

Supporting Our Soldiers Organization Seeks Business Champions

By **Jacinda Simmerman** and **Elizabeth Ransom**

In today's society, civilian employers play a critical role in the defense of the nation by complying with existing employment laws that protect the rights of workers who serve in the National Guard and Reserve.

Employer Support for the Guard and Reserve (ESGR) is a United States Department of Defense organization. It operates under the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Reserve Affairs (OASD/RA), which is itself a part of the Office of the Secretary of Defense. National Guard members and Reserve forces from all branches of the military comprise approximately 46% of our country's total available military manpower.

Employer outreach

The ESGR mission is to gain and maintain active support from all public and private employers for the men and women of the National Guard and Reserve. To do this, we conduct both proactive and reactive services in support of the organization's strategic goals. Primary emphasis is directed toward known employers of the Guard and Reserve, as identified by the Civilian Employment Information initiative.

ESGR conducts the 5-Star Employer Program, comprised of the following steps:

- Sign Statement of Support – demonstrable compliance with the law
- Review HR policy
- Train supervisors and managers on the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act (USERRA)
- Provide "Above and Beyond" HR policy
- Advocate for Guard/Reserve

The primary means of assistance in preventing, resolving or reducing employer and/or employee problems and misunderstandings is done through a nationwide network of over 900 volunteer ombudsmen. These volunteers, who receive extensive training on USERRA and dispute resolution techniques, serve as informal mediators between employers and their employees who serve in the Guard and Reserve. Ombudsmen inform and educate the employer/employee on what the law requires and assist in finding a mutually agreeable solution.

ESGR sponsors an awards program designed to recognize employers for employment policies and practices that are supportive of their employees' participation in the Guard and Reserve. All employer recognition and awards originate from nominations by individual Reserve members. Employer awards include:

- The "Above and Beyond" award is given in limited numbers by state and territory ESGR committees. It recognizes employers at the state and local levels that have gone above and beyond the legal requirements for granting leave and providing support for military duty by their employees.



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- The "Pro Patria" award is presented annually by each ESGR committee to one employer in its state or territory that has provided the most exceptional support of our national defense through leadership practices and personnel policies that support their employees who serve in the National Guard and Reserve.
- The "Employer Support Freedom" award is ESGR's most prestigious national recognition. The Secretary of Defense recognizes up to 10 employers nationwide each year at ceremonies held at the Pentagon in Washington, D.C.

Indiana connection

On September 13, 2007, President Bush was pictured in the Oval Office of the White House with Employer Support Freedom Award recipients. One of those winners was Con-way Inc., a freight transportation and

logistics company headquartered in California. An operations supervisor at Con-Way Freight in Indianapolis was one of two employees to nominate the company. It is the first Indiana honor in this awards program, which began in 1996.

Con-way's military program, Soldier's Pay, ensures that Guard and Reserve members receive the equivalent of full salary and benefits for up to 12 months for military leave and drill weekends. In addition, Con-way offers its Guard and Reserve employees and their families a comprehensive benefits package that includes medical, prescription, dental, vision, retirement contributions, mental health services, legal, financial and substance abuse services during active duty. When a service member returns from deployment, he or she receives a personal phone call from Con-way's president thanking them for their service and welcoming them back to the Con-way family.

INFORMATION LINK

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