

Under the Dome with DeAngelo

*An Update on the New Jersey State Government by Assemblyman Wayne DeAngelo
(December 2014)*

Just like in most offices and schools, legislators Under the Dome, are busily working to finalize issues before the Holidays and the New Year are upon us. If you're a regular reader of this column, typically it provides highlights on various issues that are on-going. This month, however, I would like to focus on veterans' issues and what our state government is doing to help those who have missed many holidays at home with their families because of their service to our nation.

Recent studies have shown the great need for increasing efforts to bring New Jersey up from the bottom of all states to create job opportunities for veterans. According to the national Bureau of Labor Statistics, New Jersey's veterans have the highest unemployment rate in the nation – 10.8 percent of those over 18 who were still in the workforce.

Other data released by the U.S. Census Bureau's 2013 American Community Survey showed that nearly one in 10 New Jersey veterans ages 18 to 64 were unemployed. That's higher than the state's average 8.9 percent unemployment in non-veterans. Compared to national rate of 7.4 percent of veterans who were out of work with an 8.4 percent rate for non-veterans.

The same report found that those who joined the armed forces after 1990 had "substantially different military experience than their predecessors" which made finding work easier. In addition, female veterans in particular became more eligible to hold more civilian positions since they served in more skilled positions that eased their transition into private sector work.

For the more than 68,000 veterans from either or both of the Gulf War periods are from New Jersey and the thousands of other veterans seeking to transition into civilian careers, it must be a priority to open the doors to jobs that use their skill-set effectively. Just as our military has evolved to address modern challenges on the battlefield, so too must our approach to working with veterans returning to civilian life adapt to the challenges in today's economy.

The Legislature has sought to address issues such as creating higher education opportunities for veterans, bringing veterans and their spouses into the nursing and teaching professions, and encouraging veterans to join the State Police force.

To spearhead the effort, the Veterans Higher Education Commission was created to identify ways to create higher education opportunities for returning servicemen and women pursuing civilian careers. The Commission, which has recently begun their work, will look at policies and program to increase the ranks of higher education students who are veterans; provide services to help transition veterans who are enrolled to transition into civilian life; work with faculty and staff to provide them with tools necessary to support veterans; and raise awareness among veterans about available educational and career opportunities available through institutions of higher education.

We need to make sure that veterans are not only students, but they also are engaged as teachers in our community. Under the VeTeach Pilot program, veterans who served in the armed forces on, or after, September 11th, will be able to undergo a 36-month teacher preparation program at Richard Stockton College of New Jersey. Upon completion, these veterans would earn a baccalaureate degree and could apply for a teaching certificate that could lead to seeking employment teaching student in grades K-8 and certain secondary educational fields.

Bringing veterans into the teaching profession also will help anticipated need for teachers. The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future has projected that more than one-third of the nation's 3.2 million teachers are likely to retire in the coming four years.

Similarly, there is always a great need for qualified individuals into our first responder and law enforcement community. In an effort to do just that, two laws passed last year would provide pathways for veterans seeking careers at emergency medical technicians (EMTs) or Mobile Intensive Care Unit (MICU) paramedics and members of the New Jersey State Police.

Now, veterans who have equivalent military training or experience in the Armed Forces or the National Guard would be able to apply for certification as an EMT or MICU paramedic. Working under the pressure of a battlefield and saving the lives of their fellow soldiers provides an unparalleled level of training and calm under pressure that will benefit our neighbors who may find themselves in a medical crisis. Similarly, a new law that I sponsored created a hiring preference for veterans seeking a career in our state's elite law enforcement agency. It made common sense that if we provide hiring preference for jobs in more administrative state agencies, then the same consideration should be provided in State Police hiring. The men and women of our military keep our American interests safe around the globe. It is that level of security and skill that will be of great value to policing our state.

Additionally, in recent years there has been a tremendous effort to encourage military personnel to enter the construction field through the *Helmets to Hard Hats* the program. Through a partnership with the state Department of Labor and Workforce Development to increase the number of participants and the number of approved apprenticeship placements. The program exceeded its entire targeted objective as it has enrolled 374 participants.

A key economic engine for many local communities, small businesses and industries is critical to ensuring that our veterans, military personnel and military families are able to find good paying jobs whether they are in our communities or connected to a military base or facility. In New Jersey, the Joint Base McGuire - Ft. Dix - Lakehurst is the state's second largest employer with 44,000 jobs and an estimated impact of \$6.5 billion. In fact, it is the nation's only three-branch military base.

As a member of the Council of Armed Forces and Veterans' Affairs, our council continues to work closely with the Lieutenant Governor's office to ensure that the joint base and other military sites in New Jersey are not subject to a future Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) closure. These bases not only provide jobs on-site but they support the surrounding communities, businesses, local economy and can be far-reaching.

Finally, I am currently focusing on Assembly Bill 2313 (A-2313) that I have sponsored in order to make sure that our veteran support organizations have the financial resources necessary to continue to thrive in our communities. Under the bill, New Jerseyans would be able to donate to veterans organizations such as the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the American Legion and the Marine Corps League through their gross income tax returns.

While this bill is moving through the legislative process, I encourage residents to consider making charitable donations to veterans' organizations – and those that support active military members -- across our state. We can all celebrate the holiday season here at home while men and women in the United States Armed Forces are stationed around the world protecting our ideals and freedoms.

I wish everyone a very Merry Christmas, Happy Hanukkah and wonderful holiday season to your families, and I hope to see you back here Under the Dome next month.

***Editor's Note:** Assemblyman Wayne DeAngelo (D-Hamilton) represents the 14th Legislative District which includes parts of Mercer and Middlesex counties. He can be reached at AsmDeAngelo@njleg.org; phone (609) 631-7501; www.WayneDeAngelo.org or Facebook: Assemblyman Wayne DeAngelo.*