

Colonel Mary Forbes, J-1 and Human Resources Director, Washington Army National Guard

My name is COL Mary J. Forbes. I am a member of the Washington National Guard and I have served over 22 years of active duty. Currently, I am assigned as the Joint Personnel Officer, J1, for the Washington National Guard. I am responsible for the oversight of the Human Resource Office, Family Support Programs, Equal Employment and Equal Opportunity Programs, Employer Support to Guard and Reserve (ESGR) and Labor Relations. Reintegration efforts as been my number one focus since I was assigned this position in June 2004.

My major focus has been to develop a model to transition soldiers from combat to civilian life. The package or model had to be reasonable to unit commanders and be able to fit into a commander's time constrained weekend drill period.

With the assistance and encouragement from Washington Department of Veterans Affairs, I participated in a series of veteran affairs meetings in which members of our team incrementally brainstormed and then built a model, which we codified using a memorandum for understanding (MOU).

From the beginning of this process, John Lee, Deputy Director of the WDVA, advocated the idea of "after" active duty customer service. The MOU team created the idea of "Family Activity Day" and members purposely decided this would not be another briefing but an opportunity for veteran organizations to provide one-on-one customer service. The four hour Family Activity Day starts with a 20 minute introduction which is meant to inspire service members to use their earned VA entitlements and benefits. Readjustment counselors and VA Doctors on the committee emphasized that service members often experience a need for interdiction services at the 3-6 month mark after active duty.

The Adjutant General, Major General Lowenberg, issued the following commander's intent: I want each Commander to conduct a Family Activity Day within three to six months after returning from Operation Enduring Freedom, Operation Iraqi Freedom, and Noble Eagle as part of their normal drill schedule. The Family Activity Day Provides service members and their families personalized customer service in understanding and filing for Veteran's benefits and entitlements.

Major General Lowenberg's commander's intent ensured that each commander would execute these events in the similar manner for all units across the state. To date, the Washington National Guard (WNG) has conducted four Family Activity Days and has 22 more scheduled over the next five months which provides customer service to over 3000 service members. Service members and their family members have expressed appreciation for this opportunity.

WNG has reached success at the state level in leveraging state, federal and private business to assist our service members at the six to nine month post active duty time period. In collaboration with the WDVA, the WNG is currently brainstorming on what program or training to focus on in the next 18-24 months.

I see two significant challenges in the next 1-5 years. First is the on going communications with veterans. Second is ensuring the service member has access to the right resource at the right time given that many of their issues may not surface or materialize for many years to come.

The first challenge is communications. There is vast array of agencies that want to help the service member. However, service members may be unaware of many of the services that are available because information is dispersed and uncoordinated. At the national and state level, I strongly believe we need a positive and educational media plan to inspire, remind, and encourage service members of the many assets available. I believe we need a media plan that educates the public using multiple formats like radio, TV, print media, internet and hands-on workshops like our Family Activity Days.

I recommend a partnership be formed at the national level which leverages state, federal, and private organizations to develop and execute a media campaign for TV, AM/FM radio and other media forms. The goal would be to synchronize efforts, avoid duplication, plug gaps in coverage, and be sure we reach every service member irrespective of their location. We need a mutually supporting federal, state, and private communication campaign over the next 50 years to continue to communicate with our veterans. I say 50 years because those heroic service members who are severely disabled will need to hear reinforcing VA messages for their entire life. The public campaign would reassure the service member, the public and elected officials of the long term commitment from our government and private leaders.

Second is ensuring our service members has the accesses to the right resource at the right time given that many of their issues may not surface or materialize for many years to come. One example may be the educational benefits available to children of severely disabled service members. If the child is a twelve years old at the time of the accident, it will be five more years before the child has a need for such benefit.

To accomplish this, we need direct and indirect communications with service members and their families over an extended time period. Indirect communications is the public awareness campaign discussed in the above paragraphs. Direct communications is an on-going management and ability to provide referral to our service members as provided by our Family Assistance Centers. The WNG needs the resources and funding for our decentralized Family Assistance Centers through-out the state to ensure this continuous support for the next 2-6 years and beyond.