

Statement to the Commission on the National Guard and Reserves

The State of New Hampshire Department of Corrections May 17, 2007

In March of 2003 and again in March 2004, the Governor of New Hampshire issued executive orders allowing for “special leave with partial pay” for all employees of the State of New Hampshire who were called to active duty in response “to the conflict in Iraq.” When the March 2004 order expired in September 2005, another executive order was issued expanding the provision to, “full time active duty by the President of the United States, under my authority as Governor, or under the authority of another Governor who participates in the Emergency Management Assistance Compact...for the duration of such full-time active duty.” The proclamation also afforded the continuation of Medical and dental benefits. This executive order was signed into law as to New Hampshire Revised Statutes Annotated, Title VIII Public Defense and Veterans’ Affairs, Chapter 110-B: 37 Pay and Allowances, paragraph IV on June 13, 2006.

In January 2005, Commissioner Stephen Curry, (Brigadier General, Retired) assigned Employee Health Services (EHS) to represent the Department of Corrections (DOC) on the State’s “Operation Welcome Home” Committee and to serve as the Liaison with New Hampshire National Guard and the New Hampshire Committee of the Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve (ESGR).

“Operation Welcome Home” evolved from a previously established partnership with the NH National Guard and a number of state agencies, whose initial mission was to assist in obtaining services for the families during the absence of deployed personnel. That mission was then expanded to address the anticipated needs of the troops and their families as they returned home. The efforts of “Operation Welcome Home” served to create a virtual military community in the absence of traditional military bases/forts.

Members of the Committee first identified well-established resources throughout the state that would be immediately available to the returning veterans and their families. Among these resources were: a directory of a state-wide mental health network, the Vet Center Outreach Program, Family Assistance Centers, the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the Veterans Administration health services, and the New Hampshire Committee for the Employer Support for the Guard and Reserve (ESGR).

The Committee then identified the veterans’ “natural” support systems: family members, employers, health care providers, counselors, schools, clergy, and law enforcement. Sub-committees were formed and tasked to design various presentations and literature that would assist these community “natural helpers” as veterans and their families transitioned back into their communities.

NH Department of Corrections chaired Support for Employer’s Sub-committee whose other members included Linda Brewer from the State of New Hampshire Employee Assistance Program; COL Michael Horne from the New Hampshire Air National Guard; Ernest Loomis, Chairman and James Goss, Executive Director from the New Hampshire Committee of the ESGR; and Fred White from the New Hampshire Department of Safety. A Re-orientation Plan was designed to assist employers in facilitating the transition of re-deployed personnel to the workplace. The committee identified employers’ anticipated needs; provided guidance on how to establish and train a cadre to assist the returning veterans; developed and distributed a resource network with accompanying support

literature for the veterans, their employers and colleagues; and established guidelines for employers to construct their individualized action plans. The Re-orientation Plan prototype was presented as a model for employers throughout the state.

The DOC Re-orientation plan was designed to parallel some traditional military models. First, Sponsors were identified and assigned to each returning service member. Second, an in-processing method was designed to address administrative needs. And finally, because Citizen soldiers and reservists, unlike their active duty military brothers and sisters, are not entitled to have 30 days of paid permanent change of station leave when they return from overseas duty, during the first month back to work each employee usually assigned to a second or third shift was scheduled to work on first shift; all employees also had weekends off.

Sponsors, supervisors, administrators and human resources personnel attended a workshop based on the New Hampshire National Guard's Reunion and Re-entry Training Program. Employee Health Services presented a summary of "Operation Welcome Home," an outline of the DOC plan, an overview of the sponsors' roles and samples of brochures and other resource literature. Dr. Mark Gilbertson from the Veterans' Administration Medical Center in Manchester, NH conducted a class on adjustments necessary when returning from combat as well as some common behaviors exhibited during the transition process and recognizing signs that might warrant referral. Ernest Loomis and James Goss from the ESGR presented a history of the configuration of the nation's military force since the elimination of the draft, the mission of the Guard and Reserves and the role of the ESGR.

In anticipation of their return, each deployed staff member was sent a letter from Commissioner Curry saluting their service and welcoming them home. An outline of the DOC Re-orientation Program, the name of their sponsor and Employee Health Services contact information was sent along with the Commissioner's letter. The Commissioner, along with other DOC staff members, was present to greet each employee when they returned to New Hampshire. Independent of the DOC Plan, the New Hampshire State Police met each military convoy at the state border and provided an escort to the unit's welcoming facility.

The DOC Re-orientation Plan was implemented in two phases: Phase I, Departmental Re-orientation, began on their first day back to work. Staff first reported to DOC Headquarters where they met with the Commissioner, reviewed and updated their payroll and training records, received general information regarding departmental changes since deployment and met with EHS. Then staff reported to their respective facilities to begin Phase II, Divisional Re-orientation which continued for the remaining 30 days. Upon returning to the worksite they were welcomed by the Warden/Division Director, met with their Sponsor and the facility Human Resources Coordinator for an update on facility/divisional changes during deployment and arranged for necessary training/testing with the Training Coordinator.

Staffing the facilities and maintaining case loads in Field Services were the principal problems encountered during the 2004 deployment period. The structure of the state's human resources system does not provide a mechanism for temporary employment to replace deployed staff. Consequently, staff worked overtime, assumed extra duties and filled additional roles to provide ongoing services while maintaining the safety and security throughout the entire Corrections system.

Although all the returning troops were encouraged to take as much time as they needed before reporting to work, all but one staff member returned far sooner than the ninety (90) day period allotted by the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act; most did so because they

were unable to sustain a leave without pay status once they were released from military orders. Some of these employees experienced some readjustment issues that required intervention and utilization of the Family and Medical Leave Act.

Another difficulty for returning troops was the coordination of care for those on “medical hold.” Outpatient care was delivered throughout the northeast to include Ft. Dix, New Jersey, Ft. Drum, New York and Otis Air Force Base, Massachusetts. In some cases, because of the distance to the treatment facility, overnight stays away from family was necessary. The closest in-patient military medical facility is Walter Reed Medical Center. Once released from orders, it seemed that the coordination of care was not as cumbersome to manage.

To date the NH DOC there have been a total of 50 DOC staff members, assigned to more than 10 military units, deployed to Iraq since in 2003. Of these, 45 have returned; the remaining five DOC soldiers from the 3643rd Maintenance Battalion are still serving in Iraq with 324th MP Battalion. The deployment of more staff is expected in June 2007.

Acknowledgements:

The sustained assistance of Major General Kenneth Clark and his staff of the New Hampshire National Guard as well as the help from Mr. Loomis and Mr. Goss of the NH ESGR have been, and continue to be, essential to the success of “Operation Welcome Home” and the Department of Corrections Re-orientation Program; we cannot thank them enough.

NH DOC Commissioner Curry’s dynamic leadership by example, along with his enthusiastic participation in the establishment and implementation of the Re-orientation Program was pivotal in the education and involvement of staff members throughout the Department.

Respectfully submitted,
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