

Group helps soldiers, employers make it through tours of duty

By Jennifer DeWitt, Quad-City Times | Thursday, June 28, 2007

It was April 2004 when Eric Rant was preparing to transfer to his employer's Atlanta, Ga., headquarters. He put up his Bettendorf house for sale on a Friday, and sold it in one hour. On Monday, he was due to fly to Atlanta to discuss the new job.

But over the weekend, his life got turned even more upside-down when the Iowa National Guard member was called up for deployment to Iraq. Suddenly without a home, a tour of duty on the horizon and unable to transfer to his new job, Rant faced a dilemma. But his employer, Rock-Tenn Co. in Clinton, Iowa, said "Do what you've got to do; we'll support you 100 percent," he recalled Wednesday. "Rock-Tenn, my boss, could have said 'Buddy, you're on your own.'"

Instead, the paper packaging manufacturer agreed to halt the transfer to Atlanta and move his family to Missouri, where other family members lived. Rock-Tenn also allowed Rant to miss seven weeks of work prior to his deployment for training. Upon his return from the military, the company gave him his exact job back, said Rant, who now is the plant/general manager of the Clinton plant.

Rock-Tenn was held up Wednesday as an example of an employer that went the extra mile in response to an employee's deployment. "The company was always trying to make the best decision," Rant told about 85 Quad-City representatives from about 50 companies at a seminar hosted by the Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve, or ESGR, and Iowa Workforce Development.

Held at the Best Western Steeplegate, Davenport, the seminar is part of a statewide effort to make employers — particularly human resources directors — aware of issues that may arise when employees are deployed or when they return to the work force.

"The employers' responsibility is to treat the returning military employees as if they never left," said Harry Cockrell, chairman of ESGR's Area 9, which includes Cedar, Clinton, Jackson, Jones, Muscatine and Scott counties.

That was a recurring theme as veterans' advocates, employers, and ESGR and Department of Labor officials discussed the laws protecting veterans as well as issues and challenges that may arise in the workplace.

Allan Enright, the Iowa ESGR's executive director, said the symposiums are being held throughout Iowa, particularly across the northeast part of the state where 600 soldiers are due back soon from Iraq. The 133rd Infantry Battalion, out of Waterloo, Iowa — which includes about 30 soldiers from Davenport — is expected to return in late July or early August after a two-year tour in Iraq.

"You are sharing with the military an employee or employees, and you are a key part of the Department of Defense of the whole country," Enright told the employers. He said that today, 50 percent of the military for the nation is in the National Guard and Reserves. With that many citizen soldiers, there is a ripple effect on the employers.

ESGR representative Heidi Schultz, who spent 14 years in the National Guard herself, now helps employers and citizen soldiers manage situations related to the military. Schultz, a partner in Management Resource Group, Davenport, reminded the employers that the soldier is "stuck in the middle, trying to balance it all."

Employers also got a glimpse into some of the resources available not only from ESGR but also agencies such as the Vet Center, which provides readjustment counseling for combat veterans. Nicki Butler of the Vet Center told the employers to recognize that as soldiers come back they

may suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. "A person who has been in combat for a year will experience things that are not normal in everyday life."

The center, located in Moline, helps veterans cope and deal such life-changing experiences. She encouraged the group to act if they believe their veteran is experiencing problems. "Talk to them, be supportive ... and talk to one another."

Rant, dressed in his National Guard uniform, offered the same advice as he presented a list of suggestions and issues "that are big to soldiers." On his list — and things his employer did right — include taking care of his family while he was deployed, and ensuring he would not take a cut in pay during his tour. "Most important is to have constant communication."

Soldiers also have their share of frustrations after they return, he added. After a year or more away, the soldier no longer has the same role in the family and both the soldier and family have changed, Rant said.

At work, the same soldier has "missed out on chapters" having lost that time at work. They also have feelings of lost opportunities. "They also have feelings of guilt for staying in the National Guard."

"If you have an employee out there, think about what they have to go through," he said.

"Know you have special men and women in your company ranks who literally will give everything away to serve their country," Rant said to a standing ovation.

FOR ASSISTANCE

Information on employer's rights and responsibilities is available by calling Allan Enright, executive director of Iowa's Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve group, at (515) 252-4192.

Jennifer DeWitt can be contacted at (563) 383-2318 or jdewitt@qctimes.com.