

COMING HOME

Troops returning from overseas and veterans are getting a hand from states in finding jobs, justice and the support they deserve.

BY JAMES B. REED

There are 2.3 million veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. Tens of thousands of additional troops are now returning home as the American presence in both countries winds down.

This homecoming is a challenge to vets, service members and society for several reasons. The number of people suffering psychological trauma from the current wars has skyrocketed, and not all those coming home know about or make use of the benefits to which they are entitled.

At the same time, hefty cuts are looming for the U.S. defense budget over the next several years. State and local governments will feel the pain.

States and communities are gearing up to meet the needs of this growing veteran community. At the same time, state lawmakers are working to protect existing military installations from development and incompatible land uses that could cause the military to pack up and leave.

Various federal agencies are primarily responsible for the post-deployment needs of returning service members and veterans, particularly providing health care and mental health benefits. States, however, have an increasingly important role, providing services that range from education benefits to unemployment compensation, and also granting waivers from taxes and fees for a variety of services.

Lawmakers passed nearly 300 bills in 2011 to help veterans, adding to the 225 enacted in 2010. So far this year, several hun-

dred bills have been introduced aimed at helping vets and active members of the military.

In Texas, Representative Dan Flynn (R), chair of the Military Caucus, is emphatic about stepping up the state effort. "I'm working to ensure the maximum effort is made to give troops returning home the support they need as they reintegrate into daily life," Flynn says.



*Representative
Dan Flynn
Texas (R)*

By the Numbers

120,000

Troops returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, 2008-2012

300,000

Estimate of troops demonstrating post-traumatic stress disorder since 2001

2.3 MILLION

Veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan

321

Military bases in the United States

22 MILLION

Acres owned by the Department of Defense

He introduced successful legislation last session to strengthen the right to re-employment for members of the military forces of Texas or any other state upon return from authorized duty. Numerous states offer employment protection for deployed National Guard members, mirroring or strengthening the federal Uniformed Services Employment and Re-Employment Rights Act of 1994, which protects the civilian jobs of those deployed. A new trend is to give tax credits to employers who hire veterans. Developing call centers for transportation assistance and providing free or reduced fares for veterans who are using public transportation are increasingly common, as well.

The list goes on:

- ◆ Foreclosure protection.
- ◆ Income tax reductions, credits or exemptions.
- ◆ Reduced college tuition.
- ◆ Waivers from certain fees and taxes, such as state parks admission or special license plates.
- ◆ Residential property tax exemptions for disabled veterans.
- ◆ Free or reduced fees for hunting and fishing licenses.

Employment Is Key

All levels of government are looking to ease the transition to civilian employment for those returning from Iraq and Afghanistan.

James B. Reed serves as staff liaison to the NCSL Task Force on Military and Veterans' Affairs.

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Representative Dan Flynn (R), Texas



Several federal agencies not only pay for job training and placement, but also give veterans preference in obtaining small business loans. The Obama administration has proposed a Veterans Job Corps to employ veterans to do conservation work on public lands. Washington state created such a program in 2005. States are examining a variety of approaches not only for vets, but also for spouses who have had to move frequently over the years, imperiling their professional licenses as they move between states.

For veterans, several states now require licensing boards to accept military education, training and experience to fulfill requirements in a variety of fields where the training is comparable. Colorado, Kentucky, Utah, Virginia, and Washington have

adopted this approach recently.

Military spouses in Alaska, Arizona, Colorado, Florida, Kansas, Kentucky, Missouri, Montana, Tennessee, Texas, Utah and Washington can obtain temporary licenses while they complete requirements, receive reciprocity for their credentials from another state, or take advantage of expedited procedures to replace their license from another state. Lawmakers in 15 more states have introduced similar legislation this year.

“It’s about recognizing the contribution service members make to the community, especially those in the National Guard,” says Kansas Representative John Grange (R).

Another option is to give employers tax credits for hiring veterans. Vermont passed legislation in 2011, and 15 states—



*Representative
John Grange
Kansas (R)*

NCSL Task Force on Military and Veterans' Affairs

Lawmakers from around the country are serving on NCSL's Task Force on Military and Veterans Affairs and studying military-community relations and the health and well-being of veterans.

Formed in 2007, the task force has been promoting a greater understanding of the roles state legislators, local government officials, land conservation organizations and the military play in managing development near military bases, while protecting natural resources and the health and safety of citizens.

Among the issues covered by the task force are military-community partnerships to respond to mission change; veteran hiring and procurement preferences; mental health, substance abuse and family issues facing returning veterans; and benefits for military personnel, veterans and their dependents.

The task force lets lawmakers share the best ideas and innovations concerning the role legislatures play in assisting military service members and veterans and in working with military installations concerning the large variety of issues that cross jurisdictional lines.

Alaska, California, Hawaii, Iowa, Indiana, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Virginia and Wisconsin—and the District of Columbia are considering similar bills this year.

Justice Reconsidered

Another issue of growing concern to state lawmakers is veterans who become caught up in the criminal justice system. Veterans are no more likely to be arrested than the general population, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics. But many end up facing criminal charges because of wartime psychological trauma that has led to mental illness and substance abuse.

Studies show traditional criminal justice proceedings often fail to meet the needs of veterans. A recent survey in Travis County, Texas,



for example, showed a majority of arrested veterans have not obtained Veterans' Administration or other benefits for which they qualify.

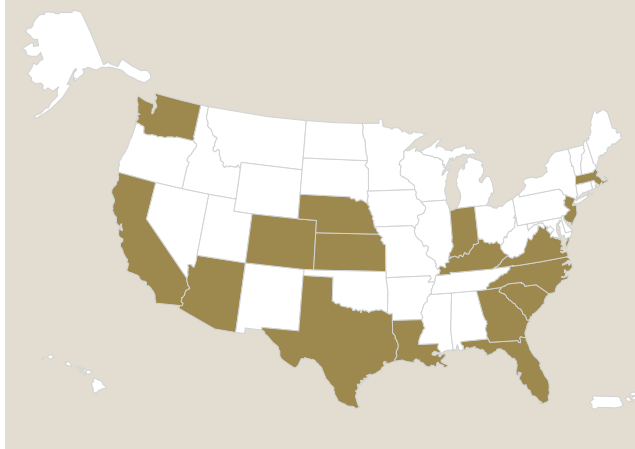
"A lot of returning young soldiers with problems are not aware of the services they are entitled to," says retired Air Force Chief Master Sergeant Rich Lindsey, lead peer mentor to returning war veterans at the Colorado Springs Veterans Trauma Court. The court ensures veteran defendants charged with lower level, nonviolent felonies, who also are diagnosed with service-related trauma spectrum disorder, receive treatment so they can get on with their lives.

"When we get them the services they need, it really changes these guys," Lindsey says.

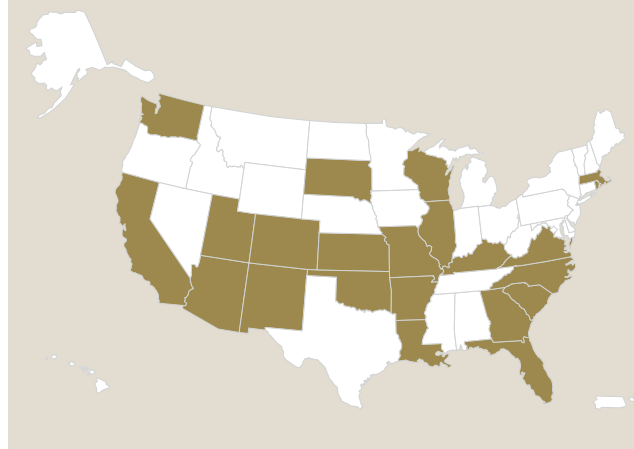
At least 70 courts like the one in Colorado Springs are operating in 26 states. Matt Stiner, a Marine veteran who helped start the Tulsa, Okla., veterans' treatment court, now serves as director of development and outreach for Justice for Vets, a group promoting these courts around the country.

"These courts offer veterans the opportunity to receive the benefits and services they have earned, while undergoing the treatment needed to be productive citizens," Stiner says. "They significantly

States that require notification to the military of any land use change near installations



States that require coordination with the military on land use planning near installations



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—Representative John Grange (R), Kansas



reduce criminal justice costs and break the costly cycle of addiction and crime.”

These courts are presided over by judges and staffed by people trained to identify a variety of post-battlefield ailments, such as post-traumatic stress disorder or traumatic brain injury that have been a factor in veterans’ legal violations. This is critical, since the incidence of PTSD and TBI is so much higher in the recent wars because of long, multiple deployments, coupled with the battlefield horrors such as seeing friends and innocent bystanders killed.

Advocates believe service members and veterans respond better in a system that recognizes, addresses and is sympathetic to their unique circumstances and needs and that metes out appropriate court-ordered treatment. Veterans’ treatment courts often team up with other veteran service groups, such as Disabled American Veterans, American Legion, United Service Organizations and Veterans of Foreign Wars.

Eleven states have created their own courts or diversion programs for vets. Courts are operating in many other states as well, under the auspices of local jurisdictions. Lawmakers in Hawaii, Michigan and

Protecting the Military’s Presence

Helping service men and women adjust to coming home also means ensuring there’s a place to come home to.

Lawmakers are concerned about encroaching development near military bases and installations that threaten the military’s ability to continue using these facilities. Dozens of state studies have documented the critical role of military facilities to state economies. Maryland, for example, attributes 118,000 jobs and a total economic impact of \$36 billion a year to the presence of 17 military facilities. Protecting installations from incompatible development is a paramount concern for states, particularly given the possibility of new base closings, which may consider “crowded” or encroached upon facilities more expendable.

Lawmakers have responded with a variety of policies.

- ◆ Requiring local governments and state agencies to communicate land use changes with military installations. (17 states)
- ◆ Creating open space areas around bases and separation between the base fence line and other land uses. (18 states)
- ◆ Coordinating land use planning with military officials to ensure greater compatibility with military installations. (22 states)
- ◆ Keeping public lighting at a low level to avoid “light pollution” that can interfere with military training. (14 states)

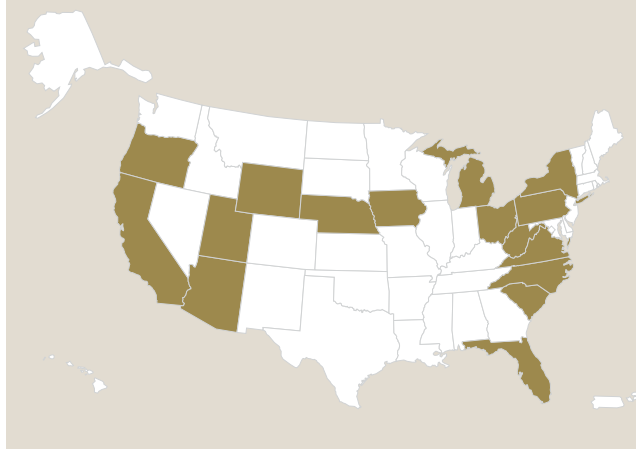
Last year, several states added to the list by enacting legislation to ensure a sustainable military presence.

Alabama established the Job Creation and Military Stability Commission to study how to ensure the stability of its military facilities. Texas now requires local governments to notify defense bases regarding land use changes. In times of a water shortage or emergency, Utah allows special priority for military facilities. Washington officials are now required to notify the Department of Defense when siting any new energy facilities.

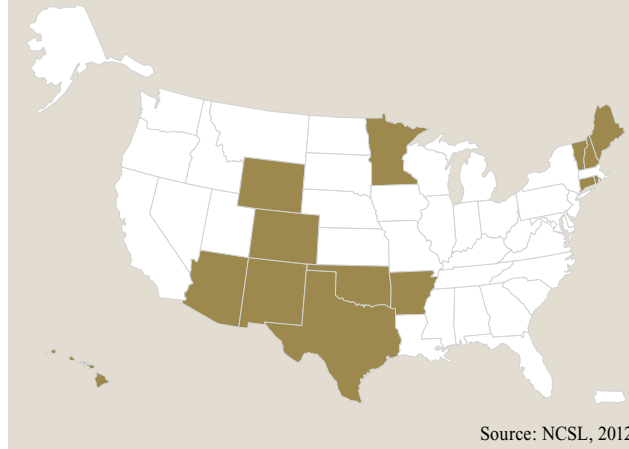
Missouri are considering bills this year to address veterans’ courts, while a New Jersey task force is studying the issue.

“When veterans return home with post-traumatic stress disorder and get in trouble with the law, they need fair judicial treatment,” says New Jersey Assemblymember Upendra Chivukula (D). “A task


States with funding to purchase property or development rights near installations



States with light pollution or dark skies requirements near installations



Source: NCSL, 2012



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force to study the best treatment for post-traumatic stress disorder is a great beginning.”

The courts also are efficient and can save money. “Grouping veterans into a single docket makes it feasible to involve the VA, veterans’ service organizations, and volunteer veteran mentors in every court session,” says Stiner. “They also help veterans receive disability compensation through the Veterans Benefit Administration, which helps to stabilize their lives and gives them some income.”

When it comes to getting help, veterans face a maze of options. Coordinating and consolidating services is a goal for many state lawmakers. In 2009, Texas lawmakers decided to pay for training and technology to help match veterans’ needs with available resources and to better coordinate services provided by the Department of State Health Services. That was combined with a grant program to local governments and charitable organizations to establish more seamless partnering of agencies to provide an array of needed services such as housing, legal assistance, counseling and employment help.

Maryland, New York, North Carolina and Oregon set up coordi-



Assemblymember
Upendra
Chivukula
New Jersey (D)

nated approaches to assisting veterans in 2011. The Oregon bill requires 11 state agencies to team up with the Oregon Military Department to provide reintegration services for veterans. Another example of coordination is a Maryland executive order that set up a Governor’s Warrior to Worker Council of state agencies to promote the highest quality services to veterans in the most accessible and efficient manner.

The work of legislatures to help veterans also is an expression of gratitude for the sacrifices made by those who have served, says Hawaii Representative Henry J.C. Aquino (D), who has supported several bills to aid veterans as chair of the Hawaii House Committee on Public Safety and Military Affairs.

“The goal is to assist veterans, active duty service members and families of those who protect our country’s freedom,” Aquino says.



Representative
Henry J.C.
Aquino
Hawaii (D)

SL ONLINE

Ed Kringer, state liaison with the Department of Defense, discusses efforts to work with states to improve the quality of life for service members and veterans at www.ncsl.org/magazine.