

ESGR – Helping employers understand

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With nearly half of our military force in the Reserve Component, our nation depends upon the Guard and Reserve for national security. Guard and Reserve servicemembers are a resource shared between the Department of Defense and civilian employers. Splitting time between two employers creates a unique set of challenges, so Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve (ESGR) was established in 1972 to respond to those challenges.

ESGR, a Department of Defense organization under the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Reserve Affairs, operates programs designed to assist U.S. employers and employees in understanding the role of servicemembers. ESGR strives continuously to promote and preserve the support of American employers for our shared resource by focusing on three mission areas: recognition, information and mediation.

The first mission area, recognition, involves acknowledging employers supporting Guard and Reserve servicemembers. Proactively recognizing outstanding employers goes a long way towards promoting a positive relationship and ensuring future support. The first line of recognition is initiated by the servicemember. Guard and Reserve servicemembers can show appreciation for supportive employers by nominating a supervisor for a Patriot Award, a free and easy way to say thank you (nominate your supervisor today at www.esgr.mil).

Many employers take things further by providing benefits and pay beyond what the law requires while a military employee is activated. In 1996, the Secretary of Defense Employer Support Freedom Award was created to acknowledge these outstanding contributions. Celebrating its 15th year in 2010, the Freedom Award honored 15 employers from across small, large and public sector employers. Nominations for the Freedom Award are accepted at www.freedomaward.mil.

In addition to recognizing employers, ESGR devotes a large amount of time to informing servicemembers and employers of the law. ESGR works through a nationwide network of volunteers and a small, full-time support staff to inform and educate hundreds of thousands of Reserve Component members and their employers regarding their

rights and responsibilities under the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act (USERRA), and to develop and maintain relationships with employers.

USERRA provides job protection and rights of reinstatement to employees who participate in the Guard and Reserve. At the end of 2009, all Guard and Reserve servicemembers were mailed a brochure from ESGR covering these rights and responsibilities. In a nut shell, it is the servicemembers' responsibility to provide prior notice to employer before performing military service, serve under honorable conditions, and return to work in accordance with USERRA guidelines. Your rights include military leave of absence, prompt reinstatement, accumulation of seniority, reinstatement of benefits, training or retraining of skills, and protection against discrimination.

ESGR also encourages development of employer policies and practices to facilitate employee participation in the Reserve Components.

Employer outreach programs conducted by ESGR promote understanding of Guard and Reserve service; encourage human resource policies and practices favorable to Guard and Reserve service; and encourage "above and beyond" benefits exceeding USERRA requirements. The employer outreach programs range from employer gatherings hosted by ESGR volunteers to symbolic gestures of support. Three programs fostering positive relationships between employers and their Reserve Component military employees include:

- * **Bosslifts** – Employers are transported, via military aircraft, to military facilities where they observe Guard and Reserve members on duty.

- * **Briefing with the Boss** – Brings together employers, unit commanders, ESGR volunteers and community leaders to discuss issues related to service in the Guard and Reserve.

- * **Statement of Support Signings** – By signing a Statement of Support for the Guard and Reserve, an employer demonstrates an understanding of the importance of military service. It also sends a clear message to employees who serve in the military that they don't have to worry about their civilian jobs.

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Finally, ESGR utilizes mediation to assist servicemembers and employers when issues arise pertaining to USERRA. Servicemembers have at their disposal hundreds of trained Ombudsmen, in every state and US territory, who provide free and neutral mediation to try and resolve disputes over potential USERRA violations. The trained volunteers conducting mediation are dedicated to working with the servicemember and employers in seeking resolution. When mediation does not result in resolution, Guard and Reserve servicemembers may seek additional assistance from the Department of Labor, via the

Veterans' Employment and Training Branch – the enforcement authority for USERRA, or by hiring a private attorney.

Despite the tremendous strides gained by ESGR in all three areas, an enormous task remains. The employer and servicemember populations are in a constant state of flux due to Guard and Reserve recruitment, labor mobility and a dynamic business environment. ESGR must constantly review programs and initiatives to stay current and maximize opportunities to engage with both employers and servicemembers. One way ESGR has

adapted to the current environment is by jumping into the social media scene, via Facebook and Twitter (www.twitter.com/ESGR). These new avenues of communication open up the opportunity for ESGR to reach more employers and servicemembers, paving the way for continued service in the Guard and Reserve while maintaining jobs back in the local community.

For more information on ESGR, USERRA or volunteer opportunities within ESGR, please visit their Web site at www.esgr.mil or call 1-800-336-4590. ⚓