Training soldiers for the workforce, all year-round

BY MICHAEL C. JULIANO
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As communities across the state prepare to honor their veterans on Tuesday, the state Department of Labor has been offering services year ‘round to help veterans find work.

“There’s no veteran who should not have a job,” said Terence “Terry” Brennan, director of the department’s Office for Veterans Workforce Development.

“One percent of the U.S. population serves in the military, so we owe them at least that.”

Shaun B. Cashman, the Labor Department’s former commissioner, established the office in 2005 to help veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars find employment, said Brennan, who was appointed the state’s veterans coordinator in 2003. He added that Sharon Palmer, the department’s current commissioner, is very involved with ensuring the program’s success.

So far this year, the office has helped more than 3,000 veterans find work, whether through face-to-face meetings or via email and social media, he said.

“A lot of the younger vets don’t want to come into an office,” Brennan said. “They’d rather communicate electronically.”

Veterans have acquired many skills on the battlefield that are invaluable in the workplace, he said, such as the ability to follow directions, adapt to different circumstances, and handle pressure effectively.

“I don’t think any work situation can compare to being on the battlefield,” said Brennan, who has helped veterans find work since joining the department 26 years ago. “Hopefully, the employers take advantage of that.”

Programs offered by the office include STEP Up for Vets, an initiative enacted by the state legislature in 2012 as part of 2011 Jobs bill that provides a six-month wage subsidy to employers who hire veterans.

“It gives the company time to train the vet,” said Brennan, a Vietnam War veteran who served in the Navy. “They have a lot of military skills, but companies need help with crossover training.”

More than 200 veterans have enrolled in the program since the beginning of the year, he said. “We’re seeing more companies get involved because hiring has picked up in the state.”

Hopeton Guthrie, an Army veteran from Naugatuck, was able to get a job recently as an assembler at Gar Kenyon Aerospace & Defense, at 238 Water St. in Waterbury.

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Naugatuck, through the STEP Up program.
“If it wasn’t for that department, I don’t think I’d be working right now,” said Guthrie, who served as a diesel mechanic in Afghanistan in early 2002.
“What I’ve learned in the military has helped me.”

Guthrie, 35, attained the rank of sergeant in the Army, but also worked as a diesel mechanic in Afghanistan as a contractor for the Army from July 2006 to June 2007.

The office also connected Guthrie to the Advanced Manufacturing Program at Naugatuck Valley Community College in Waterbury to study engineering, said Vanessa Rouen, veterans employee representative and a fellow Army veteran.

“He was a really good fit for them,” he said.

Guthrie said he would like to get certified as an electrician so he can start his own business one day. “The job market is very slim, so when you learn a skills as an electrician, you can use that to support yourself,” he said.

Services offered by the office include career coaching, employment workshops, and counseling on resume writing and using computers, Brennan said. It also provides case management services through veterans employment representatives and disabled veterans outreach program specialists, he said.

“We look at their education, military training and jobs they’ve had in the past,” Brennan said, adding that veterans receive first dibs for job training offered by the state’s workforce investment boards. “If they need more training or education, we try to steer them to the right resources.”

For example, the office will guide a veteran looking to go to college to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs to take advantage of the federal G.I. Bill, which offers up to $75,000 in tuition assistance, he said. If a job in high-tech manufacturing is desired, then the office would connect the veteran to one of the state’s local colleges, he said.

“We’re kind of like the conduit for all of the other services — state, federal, non-profit or municipal,” he said.

Further, the state legislature enacted a bill that requires the Labor Department to ensure that state agencies give vocational licenses to veterans for equivalent training they gained in the military, Brennan said.

“It’s a really good program for veterans, because we can recognize their military training,” he said. “It’s crazy for a veteran with training to come back and get retrained after the military has spent thousands of dollars on training them.”

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