employers from almost every industry, including health, transportation, hospitality, entertainment, banking, service and security, as well as from federal, state and local government agencies.

History of the Freedom Award

- The Freedom Award began in 1996 and is overseen by Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve.
- The award serves to recognize outstanding employers and draw attention to support from the employer community.
- Only 235 employers have received the award.
- More than 14,000 nominations have been received since 2011.

To learn more about ESGR, visit www.ESGR.mil.





Photo by Kevin E. Schmidt, courtesy of Quad-City Times

By Jennifer Dewitt, [Quad-City Times](#)

From 1,500 feet above Scott County and strapped into a seat on a CH-47F Chinook helicopter, a group of Quad-City employers got an up-close and personal view of the work their employees do when called to duty as citizen soldiers with the Guard and Reserve.

More than 40 employers and community leaders had the rare opportunity Sep. 22 to fly with the Iowa National Guard. The experience was part of a Center of Influence event at the Davenport Army Aviation Support Facility hosted by the Iowa National Guard and Employer Support for the Guard and Reserve, or ESGR.

"I was going to chicken out," said Mary Essman, the member community relations business partner with HON, Muscatine. "I didn't sign the [release] paper right away. I was nervous." But minutes after taking her first Chinook helicopter ride, she had a different tune. "That was awesome," she said. "When you're in it and up there, there's not a whole lot between you and what's going on."

While the 20-minute flight clearly was the event highlight, the employers also got schooled on the Guard's role in the military and in local communities. As they got to see various weapons and equipment up close, they also were learning more about the resources ESGR offers employers who have citizen soldiers working for them.

"We've learned a ton about military veterans and how to support them," said Lainie Cooney, an assistant vice president of Hy-Vee's workforce. "We're looking to recruit and hire more military for our organization." But this event was about understanding what those employees go through on their monthly weekend and yearly two-week trainings.

U.S. Air Force Chief Master Sgt. Mitchell Brush, the senior enlisted adviser for the National Guard Bureau in Washington D.C., was on hand to show his appreciation for the employers who support the Guard's mission. In the war fight, he said "They wear the same uniform [as regular military]. When we get in the theater we are identical." But fighting a war is only part of their role today, he said. "Reliance on the Guard is going through the roof."

Citizen soldiers, who during the week hold down regular civilian jobs, are the people who are brought in when state governors come calling in time of natural disasters or violent situations, such as the riots occurring now in Charlotte, North Carolina. "I need them to work for you," Brush told the employers. "The things you're teaching these young men and women, I need you to do..." According to Brush, the Guard has not done a good job of telling its story. "The Guard is the community. We live here, we are you," he said. Today's National Guard is made up of 453,000 citizens, including 348,000 Army National Guard and 105,000 Air National Guard, Brush added.

The Center of Influence event was designed to show employers intense training and that work that their military employees must endure as part of Guard duty. Visitors also got a chance to see aircraft, weaponry and equipment such as night-vision goggles to better understand their employees' military life. "If not for the employers like yourself, it would be impossible for the armed forces to do what we do," said Terry Dell, who became the incoming ESGR area co-chair during the meeting. He and Mike Allbee will share the post after Harry Cockrell retires after 10 years.

Thanking the group, Cockrell said "No employer has ever said 'no' to any of my people. That speaks highly of Iowa... You employers are just outstanding." Among the employers was Chris Bandy, district manager of Farmers Insurance, Cedar Rapids, who joined his Davenport office manager and Coast Guard member Petty Officer 1st Class Nick Grant. For Bandy, the experience was eye-opening. "I didn't know these guys train at the same level as active military. I have a new respect for what he [Grant] does."

Bandy, whose offices provide training and support for Farmer's agents, added that they are trying to actively recruit more military members to their operation. "Former military usually get done (serving) in their 40s and are looking for a mid-career profession. We like that."

Despite his military career, Grant, of DeWitt, also had his first helicopter ride during the event. "I usually stay on water," he said, adding he loved the ride. "As the old saying goes there's more helicopters in the ocean than boats in the sky."





By FEPP HQ

Colleen Trout has volunteered hundreds of hours to help our Nation's Guard and Reserve members for one big reason: She feels deeply grateful for their service and sacrifices.

"I feel strongly about this because I could not do what they did," said Trout.

Trout, a former telecommunications services manager from Safety Harbor, Fla., is one of about 4,500 dedicated volunteers with the Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve (ESGR). The Department of Defense program has committees in all 50 states, Guam, Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, and the District of Columbia.

Since 1972, ESGR has worked to build cooperation between Guard and Reserve members and civilian employers, helping to resolve work-related problems stemming from an employee's military commitments.

These citizen warriors "have earned the right to have a good job and be treated well and have their families treated well," Trout said. "They deserve our respect."

Volunteers come from all walks of life. Trout, 52, uses her skills stemming from a career with companies like Sprint and Pacific Bell.

Her efforts – like those of many volunteers – are wide-ranging. They include meeting one-on-one with Service members about job opportunities, giving presentations about ESGR, and nominating and presenting outstanding employers with Patriot Awards for their support.

ESGR volunteers can be crucial to bridging the gap between the military and civilian employers who may not be aware of Federal laws regarding the rights of Guard and Reserve members.

The Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act, or USERRA, protects Service members from being

discriminated against because of their military duties, such as being away for monthly or annual training. ESGR provides free ombudsman services through highly-trained volunteers to address conflicts and resolve them as quickly as possible. More than three-quarters of cases are resolved in fewer than 14 days from an inquiry into the system.

Both employers and Service members often need more information on what the law covers. Often, issues can be resolved through educating employers and without filing formal complaints, Trout said.

For example, Trout recently met with Reservists from a Marine battalion in Tampa and informally explained the rights and responsibilities of Guardsmen and Reservists.

"I want to meet people where they are to address their needs and concerns," she said.

Trout also attends Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Program (YRRP) events to meet with Service members and their families. YRRP is a Department of Defense program that supports families and Service members before, during, and after deployments.

Trout often gives presentations about ESGR in front of hundreds at YRRP events, then sets up a table in the halls where Service members and spouses can stop by for help and advice. She said a majority of the questions deal with a need for a job, a better job, or with problems with employers who do not understand what the law covers.

She brings a laptop computer and may forward a resume to a potential employer while the Service member is standing there.

"ESGR works because of personal networks where we introduce employers to Service members," Trout said. "Part of what I do is help employers who do not have a military background understand the skills and values that [Guard and Reserve members] bring to an employer."

"I truly think they are twice the citizen," Trout added, noting that men and woman who serve in the Guard and Reserve give up weekends and, in many cases, months of their time to serve their country. Civilian employers don't always fully understand such commitments, which is why she reaches out to the business community and gives presentations on USERRA.

Trout and other volunteers are also invaluable in nominating supportive employers for Patriot Awards. Trout and her husband, Roger, a longtime Army Reservist and ESGR training director in Florida, often make surprise visits to workplaces to present Patriot Awards.

Volunteers also attend job fairs and Chamber of Commerce events to reach out to potential employers and spread the word about ESGR and the benefits of hiring Guard members and Reservists.

"The need is great," Trout said of why ESGR can always use more volunteers.

Trout loves her work and encourages others to volunteer because they can truly make a difference. She recalled a recent email that made her day. It was from a Marine Reservist thanking her for showing up every weekend to help his unit.

"We need to let them know we've got them covered," Trout said. "We are serving those who are serving." 



U.S. Air Force photo by Senior Airman Frank Casciotta

By Senior Airman Frank Casciotta, 482nd Fighter Wing

Approximately 450 Air Force Reserve Airmen and family members attended a Yellow Ribbon event here Aug. 20, to gain information on available resources before, during and after deployments.

Since 2008, the Air Force Yellow Ribbon Program has assisted Reservists and Air National Guard members in maintaining resiliency as they transition between their military and civilian roles.

As part of the event, several guest speakers presented information to participants, including Chaplain (Maj. Gen.) Dondi E. Costin, the Air Force chief of chaplains.

"I want you to think for a moment about what resiliency really is, because it's simple," said Costin, the senior pastor for more than half a million active-duty, Guard, Reserve, and civilian forces. "I like to think of it as the old Timex (wristwatch) commercial, 'A Timex can take a lickin' and keep on tickin'.' That's what resiliency is."

Costin, a member of Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. David L. Goldfein's special staff, is responsible for establishing guidance and providing advice on all matters pertaining to the religious and moral welfare of Air Force personnel. He is also responsible for establishing effective programs to meet the religious needs of Airmen and their loved ones.

One such person is Sarah Thorpe, a former North Carolina National Guard member who attended the event with her husband, Staff Sgt. Steve Thorpe, a civil engineer with the 567th Rapid Engineer Deployable, Heavy

Operational Repair Squadron, Engineer Squadron at Seymour Johnson Air Force Base, North Carolina, who is preparing for his deployment. Sarah recalled her frustration with the lack of support programs and resources following her 2005 deployment to Iraq. "It was the first deployment for my unit, so everything was new to everyone," she said. "We struggled. It was difficult, I didn't know the resources, and I didn't know how to contact the resources because I'm suddenly back to my regular life."

The program promotes the well-being of Reservists and their loved ones by connecting them with resources before and after deployments. Each year, the Air Force Reserve program trains 7,000 reservists and those closest to them in education benefits, health care, retirement information and more.

"Now that they finally have the Yellow Ribbon Program, I am getting the information as a spouse and my husband is getting the information so we can work together as a team," Thorpe said. "I'm hopeful because now I know what to expect, because I have the resources and because I can be in control of the situation at home when his mission is overseas."

The event was the first one of its kind attended by Costin, who has been the service's top chaplain for a year.

"You've got other people around you who can help you," Costin said. "That's what your squadron is there for. That's what your flight is there for. That's what your base community and your family and your neighborhood is there for – to help you." 