

NCSL Task Force on Military and Veterans Affairs

2015 Spring Executive Committee Meeting – Denver, Colorado

Westin Downtown Denver Hotel

Friday, June 5 | 8 a.m.-5 p.m.

U.S. Department of Defense Program Updates

Speaker: Kristin Thomasgard-Spence, program director, DoD REPI Program

- Presentation focused on the [Sentinel Landscapes Partnership](#), a new federal, state and local initiative to protect working lands, preserve wildlife habitat and sustain military readiness by focusing on places where these priorities overlap. State engagement is a primary objective.
 - Minnesota enacted first sentinel landscape legislation in May 2015. [House Bill 283](#) establishes a coordinating committee to identify lands around Camp Ripley that meet the criteria of a sentinel landscape. Identifying land boundaries will help direct federal resources and allow the state to nominate lands for federal designation.
- REPI Program is developing state fact sheets to highlight the military impact and REPI's accomplishments in each of the 27 states where a project has been completed. Thomasgard-Spence asked task force members for recommendations on data to include in the fact sheets.

Potential Impacts From Defense Budget Cuts and Available Resources

Speaker: Gary Willis, program lead, DoD Office of Economic Adjustment

- Defense budget has decreased 25 percent from FY10-FY15.
- DoD [Office of Economic Adjustment](#) (OEA) is the primary responder to changes in the defense budget/industry that affect states and communities.
- Though a future BRAC round is possible, sequestration is the immediate concern.
 - Impact on subcontractor employment will be greater than primary contractor employment, yet often overlooked because many states do not know who their contractors are (ex. screws, buttons).
 - OEA (through Defense Industry Adjustment Program) can help identify contractors in a state as far down the chain as possible.
- Army Force Structure Reductions (560,000 soldiers to 420,000)
 - Army has released a list of installations where cuts will be made. A final announcement is expected in the coming months.
 - What will the civilian impact be? Unknown at this point.
 - OEA is developing a specific program to respond and help states.

Speaker: Jay Lindell, Colorado Aerospace and Defense Industry champion

- Described nature of Colorado's growing aerospace economy. 400+ companies, 84 percent of which are small businesses. Fourth in nation in NASA funding.
- State [study](#) on economic impact of military presence just released. Defense is the third largest sector in the state with \$27 billion total state production derived from defense expenditures.
- Colorado is not immune to defense drawdowns. Lindell meets regularly with Colorado's congressional delegation and state legislators to promote the value of defense and significant impact to the economy.

Veterans Employment Issues

Speaker: Marion Cain, associate director, Training Readiness and Strategy, Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense (Readiness)

- Tremendous number of service members returning to civilian life (FY14 = 310,000).
- DoD began actively engaging state and local official on licensing and credentialing issues 2012-13.
 - 30+ states now accept military education, training and experience toward EMT and nurse licensure.
 - All 50 states now waive skills test for military drivers toward CDL.
 - Currently working with states to implement/refine laws, raise awareness about eligibility for licensure and improve partnering with states and community colleges to aid transitioning service members.
- [DoD SkillBridge](#) Program allows service members to participate in civilian training, apprenticeship, and internship programs starting up to six months *before* separation.

Connecting Veterans to Careers in Agriculture

Speaker: James McCormick, director, West Virginia Veterans and Warriors to Agriculture Program

- West Virginia enacted legislation in 2014 ([SB 469](#)) creating the West Virginia [Veterans and Warriors to Agriculture](#) Program, the first state in the nation to do so. The goal is to assist veterans in the transition to civilian life through education on farming, beekeeping and business practices. The program leases state land to veterans at affordable prices and provides marketing assistance for their products. The program also helps veterans with PTSD and TBI readjust and heal through agriculture therapy.
- More than 250 veterans have graduated from the program or are currently in training. 105 are operating small farms and 80 are producing honey. Incarcerated veterans are also involved.

Speaker: Rich Murphy, program manager, Veterans to Farmers, Denver

- The organization [Veterans to Farmers](#) trains veterans to run greenhouses.
- Many returning veterans do not wish to continue the occupation they learned in the military, especially for those dealing with PTSD and other disabilities.
- “Therapy is in the field”

Open Dialogue with Colorado’s Adjutant General

Speaker: Maj. Gen. H. Michael Edwards, adjutant general of Colorado

- Responsible for the command administration of more than 5,000 Army and Air National Guard members, serves as the executive director of the Department of Military and Veterans Affairs and is a member of the governor’s cabinet.
- Has responsibility for the Colorado National Guard’s primary missions of national defense and state emergency response as well as supporting the missions of the Civil Air Patrol’s Colorado Wing, consisting of more than 2,500 volunteers.
- Takes pride in working with Colorado’s state legislators and stressed the importance of relationships.
- Colorado has five state veterans’ nursing homes that are under the direction of the Colorado Department of Human Services.
- The Colorado Board of Veterans Affairs, under the Colorado Division of Veterans Affairs, provides \$1 million each year in grant funding.
- Current restructuring issues for the Army are unfortunate and noted the Air Force went through them in 2012.
- Hope the Army and National Guard could come together in consideration of the budget.
- Colorado doesn’t have a Commander’s Council, but the Army and Air Guard conduct general officers meetings with approximately seven people in attendance.

Arts and the Military

Speaker: Jay Dick, senior director, State and Local Government Affairs, Americans for the Arts

- National Initiative for Arts and Health in the Military advances the arts in health, healing, and health care for military service members, veterans, their families and caregivers.
- Research and proven results that veterans engaging in gardening, visual arts, music, symbolism, mindful breathing and expressive writing provide for a stronger well-being for veterans.
- Engaging in the arts can relieve stress, increase self-esteem, improve health, and minimize anxiety and PTSD symptoms, depression and loneliness.
- Have conducted cross-sector dialogue since 2011, including three national summits on arts, health and wellness.
- Key 2015 activities include: 1. 2015 National Summit: Advancing Research in the Arts for Health and Well-Being across the Military Continuum at NIH (Feb.) 2. MOAs with the VA and VHA. 3. American Legion Auxiliary Statement of Collaboration 4. “Arts Deployed” Guide and Webinar Series 5. VA Healthcare Practitioner Training Pilot Project in Lyons, NJ (March) 6. National Veterans Creative Arts Festival, Durham, N.C. (Oct.) 7. National Directory

State Services for Veterans

Speaker: Ben Mestas, director, Colorado Division of Veterans Affairs

- The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs divides its shared missions among three organizations to create a dynamic partnership that includes: 1. [Veterans Health Administration \(VHA\)](#) manages one of the largest healthcare systems in the world. 2. [Veteran Benefits Administration \(VBA\)](#) supplies compensation and vocational assistance to disabled

veterans. 3. [National Cemetery Administration \(NCA\)](#), honors veterans with a final resting place and lasting memorials that commemorate their service.

- 415,000 veterans live and work in Colorado.
- State benefits offered to veterans include a Colorado Property Tax Exemption designed to eliminate up to the first half of the assessed value for homes valued up to \$200,000. 100 percent permanent and totally disabled veterans qualify.
- Disabled veteran handicap plate for individuals rated 50 percent or greater and a physical impairment verified by a physician. This must be a mobility disability and this is at no cost to the veteran. Other specialized license plates are also available for a small fee.
- Seventy-nine state and county one-stop workforce centers; 31 full time Disabled Veteran Outreach Program (DVOP); and six full-time Local Veteran Employee Specialists (LVER) assigned to workforce regions throughout state.
- Veterans Trust Fund for fiscal year 2014 was \$836,000 and currently being used for items such as transportation, including vehicle purchases, homeless stand downs, veteran employment programs, grocery, rent and utility assistance.
- Veterans Assistance Grant targets 501c3 organizations and government entities with \$970,000 used for access to health, counseling, homeless and job training.

Service Dogs and Military Veterans

Speaker: Lynette Legoski, treasurer, Wings-and-Warriors, Florissant, CO

Speakers: Sarah Sarni and Kristie Morales, Canines Providing Assistance to Wounded Warriors (C-PAWW), University of Colorado-Denver

- C-PAWW was founded in October 2013 by Director Cheryl Krause-Parello, associate professor, University of Colorado College of Nursing.
- C-PAWW's organizational mission is to advance the standards of care for veterans through: interdisciplinary research, education and practice through the development of evidence-based and restorative interventions; support of military-related health initiatives via community partnerships; investigation of therapeutic interventions that positively influence outcomes; and emphasizing system planning and protocols of care development for the armed forces.
- Primary interests and causes include veterans and animal-assisted intervention, invisible wounds like Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), and suicide prevention in veteran populations.
- Conducted a study that focused on what psychosocial factors influence the need for a service dog and to learn about the support service dogs provide for veterans with invisible wounds. Preliminary analysis said service dogs are a protective mechanism against suicidal behavior, allowed some veterans to cease taking medications for depression/anxiety, and protected against other maladaptive behavior (e.g. substance abuse).
- Implications and results substantiated the positive impact that service dogs provide for veterans include: call to action for change in public policy; service dogs as a reimbursable medical expense; financial barriers; long waiting list of two years for service dogs; veterans experience a 50 percent higher mortality rate from suicide than civilians – 22 veterans die each day.
- Adoption of war dogs and need for trainers and civilians to participate.
- Both groups rely on donations and sponsors.