

Brief Summary of NCSL Military and Veterans Affiants Tour and Meeting December 7-8, 2015

On Pearl Harbor Day, members of the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) Task Force on Military and Veterans Affairs received a behind-the-scenes tour of Marine Corps Base Quantico outside of Washington, D.C. Quantico covers 86 square miles and is home to The Basic School which trains all commissioned and appointed Marine Corps officers. NCSL tour participants learned about the approach of The Basic School which includes a focus on building exemplary character; leading 24/7; deciding communicating and acting in the fog of war; embracing a warrior ethos; and being mentally strong and physically tough.

The NCSL group received a briefing from the pilots of the Presidential Helicopter Squadron also known as HMX-1. The elite group of pilots flies the president, vice-president and other dignitaries in Marine One to locales in this nation and across the world as needed.



NCSL Military and Veterans Affairs Task Force members inspecting an MV-22B Osprey, in compact storage configuration, a tiltrotor aircraft used for transportation of troops, equipment and supplies from ships and land bases for combat assault.

A special briefing was given on efforts by Quantico community plans and liaison officer to preserve buffer around the installation through the Readiness and Environmental Protection Integration (REPI) program at the Department of Defense (DoD).

The group also saw a demonstration by instructors in the Marine Corps Martial Arts Program. It focuses on the “personal development of each Marine in a team framework using a standardized, trainable, and sustainable close combat fighting system” combining martial arts from a variety of disciplines and incorporating the use of weapons and tactics used on the modern battlefield. The groups also learned about the Marine Raiders, an early special operations unit created during World War II.

The tour closed with a visit to the National Museum of the Marine Corps, established in 2006, adjacent to Quantico. The soaring design evokes the flag raising at Iwo Jima and inside is a vivid rendering of the history of the U.S. Marines.



On December 8, back in the meeting room, the task force heard from representatives of numerous programs designed to help veterans better transition back to civilian life after deployment.

Programs described included the “Transition to Veterans” Program at the DoD designed to make veterans “career-ready,” efforts of the American Council on Education to help translate service member training and military education into college and university credits, new research on a new metric of heart rate variance to assist spouses and children of veterans with mental health issues, and the use of service dogs to help veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder.

Mr. John Conger, currently performing the duties of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Energy, Installations and Environment spoke about the tough budget climate for DoD and the \$17 billion shortfall they are facing. He said that the REPI program is an exemplar of leveraging the funding of many parties to create needed buffers around military installations. He said that many interests can be served through this program including DoD’s need for buffer, environmentalists who want to preserve threatened species, and local and state governments and conservation groups who want to preserve open space. He made a plea for pragmatism in finding solutions to our mutual problems in light of the tight funding environment.

Other Department of Defense speakers including Frank DiGiovanni, the Director of Force Readiness and Training who described the DoD Skill Bridge program (see <http://www.dodskillbridge.com/>) which links transitioning service members with civilian training opportunities. Marcus Beauregard with the Military Community and Family Policy Office of DoD explained their priorities for 2016 which relate to private sector hiring preference for veterans, reporting of child abuse, establishing veteran treatment courts, and National Guard employment protections during state activation.

Captain Jason Haag with the American Humane Association spoke of issues related to the use of service dogs by military veterans including the need to weed out fake service dogs, establishing laws to make

service dog access legitimate everywhere and the creation of a scientifically-based study to prove the efficacy of service dogs in alleviating PTSD. He proposes that a service dog license be created to assist in making the unfettered access by service dogs to business establishments more routine. Senator Bryce Reeves of Virginia will be introducing a bill for this purpose in 2016.

A panel addressed employment of veterans with disabilities and programs to support them through federal efforts and through business associations and individual companies. Included is a state-focused effort by the U.S Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment called the State Exchange on Employment and Disability (SEED) of which NCSL is involved. Also explained were the efforts of the U.S. Business Leadership Network which works with employers on employing people with disabilities and the particular efforts by Northrup Grumman.

The final briefing was on the Army Soldier for Life Program that assists in reintegrating separating service members with community life.

Interests and efforts of task force members include Yellow Ribbon programs, honorable burial for indigent veterans, preventing military installation encroachment, streamlining professional licensing of service members and spouses, and National Guard issues. Topics for future meetings include: veterans treatment courts, older veterans still needing services, veteran homelessness, dishonorable discharges and issues related to state benefits criteria, the post 9/11 GI bill, recent activities of the U.S Department of Veterans Affairs, and National Guard budgets.