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Serving the Nation’s Veterans | OAS Episode 21 | Nov. 9, 2017

Welcome to Our American States, a podcast of meaningful conversations that tell the story of America’s state legislatures, the people in them, the politics that compel them, and the important work of democracy. For the National Conference of State Legislatures, I’m your host Gene Rose.

With Veterans Day around the corner, we thought it would be an appropriate time to look at issues that affect our nation’s veterans. NCSL has a Military and Veterans Affairs Task force and this August named two co-chairs to lead the group, both of whom have deep involvement with veterans’ issues in their respective states.

In this episode, we’ll talk with those two new co-chairs including Representative Tina Orwall from the state of Washington, who has a particular interest in mental issues facing veterans. We’ll talk with her after speaking with her co-chair, who has a unique perspective on these issues.

OK, we’re talking with Representative Dan Saddler from Alaska, who is the co-chair of the National Conference of State Legislatures Military and Veterans Task force. Welcome to the program.

Dan: Well thank-you, Gene. Pleasure to be here.

Gene: Tell us a little bit about your involvement with this task force. Obviously you’ve been on it for a while and now you’re co-chairing it. What kind of vision do you have for the work that you’ll be doing?

Dan: I got involved with NCSL’s Military and Veterans Task Force very early. I got elected in 2010 and in 2011, as it goes in San Antonio and I was intrigued and gratified to find this task force doing so many of the things on the national level that I wanted to do in Alaska.

We've had the chance to bring a lot of veterans and military issues to the general membership at NCSL and it's a real pleasure and an honor to be selected by my peers as the co-chair for a time.

First off, given the international situation and the tensions with North Korea, I think I'd like to help educate my task force members about the United States' anti-missile defenses, which are based in California and Alaska. That's kind of an ongoing national security issue.

I would like to help other NCSL member states understand the importance of the task force's work and, through that, I hope to expand participation by other states. We've got 32 states and by my count there are still 18 plus a couple more territories that could benefit by joining in with us. I think I've got a very good partner in Representative Orwall, who has got a real heart for and experience with the social services and health programs for veterans. And other than that, I'd like to respond to the direction of the members who frankly are the best experts on what their own states are doing for veterans and for active military.

Gene: And let's talk about your personal experience there. Obviously the military is a very important part of the state of Alaska. Is that how you kind of got interested in veterans' issues to start with?

Dan: Well, yes. My district in Anchorage... it's a little bit north of Anchorage; it includes Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson, which is one of the joint bases set up for backgrounds in the past. And about a third to 40 percent of my constituents are either active-duty military or their families. I've also got the largest veteran population per capita in Alaska, and that's saying something.

So my constituency cares about active-duty and military issues. So I'm very pleased to be in a position where I can help influence those issues on a national level and serve my members.

I've been honored as the co-chair of Alaska's Military and Veterans Committee and I've also served as an effective co-chair for about four years as the Joint Armed Services Commission, which is kind of Alaska's anti-BRAC committee. We're supposed to be looking out to finding new missions, new facilities, ways to protect the facilities.

So I've been a defender and a supporter of the military in Alaska and I'm honored now to help serve that community and those issues nationally.

Gene: And Representative Saddler, as we approach Veterans Day, what are you hearing from veterans that you talk to and what their needs are right now?

Dan: Well, you know, there's a lot of concern about the delivery of healthcare services. One of the great things that a military career or even brief military service does is provide young men and women with the opportunity for good benefits at later life. We place a lot of faith and trust and responsibility in our Veterans Affairs clinics and hospitals and it's important to me as a policymaker that make sure we fulfill those promises.

I'm hearing concerns that the VA clinics and hospitals are doing some great things, but need some plus-ups in other areas. We in Alaska are not fortunate enough to have a VA hospital, but I know nationally that's a big, important issue.

Frankly, the issue of to what degree the reserve and guard units are being called upon to be a big buttress to the active force – people joined up hoping to do their two weeks a summer and a weekend a month – but a lot of folks in Alaska have gone into deployment one, two, three times for up to a year. So the changing relationships between the big Army, big Air Force and the reserve and guard units is a big issue I hear a lot about.

Gene: There was concern a few years ago about how veterans were being treated by veterans' hospitals. Do you see this as kind of an area where states can take the lead to see that veterans get more equitable treatment?

Dan: Well Gene, one of the benefits of NCSL is it provides a place for states, which are the laboratories of democracy, to get together and share information about what works. We've had some good, innovative programs in Alaska, which is a big rural state, which has native health clinics scattered around a huge rural state, and we've been able to provide services for veterans in these rural communities through innovative, cooperative arrangements. Not all veterans' care has to be delivered at a big city hospital.

So I think states do have a big role to play in offering innovative solutions to helping veterans in their states get the services they've earned at a price the federal government can afford.

Gene: And what types of things does the task force do that you think really help members have a better understanding of what the needs of veterans are right now?

Dan: The task force has taken on and dealt with a lot of very important issues... just counting off my fingers here: veterans' healthcare; support for families while their members are deployed; transitioning and retraining for veterans returning to civilian jobs; professional licensing; DOD budgeting and bracket potentials; base encroachment issues and environmental issues on base; veterans' courts; addiction recovery; repurposing closed bases – there's a huge amount of things that this task force touches that are vitally important to states, not only military issues, but in economic development, in social services and public health, public safety. So there's almost nothing that we do in this task force that doesn't affect other states in a lot of ways.

We are going to continue to talk about base encroachment as the population grows and as alternative energy puts more windmills next to the prime real estate of bases. I think that veteran business supports and for disabled vets are going to continue to be important; environmental considerations on base installations; sadly to say, suicide and mental healthcare for veterans is a continuing challenge; and the DOD budgets is a big one, the sequester and how it's affecting planning and operations. These are some of the ongoing issues that I hope we will continue to do in our task force, maybe branch out into more details as the member states desire.

Gene: You did list a rather dizzying list of things that you will be touching. Could I just focus on jobs for a little bit? You mentioned disabled veterans coming back and there's always been a concern about veterans finding jobs when they come home. What's your experience and what have you heard on the task force before on this subject?

Dan: I do know that DOD has done a much better job in recent years of making sure to begin the transition process out-of-uniform early in a soldier or airman or sailor's career, instead of just two weeks out they say: 'Guess what? You're getting discharged. You know, go gear for your pay.'

They're starting out to do assessment and training. I know there have been efforts to improve the military resumes, which makes them more intelligible to the civilian employer, and that's been helpful. Frankly, we've had some success in Alaska and I've heard of success in other states of taking the skills a military personnel will receive in training and seeing to the extent possible how we can translate that into certificates or professional licenses or some credential that they can use to get a job quickly on the civilian side.

I know that there are an awful lot of medics and nurses and doctors trained and those are skills that are definitely in demand in the civilian economy. The equipment operators, motor field drivers and so forth, computer operations – if we can find a way to take the skills that our service members get in uniform and apply those in the economy, the private economy, we'll be doing them a better service and our private economy a better service. It's a tragedy to let that good training go to waste. And we've been doing some good things in Alaska, and I've seen some good things other states are doing as well.

Gene: Let me get you out on this: Is there anything I haven't asked you about that you think is important for your colleagues across the country to know about when thinking about veterans' issues?

Dan: Gene, that's a good question. I think the thing I would want to leave listeners with is the idea that veterans are an integral part of our states and our communities and our nation, and the military is an important part of our economy and our culture and our whole national character. The military doesn't exist behind the wire; they exist among us all day, every day, all year long. And I think to the extent we can make sure that NCSL members understand what military members are doing and what skills and what attributes and benefits their veterans can bring, we'll get more understanding of what the task force does or appreciation of what they do, and I hope more participation and dissemination of the good work we're doing on the task force.

Gene: We have been talking with Representative Dan Saddler, the co-chair of NCSL's Military and Veterans Task force. We appreciate you being a guest on Our American States.

Dan: Thank you very much Gene. Looking forward to seeing everybody at the next NCSL meeting.

Gene: Now let's talk with Representative Saddler's co-chair, who brings some personal experience to her understanding of veterans' issues.

We're talking today with Representative Tina Orwall from the State of Washington, who is the co-chair of the National Conference of State Legislatures Military and Veterans Task force. Representative Orwall, welcome to our program.

Tina: Thank you. Thank you for having me.

Gene: So let's talk a little bit about your interest in veterans' issues. I know, if my research is correct, that there are seven military bases in the State of Washington. How did you get connected with veterans' issues?

Tina: The veterans' issues are really important to me. Obviously it affected my life; my father was a World War II veteran and, though he didn't speak a lot about his experiences, it clearly shaped his life and our lives around his love of our country and service. He made a decision that we would relocate on Whidbey Island, which is in Washington State next to the military base, and so most of my friends and neighbors were in the military. It became pretty clear to me early on just the sacrifices the men and women who serve our country make, and I certainly want to be a support to them.

Gene: And are there particular issues that you are concerned about and hope to get the task force to focus on?

Tina: My background – I'm a social worker and a mental health professional. Sadly, Washington State has one of the highest rates of suicide and when we lose these precious lives – we know about one in four are veterans – and so I started working on this issue and I think the committee really has an opportunity to shine a light on it and to really look at best practices. I'm really proud of the work we're doing in Washington and I'm looking forward to sharing that with the group. And, again, suicide is one of the most preventable illnesses and I'm hoping we can really make a difference.

Gene: And with veterans, we have a wide range of ages of people that you are trying to serve. You have people that have been in the military for a long time, and then you've got the new people that are just coming back from service.

Tina: That is correct. We have the whole range. We have a very large population of retired veterans in our states, I think around 600,000, and it's also one of our largest employers – it's in our top three. So we really have a lot of men and women serving. A lot of them are in the National Guard. And so when they return, we want to really support them in their transition, and a lot of them will be served in our communities and working in our communities.

Gene: So you've been on the task force since 2013 and now just in August were named co-chair of the task force. What are going to be your priorities and when do you all start working on these issues?

Tina: Well, it's an incredible honor to co-chair the committee and I'm really looking forward to working with my dear colleague from Alaska. We have a number of things kind of on our radar. I think some of the things we'll be looking at will be around employment in veterans, really wanting to look at best practices and really highlight that some of the employers are doing really good work in this area.

Again, I think the mental health and how the men and women transition back into our communities I think is really important. And sometimes we have issues in our state around how the military, how do we embrace them in our states – there are issues that come up around bases that we want to be sensitive to. So I think we have a number of issues to tackle and I'm really excited to be part of the committee.

Gene: And I know one of the major focuses of the task force, one of its primary goals, is military/community relations, as you kind of referred to a while ago.

Tina: Yes.

Gene: Has there been some success in that? I know there have been some closures across the country in recent years. Tell us a little bit about that focus.

Tina: Well, I think it's really important. I think one of the reasons I love being part of the committee is really to understand what other states are doing, what are the best practices. And so I think we are trying to learn from each other. In Washington State I know we have issues around some of our bases around noise and volume, and I know they've made changes to flight patterns and other things. I think part of it is really opening up that communication. They are such an important partner and I think the work as a legislator is trying to see how do you bring everyone together and find those win/wins and strengthen those partnerships. I think there are some great things going on across the country.

Gene: Tell us about some successes of the task force. Have you seen some changes in other states across the country based on your work?

Tina: I was really inspired when I first started. I remember hearing some best practices in Texas around men and women getting assessed when they came back around mental health issues, and I know a lot of us as states started looking at that.

One of the things that inspired me was also the employment piece – seeing what kinds of partnerships they had with private industries. I know we went back to our state and we've been trying to build on those with Starbucks and other companies. So it really is this opportunity to share what we're doing.

I'm hoping around the mental health, you know, I'm really proud of our work, and I hope to share that with the other states and compare notes, because part of what you do in the legislature is you always try to make sure you're moving in the right direction, and you really look to your peers to get feedback and hear what's working.

Gene: Is there particular legislation that you're going to be pushing in regards to the mental health of veterans?

Tina: We've done several bills the last few years. I'm very proud – we became the first state in the country to require all our mental health and medical providers to be trained in suicide prevention, but also it has to have a veterans' component. So we're building that.

Now we're working on this partnership around lethal means and we're working with the gun rights groups and with the pharmacies, and so we are working on some next steps around ways of making it known in the community. We're training gun stores and gun ranges around the signs of suicide, and we've reached out to the VA and other groups. So we'll be doing some additional work in this area about how these partnerships can really be strengthened to get that

word out, because again, if people know the signs and symptoms and they know the resources, they can reach out for help.

Gene: So what haven't I asked you, Representative Orwall, that's important that you think other legislators, legislative staff across the country need to know about veterans' issues and what you're going to be working on?

Tina: You know, I think the important thing is this is really a bipartisan issue and we really come together in a way to support each other. We have so many men and women returning and transitioning that I can't imagine a more important time to really look at this issue and have the voices of the veterans.

One of the things we do is we tour the different bases and we learn what's going on. Again, when we're down in San Diego, we'll be looking at the naval station. So, again, I think it's a combination of sharing best practices; kind of also seeing what's going on in our communities. There's really no substitute for that kind of tour and discussion. So, again, I think it's an incredible resource to legislators.

Gene: Okay. So we've been talking with Representative Tina Orwall from the Washington State House of Representatives, who is co-chair of the National Military and Veterans Task force. Representative Orwall, thank you for being part of this program.

Tina: Thank you for having me.

Music and Gene VO:

And that concludes this edition of Our American States. We invite you to subscribe to this podcast on iTunes and Google Play. Until our next episode, this is Gene Rose for the National Conference of State Legislatures. Thanks for listening.