

KINS COMMUNITY COMMENT (442-5744)

This is Ron Pierre for Community Comment.

Last Thursday I attended the 17th Annual Freedom Awards presentations in Washington D.C. I was recently named the Department of Defense Employer Support of the Guard and Reserves Ombudsman of the Year, and one of the National honorees of the evening. Like most awards ceremonies I was impressed by the extraordinary efforts individuals will take to make differences in people's lives. Fifteen employers big and small were singled out as examples of outstanding support for American military personnel. These efforts are not mandated programs, but people looking out for each other one on one. As the California Ombudsman Director I am amazed nearly every day by the efforts of private individuals. The work place issues that have arisen vary location to location. It was interesting to discuss the mediation case load state to state and the increasing number of situations brought about by the depressed economy. On a National level, military reserve component forces have been in a deployment status since the end of the first Gulf War in the early 1990s. The burden on all our military people is shared also by the America business community and the fifteen Freedom Award honorees have gone above and beyond to support the military.

Here in California, our ombudsmen worked more cases than any other state. Last year we mediated about 300 cases, nearly one-tenth of the National cases... In talking to representatives from other locations, where the unemployment rates are lower, the problems and number of cases mediated were substantially smaller, and volunteers were talking about ombudsmen who haven't worked a mediation case in over six months. Here in California our work load is increasing. Volunteers each handle about 10 cases annually. In an era of pay or charge for everything, the benefit of informal professional mediators discussing work status with employers and returning service members saves the government and the Department of Labor millions annually in legal fees and investigations.

Probably the most significant issue in all California cases is the high unemployment rates because of restructuring of businesses. Many employers are changing the workforce job model from permanent positions to a part-time employee pool. As service members return from deployment, they face a situation

where their 40-hour job has changed to part-time. Hardest hit are the younger service members with young families or those individuals just starting careers. In some areas of California, the unemployment or under employment rates exceed 25 % of the workforce. When businesses restructure, the most significant elements that change in work status, are the health benefit and retirement plan of the part-time job. These employee benefits go away.

On numerous occasions over the past couple of years, I have also undertaken mediations involving service members who have experienced combat wounds or mental conditions like PTSD, that have produced barriers to re-employment with their former employers. In most cases when our volunteers handle a case we can mediate a positive solution to the situation.

In the end.....It's about making a difference at the individual to individual. The program succeeds because of volunteers not bureaucrats

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