



American Employers Recognized for Patriotism

by **James David Dickson** (more by this author)

Posted 09/23/2008 ET

Deployment to the battlefield is the gravest and most important form of national service. But as the country learned during Vietnam, the most important battles are often fought on the home front. Troops who are preoccupied with whether the grass is getting cut or if the bills are being paid can't give their focus to the task at hand. This puts their entire unit at risk and lives at stake.

That doesn't make it any less understandable. Deployed for up to 18 months at a time in strange, hostile lands, it is natural for a soldier's thoughts to revert to home and family.

But the one thing the troops don't have to worry about is whether their jobs will be there waiting for them when they return from battle.

In 1994, President Clinton signed the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act into law. USERRA guarantees that deployed troops who follow proper employer notification procedures have their jobs waiting for them upon return. Employers who violate USERRA are in hot water with the Department of Labor.

Peace of mind is the most important gift that can be granted our deployed troops. The Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve (ESGR) was founded in 1972, in the midst of the Vietnam War, to speak on behalf of deployed troops and act as a liaison to their employers. ESGR satellites in each state to explain to local employers their duties under USERRA and mediate disputes between servicemen and their employers.

There are no minimum standards for participation in the ESGR. "All we need from employers," beyond following the law of the land, "is to know that they support our

troops,” said ESGR’s Lt. Col. Michelle Barrett. “This means anything from saying a simple ‘we support you’ to keeping in touch with the serviceman’s family, to sending things like flashlights and kneepads for the troops to use. All of this makes a tremendous impact.”

The Department of Defense’s Freedom Award was instituted in 1996 by then-Secretary of Defense William Perry as a “thank you” to employers who went above and beyond in supporting troops leaving the workplace to defend America. As Perry said at the time, “the Freedom Award was established to recognize the sacrifices, and to honor those companies who have really gone the extra mile.” Perry understood that the Reserve Component of the military would only grow in importance. Today, roughly half of the military’s manpower comes in the form of reserves or the National Guard.

Nomination from a once-or-still deployed serviceman is the only way to merit consideration for the Freedom Award. This year just under 2,200 employers were nominated. 15 awards were granted to employers ranging from school districts to large corporations to municipalities to fire departments.

If USERRA is the Department of Defense’s stick to mandate compliance with troop-leave laws, then the Freedom Award is the carrot to encourage employers to actively support the deployments of their charges.

The Oakland County Sheriff’s Office (MI) is one such employer. From the start of his tenure in 1999, Sheriff Mike Bouchard has made it a priority to recruit former soldiers and current reservists. Bouchard makes no secret of his preference for recruiting military men to serve as his sheriffs.

“[Former troops and reservists] bring with them a character that’s unparalleled -- the character required for military service. They bring a unique understanding of the world and leadership ability from the first,” Bouchard says. “They are a known and proven commodity” whose learning curve is usually much flatter than that of civilians.

Approximately 40 of Bouchard’s 900 sheriffs have been or currently are deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan. But for all the adjustments their families will have to make,

getting by without dad's income isn't one of them. If a soldier's battlefield service pays less than the Sheriff's Office, the office provides differential pay to cover the gap. Benefits and healthcare plans continue unaffected.

But it is the human touch that makes the office's efforts special. Bouchard has sent laptops to troops trying to keep in contact with their families. Whenever the sheriff is in Washington, D.C., he makes it a point to visit the Sheriff's Office's Wounded Warriors at the Walter Reed Army Medical Center. The Sheriff's Office has also held fundraisers to cover things insurance plans do not, such as like modifications to the homes of sheriffs partially or wholly immobilized during their service.

When a drug raid turned up hundreds of unused cigars, the Sheriff's Office, rather than having them destroyed, or preserved as evidence until they turned brittle, sent them to his men on the battlefield. They proved such a big hit among the troops that three different cigar companies -- Jenuwine Quality Fresh Cigars, Altadis U.S.A., and General Cigars -- approached Bouchard to make the shipments a regular occurrence. It is an arrangement that Bouchard's men, and their respective units, appreciate greatly.

"Whatever they need, we try to provide," Bouchard says. "I tell my kids all the time: the sacrifice of those troops is the only reason we can experience freedom. They're giving everything they've got. The least we can do is lend a hand."

List of 2008 Employer Support Freedom Award Recipients:

Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma -- Durant, Okla.
Chrysler LLC -- Auburn Hills, Mich.
City of Austin -- Austin, Texas
Coastal Windows, Inc. -- Waipahu, Hawaii
Dominion Resources, Inc. -- Richmond, Va.
Jersey City Fire Department -- Jersey City, N.J.
Lochinvar Corporation -- Lebanon, Tenn.
Oakland County Sheriff's Office -- Pontiac, Mich.
Oshkosh Corporation -- Oshkosh, Wis.
Regional Emergency Medical Services Authority -- Reno, Nev.
Robinson Transport, Inc. -- Salina, Utah

State Farm Mutual Automobile Insurance Co. -- Bloomington, Ill.

Union Pacific Corporation -- Omaha, Neb.

Winner School District -- Winner, S.D.

Womble Carlyle Sandridge & Rice, PLLC. -- Winston-Salem, N.C.

James David Dickson is the Collegiate Network Fellow at The American Spectator.

[Advertise](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms and Conditions](#)
Copyright © 2008 HUMAN EVENTS. All Rights Reserved.