

Vets face a tough decision

In sour economy, some ask: Get more education or go back to Iraq?

BY RAYMOND RENDLEMAN

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Time is running out for the more than 2,700 members of Oregon's 41st Infantry Brigade who might want unemployment benefits this summer. Thousands kicked off the summer by attending the **Yellow Ribbon Career and Benefit Fair at Clackamas Community College**, but the dog days of August mark their 90-day expiration for deciding whether to accept veteran unemployment claims or go back into the Army.

"We don't want the government to be their sole support system, when they can get back to work or go to school," said retired Col. Scott McCrae, director of the Oregon National Guard Reintegration team. "Soldiers have gotten a chance to settle and get back to their families, so the timing is right at this 90-to-100-day mark."

The last time public support of returning vets has been this high was probably in 1945, but the post-war economy looked a bit better that last time a group as large as the 41st was demobilized. In spite of strong supporters, local veteran advocates have found motivation and funding to be more difficult to come by.

"It's really neat that folks are getting behind returning veterans," said Spc. Cory Grogan, public affairs coordinator for the 41st Brigade. "There are people that want to help, and there are a lot of influential people trying to make sure they're supported."

Over 100 employers joined Sen. Ron Wyden (D-Ore.) and Team Clackamas, which included County Commissioner Jim Bernard and Bill Zuelke, the dean of students at CCC, at the career fair earlier this summer. "Having even one soldier not able to find a job is too much," Wyden said.

But the high-profile support doesn't always translate into jobs and money for veterans.

- Walsh Construction was one of the employers featured at the CCC event, and its booth in front of the job fair building generated interest from dozens of veterans attending. However, only two 41st veterans applied to work at the company, according to recruiter Anna Yates, who said that neither of the candidates were hired due to stringent requirements set by unions that work through the company.

- The federal government also cut a grant from \$750,000 to \$500,000 this year for local employers to get paid back for veteran hires during their first six months of on-the-job training, according to Maureen Thompson, director of Hire Oregon Veterans and Community Solutions for Clackamas County. The six-county, Portland-metro program used to be statewide for subsidizing new hires, their vocational training and their rent, if they are close to homeless.

“Trucking school is still really popular because veterans like to get to work in isolation,” Thompson said.

- The other issue is that some veterans don't necessarily want to get “on the road” to employment. To determine motivations and stresses of returning soldiers, the military's reintegration team contracted a recent web-based study through Oregon survey company i-OP, Inc.

Of 557 returning soldiers interviewed, 60 percent planned to go to school, get unemployment benefits or had no plan. Another 18 percent planned to return to their old jobs. Of those who said they would seek benefits, 69 percent said that they would stay on unemployment for up to 90 days.

“Reintegrating these warriors back into society would be a challenge in any circumstances, but this is also the worst economy since WWII,” the survey said.

More than 70 percent of the veterans surveyed had only received a high-school education or one of its equivalents.

A father of four children, Grogan considers himself to be successfully making the transition, although, like many veterans he knows, he's found it difficult to manage multi-tasking several different jobs lately. In addition to public affairs work with Oregon National Guard, he works as a teacher at Cascade Heights Public Charter School, and he took a part-time job to supplement his income at DeVry University, teaching an online class.

“I've had to put a lot time into managing my civilian life, so I certainly don't always get all the sleep I would like,” he said. “While not all veterans may be A-plus employees, with their military experience, they have the discipline and grace-under-pressure skills that make them perfect for many types of jobs.”

Lawrence Burnham returned from a tour with the 41st unsure as to whether to go to school or try to advance in the Army. By the end of the summer, he hopes to decide whether to join the ROTC or explore the educational opportunities at a community college. He considered the possibilities at the CCC job fair before deciding that entering the civilian workforce wasn't his thing.

“Becoming an officer is what I came into the Army for, but some general studies would help me get a grasp of what I really want to do long-term,” Burnham said.

Greg Myers, the Clackamas Community College veterans' affairs coordinator, counted 206 veterans using GI Bill benefits in the spring term, and he expects even more to enroll for the fall. That 206 number is an underestimate, because many veterans choose to take classes without accessing the GI Bill.

Burnham's wife, who works with the Oregon Community College Student Association to lobby for public school funding, is happy to let her husband go back to the Army.

“If you can survive the lifestyle and the stresses that come with it, more power to you,” said Michelle Lanteigne, OCCSA organizer.

“The natural reaction for an Army wife is to freak out a little bit,” Lanteigne said, “but as long I can go to law school, my husband can do whatever he likes.”

Grogan noted that the reintegration process is different for everybody. “But having a good support system is important for everyone,” he said. “Now that you get home and there's a lot of things going on, it's easier to get really busy with work so you don't have to think about deployment as much.”

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