

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH COLONEL DIANNA CLEVEN, U.S. ARMY
RESERVE EMPLOYER PARTNERSHIP INITIATIVE VIA TELECONFERENCE TIME: 9:00 A.M. EDT
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COL. CLEVEN: I'd like to say thank you on behalf of the soldiers that
the Employer Partnership Initiative addresses and the employers who have stepped
up, to say that they wanted to provide opportunities for these soldiers.

The way the initiative actually started was, General Stultz said, with
the operational tempo and the transition to an operational reserve, he felt that
it was important to have the support of employers and to go to them and very
candidly explain, to them, what the rotations would be like, and to collaborate
on the challenges that the employers were facing, in trying to support these
soldiers.

LINDY KYZER (U.S. Army Public Affairs): Okay, great. Thanks so much,
ma'am. With that, we will go ahead and turn it over to questions. I think
first in line, we had Chuck Simmins with America's North Shore Journal.
Chuck, did you have a question?

Q Yes, I did.

Colonel, the last we heard, you were at 200 employers. Can you update
that number? And can you also talk about information that I've seen that you're
involving the families of the reservists in this program as well?

COL. CLEVEN: Yes.

We are at almost 300 employers. We're 1 or 2 shy. But I think as of
yesterday, it was something like 296. And it could very well have already
reached 300 since I was last briefed. Employers are signing on almost at a rate
now of one a day. Some have formal signing ceremonies. And some simply sign
the agreement and send it in.

In our discussion with employers, one of the things that we wanted to
know what they were looking for out of these partnership agreements. And we
really wanted to make them true partnerships, as opposed to signing a piece of
paper and making it something symbolic.

We really wanted to collaborate with them on solutions. And one of the
things that came up, in the discussion with them, was this desire to also offer
opportunities for family members.

Specifically a lot of them have talked about the spouses. But others have also talked about other family members. And then when we have -- the soldiers similarly have told us they want opportunities for their family members.

So what we do, as an example, when a spouse is looking for an opportunity -- (audio break) -- jobs that these employers are providing. We also refer them to some of the Army resources that are out there, for Army spouses, because there are some ongoing programs that provide them some additional support that we want to make sure that they're aware of.

MS. KYZER: Great. Thanks so much, ma'am. And I think next on the line, we had Todd Lopez with Army News Service.

Todd, did you have a question?

Q I'll reserve till we go through a second round.

MS. KYZER: Absolutely. Bryant Jordan, from military.com, did you have a question?

Q Yes, I do, thank you, regarding the families. And that is, if I heard you right, you provide employers with, I guess, lists or access to jobs -- or to spouses? I'm not quite sure I understood you. Is this in order for them to hire spouses if jobs open up?

COL. CLEVEN: Perhaps if what I do is explained to you, the mechanics of how our soldiers and their families access the jobs, then you would have a better understanding.

When our employers sign a partnership agreement, what happens is they make available to us the ability of scanning the jobs that are on -- on their own websites. We run a search engine across those. So when a soldier goes into our web pages, they put in their search parameters, and then the jobs, either for a particular geographical region or for a particular company or a particular type of job, will -- will come up. And then they can access each of those jobs. And when they access them, they actually access them on the employer's website.

For spouses, the way they would do this is they go into the website. There's a preview screen that our soldiers fill in. What the spouse would do is simply fill in the soldier's information. When we do follow-up, that's when we find out whether it was a spouse or a soldier trying to get this job.

What that does, by virtue of us running that search engine, is our soldiers know that the jobs that they are looking at are the ones that are available with -- with our employer partners. And one thing that we found when we went out and we talked with employers was that -- and initially, we thought we needed to persuade them that our soldiers were a good investment and that even with the rotations, that, you know, they were getting highly capable, dependable people who would be well worth it, even with those rotations. What we found instead was we did not need to convince the employers of this. The employers were having challenges in terms of getting access to the soldiers.

So what the Employer Partnership Initiative has in some ways done is create sort of a meeting space where those soldiers seeking opportunities and those employers wishing to hire them can meet sort of in a virtual environment.

Q Uh-huh.

MS. KYZER: Great. Thank you so much.

And Pauline Jelinek with AP, did you have a question?

MR. : Hello?

MS. KYZER: Well, then we'll go to -- I know we have a couple of folks -- I think we've been through that part. Is there anyone else on the line, who hasn't yet asked a question, who has one?

Q This is Dave Miller with Con-way, and I clicked on later, but I don't have a question at this time.

MS. KYZER: Okay. Got it, sir. We'll go back down the line. Chuck Simmins, did you have a question?

Q Yes. Colonel, if I'm understanding you correctly, the mechanics of this is all online. Is that correct?

COL. CLEVEN: Actual access to the jobs is online. As I said -- remember earlier when I said that these partnerships are not just about signing a piece of paper. We get together periodically with employers and find out what challenges they are facing, and then we collaborate on the solutions.

Q All right.

COL. CLEVEN: So what this has done in a lot of ways is allowed -- formalized a mechanism for them to surface issues, and then for us to work with them on those issues. Otherwise, you might have -- you know, the Army might have one perspective of the challenges the employers are having; the employers think something else. And we might not come up with the right solutions independently. But together, we can have a better understanding of what each is -- is trying to do to support these soldiers.

And then we can work on those problems and try to solve them together.

Q All right. Then, as a practical matter, how does an employer go about contacting a reservist who has an interest in one of the jobs?

COL. CLEVEN: What they would need to do is contact us. And they could reach us at AR -- which stands for Army Reserve -- so ARCareers@USAR.Army.mil, or they can call us at 703-601-0898. We can explain the partnership initiative to them, get them a copy of what the partnership agreement looks like. And then once they sign the partnership agreement, we can -- we can work with them on the technical side of this to have those jobs visible to our soldiers.

Q All right.

COL. CLEVEN: And the family members.

Q Do you have any idea how many soldiers have participated in the program?

COL. CLEVEN: We know that about 15 percent of our population is accessing the website right now. In the first two weeks, when the website went

live in the middle of October, there were over 23,000 soldiers at that time that were looking at jobs.

We regularly send out e-mail traffic to the soldiers who have been on the website to find out if they need assistance and we get feedback from them.

MS. KYZER: Okay, great. And I'll toss it back over to Todd. Did you have a question?

Q Yeah, I have a couple questions.

Good morning, ma'am -- Colonel. I have a -- this partnership, is this -- is this simply about finding jobs for unemployed soldiers? Is this about matching soldiers up with employers that essentially sign onto an agreement that says, "We understand what'll happen if we have a reservist working for us who may end up being deployed for 18 months"? Is this -- does this also include, perhaps, soldiers who had jobs with employers and come back from a deployment and find that they no longer have a job? Is this part of it, or is this designed to prevent that? Can you pretty much -- can you explain what was the reason for the program starting and what you all hope to accomplish with the -- with EPI?

COL. CLEVEN: Certainly. What transpired was General Stultz -- (inaudible) -- that, you know, in most of the history of the Army Reserve, the way things have gone is, you know, you had the two weekends -- or the two weeks in the summer and one week -- and a month that you dedicated and employers were aware of that and had to hire personnel for that. And then, of course, with the operational tempo, that has changed.

So now we have an operational Reserve and he said, you know, we need to go back to the employers, explain this to them, get their support for this -- (inaudible) -- how we can enable them to be able to continue to hire our soldiers, because what we don't want are situations in which people are deployed and they're worried about whether or not they have a job to come back to.

And what this does instead is give them the assurance that they have been hired by a military-friendly employer who understands the length of time that they're going to be gone and will support them while they're gone.

Now in some cases what has happened is, especially with the current economy, you know, some companies have folded while these soldiers have been deployed, or some even here in the United States have lost jobs because of that. What this does is create that safety net where they can look for jobs in their communities or in some cases, as General Stultz -- (inaudible) -- before, maybe you have a spouse who's been offered an opportunity in another part of the country, and the soldier doesn't know for sure, you know, what opportunities might be out there. Well, what would be ideal would be for him to be able to go on to the website, see what opportunities are available for him or her there, and then also be able to see, you know, how that would affect their Army Reserve career, and then the family can make a holistic decision about whether that spouse should take that opportunity in another part of the country or not.

And so I think, you know, part of it was that he knew that we're asking more of employers. And so how do we make that work? Well, the only way you can make that work is to go back to them and say: Let us know what challenges you're facing with this, and let's work together on how to be able to have supportive employment, so that we can sustain an operational Reserve.

Q Ma'am, what is the difference between legislation that says an employer has to keep a slot open for a deployed Reservist and what is then specified in these partnership agreements? Does the soldier understand that if they get a job through EPI, that that employer is going to continue to say: We understand you could be gone for 18 months or two years, or you could be gone for -- in a four-year employment with us, you might be gone half the time. We're still going to let you have a job.

Is that the definition of this relationship? Is that included in there?

COL. CLEVEN: Well --

Q I may have this entirely wrong. Is this --

COL. CLEVEN: Well, you know, the law is there to protect those soldiers who have jobs. A concern that the Army Reserve had, once these rotations were occurring, is that if you don't -- if you haven't been hired already, then the law never takes effect.

The other part of the concern is, rather than the stick, you know, better to have the carrot, so that (you create ?) a favorable employment climate for these soldiers, as opposed to something adversarial. And then you only have to resort to enforcement of the law in those instances in which either there's a considerable misunderstanding or, you know, something else is going on.

So I think it's subtly different in that regard, and maybe the ATA members on this panel or the Con-way representatives might want to address that.

But, you know, a lot of these employers put a lot of money out there to keep the salary levels of these soldiers consistent while deployed. Some of them continue to carry them on their medical coverage. There's a lot of goodwill out there on the part of the employers. And for the most part, when something like law enforcement gets involved, it should only be in those more extreme cases. So rather I guess what I would say, we want that favorable climate that precludes a lot of that.

Q Dave Miller, can you elaborate on that?

DAVE MILLER (Con-way Freight): Well, I've been kind of sitting on the sidelines listening. We are a very military-friendly organization. We believe very strongly in that mission. We believe it's important not only for the country, but we believe it's ultimately important for the individual soldiers.

Our concerns lie with those organizations which we wish more would join us in participating at the level that we participate, but we want to make sure that any of our military-related employees' head is in the mission every time that they are deployed, and that they're not concerned about whether or not there's enough income coming in to support the family and their assets that they leave behind. That there is a minimal disruption to the family associated with medical-care providers. That our employees understand absolutely that we're going to be there for them however they come home, and that their family's going to be taken care of while they're gone as well.

With all that said, there's a large cost associated with doing that. And our concerns lie that those employers that do go beyond the minimum

expectations of federal law in this regard, there should be a -- action taken in the Congress to provide tax credits for those types of companies that do these things. At the end of the day, at least based upon what I understand to be a forward direction where our forces are going to rely more and more upon Reserve and Guard members to protect this nation, the employers are going to be absolutely integral in the success of that program. But we cannot expect individual employers to absorb the costs solely on their own without tax considerations.

Certainly there are huge cost savings to the DOD or for the DOD by shifting the emphasis on -- away from a standing army to the Reserve and Guard, but, you know, you can't expect to shift that cost of savings to the private employer. So that would be my comment. MS. KYZER: Thanks, Mr. Miller.

Bryant Jordan with Military.com, do you have a question?

Q Yeah. Thanks again. Was part of the reason for this program -- I mean, were you getting -- was the Reserves getting a sense that employers were shying away, at least -- (word off mike) -- from hiring reservists because they knew that there would be this obligation out there? Is this partly in response to reservists not being able to land jobs because of fear by the employer that they're going to lose them for anywhere from, you know, a year or more?

COL. CLEVEN: I think it more typically came from the fact that General Stultz has himself deployed multiple times, and he, having come from industry, understood the challenges that the employer faces when that occurs.

Q So the answer's no, that was not a factor?

COL. CLEVEN: It was not a factor. What he wanted to do is make sure that that wasn't the case. And so the way you would do that is you go out and you talk to the employers.

And I think there's a considerable lack of understanding about the challenges that the employers face and the contribution that they are making to support these soldiers, and a lot of them in a very quiet sort of way.

Q And to follow up on my colleague's last question, what is -- what's the status right now of tax breaks for the people who join this partnership? Is there some kind of legislation right now that I just missed or something?

COL. CLEVEN: There is not legislation pending right now. The -- but the Employer Partnership Initiative has discussed with the Army a couple of different legislative initiatives, and I know that there's some -- there has -- there have been some members of Congress who have also approached us, because there have been some concerns -- (audio break) -- they would like to be supportive of some of these sorts of things.

So -- (audio break) -- example, some of the ideas that have been talked about are things like, for those who have to keep credentialing or licensing during periods of deployment, when that comes at a cost to the employer -- (audio break) -- some of the expenses. Or in the case of someone deploying, perhaps what you can do is -- (audio break) -- cost associated with finding the replacement person and training them, you know, maybe you could have a cost offset that would make that easier to deal with.

And in some cases it's really a question of some creative things that we've talked about, in terms of, you know, maybe we could establish a temporary pool of soldiers or retirees who might be able to step into some of the positions as backfill, that would then come at no cost -- (audio break) -- in terms of the trucking industry, one of the things that we are talking about is -- (audio break) -- licensing as they're trained in the military so that the experience that they get is tracked and then affords them a higher promotion -- or sorry, take that back -- not promotion, but hiring position when they come into the company, as opposed to coming in at an entry level. It would be reflective of the experience they actually have, and they would be making more money.

Q This is in -- this is in the trucking, you said?

COL. CLEVEN: Yes.

Q Okay.

Q This is Bill Wanamaker with American Trucking Associations. Can I kind of tie that together a little bit? MS. KYZER: Go ahead, sir.

Q Okay. About -- let's see, it was a year ago April, as a matter of fact, that the American Trucking Associations signed an agreement with the Army Reserves. It was signed by Governor Bill Graves, who runs the ATA, and also by Lieutenant General Stultz. And the agreement was to figure out ways to help soldiers transitioning into our industry.

Now, the ATA is a little bit different. We only have 190 employees, making us a small employer. We're large for a trade organization, but we're very small as an employer. So our focus is on helping our industry, our membership across the trucking industry gain access to the high-quality applicants that we find very attractive to come into our industry.

What we need more than anything else is good quality, reliable, skilled, work-ethic truck drivers. Now, with the economy down right now, the demand and the supply is fairly even. But there are two factors that will substantially change that in the coming months ahead: One, of course, is the economy picking up, but another one is the fact of attrition. The median age of the truck driver's about 57 years old. So obviously, over the next few years, half of that truck population is going to retire. And given the fact that there's about 3-1/2 million commercially licensed drivers across the country, that's an awful lot of demand for people who want to drive trucks.

And so what we're trying to do is help our membership understand what their responsibilities are when they hire -- what are their obligations when they hire a reservist, but also what are the advantages. And we're trying to support General Stultz and Colonel Cleven and their efforts to change the -- okay, I'm going to use an old term here -- change the paradigm, change the arrangement so that it's less onerous on a company that wants to do the right thing and wants to employ the truck drivers.

Now, one of the things that Colonel Cleven alluded to that is kind of an obstacle is that the (MIKE 88 ?) or the military heavy- vehicle driver's license is not equivalent to the commercial driver's license -- lot of things in common, but many things are not. And in order for us to hire somebody, they need a commercial driver's license.

But if you're an employer, your insurance company is going to say, "Yeah, but they have to have at least -- at least one year's experience." Well, they can go a long ways inside the military accumulating that experience and they can document it. So our position is that -- up front that the Department of Defense, all the -- all five services -- throwing in the Coast Guard, here -- should have -- say you have personnel that -- if they have personnel who are going to -- PRERECORDED MESSAGE: This conference is scheduled to be disconnected automatically in five minutes. To extend the time, please signal for an operator by pressing star-0.

MS. KYZER: Sorry for this. It's our friendly reminder from the Department of Defense that we're five minutes out. So with that, I want to turn it over to maybe one last question and then closing remarks.

So does anybody have a question that we haven't touched upon yet?

Q Yeah. This is Chuck, Lindy.

MS. KYZER: Go ahead.

Q I interviewed the Cleveland Clinic people after the last Bloggers Roundtable on this subject.

And I wanted to ask the fellow from Con-way, the Cleveland Clinic said the Army reservists bring attitude, discipline, focus, teamwork, integrity and service with them when they come in. And those are values that the clinic shares with the Army Reserve. What kinds of things would you say that the reservists bring to your business and to the trucking industry?

Q Well, I've gone on record many, many times talking about this wonderful access that we have to highly skilled and motivated people, relative to veterans and reserve soldiers. They understand esprit de corps. Without a doubt, they have undertaken and worked under some of the most arduous of conditions, of which I don't think we can replicate, as tough as our business is.

Q You don't regularly blow up your drivers?

Q I'm sorry?

Q You don't regularly blow up your drivers.

Q We try to avoid that. However, as I've had to point out to the general several times, while they have tough missions running fuel between the Baghdad airport and Baghdad, they haven't been in Chicago traffic at 2:30 in the afternoon. (Laughter.)

But with that said, we just find them to be wonderfully talented individuals that understand responsibility; they understand mission; again, the esprit de corps, which is so important to any company -- that there's no downside to hiring these folks, with the exception of doing the right thing by them, and our request, again, that we begin to get legislative activities to help those companies like Con-way that go beyond the call of duty of minimumly (sic) supporting these folks, that there are some tax offsets to it.

MS. KYZER: Oh -- and if we could, we just have a couple minutes left. Colonel Cleven, did you have any closing remarks?

COL. CLEVEN: The only other thing that I would say is, part of why I think this works so well for the Army Reserves is that we have combat support and combat service support career fields, which very closely correlate to civilian skills, so that they're mutually reinforcing. What you do in your civilian life makes you a valuable asset to the Army and makes you more competitive. And then on the other side of it, the experience and the training that --

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