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SPOTLIGHT

North Carolina takes key steps to become most military and veteran-friendly state

Veterans and their families are an integral part of North Carolina's economy and culture. State leaders have taken proactive steps to assist, retain and attract this vital population.

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Retired Col. Kirk Warner, United States Army, and retired Col. David Hayden, United States Army, both readily admit there is a unique bond amongst veterans.

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"When you meet another vet, maybe he's the plumber, or electrician coming to your house, and they notice something [military related], they'll look at you and say, 'Do you miss it?' Warner said. "And, I say 'Yeah, we all miss it.'"

As attorneys at Smith Anderson, whose lawyers hold prominent leadership roles in military committees, veteran organizations and nonprofit groups, Warner and Hayden honor that bond through dedicated work helping North Carolina become the most military and veteran-friendly state in the country.

The goal is both strategic and meaningful for three key reasons. First, the military and defense sectors have an immense impact on the North Carolina economy, generating approximately \$66 billion in economic activity per year. Second, the workforce provided by military families and veterans and their quality of life are vital to the many growing industries in the state. Third, Hayden noted, it's a debt owed.

"They signed a blank check -we all did- to give our life for our country if called upon," said Hayden. "When you first come into the military, that creates a bond with other veterans that lasts a lifetime. To me, there's no more honorable thing to do, except serving in the military, than to serve the veterans. We owe them a debt of gratitude and we will never be able to pay that debt."

Although it may be impossible to truly repay veterans, North Carolina has taken key steps in recent years.

State tax exemption for retired pay

The North Carolina General Assembly passed a bill, which became law January 1, 2021, that exempted military retirees from state taxes on their pensions and retired pay. The exemption will apply to veteran survivors, those who medically retired, and retirees who have served in the Armed Forces for a minimum of 20 years.

"That, to me, was far more important in the minds of veterans than I think any of our legislators realized, about whether or not to stay in North Carolina if they are leaving the military," said Hayden.

Often, when people hear "retired" they assume the individual is of an older age, or has stopped working professionally. However, many military personnel go into service in their early twenties, or as young as their late teens. This means they retire from service with many decades of economic contribution ahead of them. Encouraging these veterans to stay in North Carolina means increasing the local workforce with leaders who have experience in the fields of STEM, engineering, management and more.

Expanding special considerations for military families

Federally, the Military Spouse Licensing Relief Act [Portability of Professional Licenses of Members of the Uniform Services and their Spouses, SCRA 50 U.S.C. 4025], which compels states to give licensing reciprocity across state lines to members of the military and their spouses, was passed in early 2023. North Carolina HB 824, Teacher License Reciprocity from Every State, is part of North Carolina's compliance effort.

A number of professions that are licensed, including childcare, nursing and teaching, are in high demand. Easing state-based licensing restrictions encourages these professionals to seek out and stay in North Carolina.

Additionally, many schools are creating programs and partnerships that acknowledge the unique situations military families face. For example, the Purple Star School Program supports military-connected children in North Carolina schools and as they transition in and out of North Carolina-based military installations. North Carolina is nationally recognized for its Purple Star program and recently 336 schools were Purple Star awardees.

Educational commitment continues through partnerships with local community colleges and with private and public entities who provide scholarships, training and incentives to hire vets.

Veterans Life Center in N.C. provides a model to replicate across the country

Founded in 2012 by John Turner, a former captain in the North Carolina National Guard, [the Veterans Life Center](#) seeks to care for 21st century soldiers. "He saw that in the United States, 22 veterans, per day, were committing suicide. He wanted to address that," said Hayden.

While the VA provides temporary solutions or overnight vouchers, those efforts did little to address the issue. Hayden said, "[They] weren't doing anything to treat what was the basic cause. [Turner] envisioned a more holistic facility that would provide housing, food, transportation -to the VA for appointments, or to colleges for training."

With the largest block grant ever issued by the North Carolina General Assembly, coupled with donations from generous individuals and partners, the Center, located in Butner, can house up to 100 veterans and provide pathways to healing and success. VLC is converting veterans from homeless to home owners.

"We've got two years of positive stories of people who have gone in there who will tell you it saved their life. They are starting businesses, going to schools, reuniting with their families." Hayden continued, "I challenge any other state to provide evidence of something like this [facility.] It's a jewel and it's something we would love to replicate across the country."

Warner serves as vice-chair of the board and Hayden, a past-chair, continues to serve on the board.

Ongoing efforts ensure continued progress

Both Hayden and Warner also serve on the North Carolina Military Affairs Commission, which was created by statute to advise the governor, the state legislature, and North Carolina General Assembly on all things related to the military. The goals are to improve the quality of life of service members and their families, strengthen our installation and defense sector support, keep transitioning service members here in North Carolina and make North Carolina the most military-, veteran- and defense-industry-friendly state.

While great strides have been made, work is ongoing.

When asked why they and Smith Anderson give so much time to support these efforts, Warner said, "We do it because we're serving those who served us. It's about that simple. These men and women are heroes and we're just helping them on their journey."

Support of and commitment to active duty, guard, reserve and deployed military members and their families has been a foundational trait of Smith Anderson and what they stand for since its inception in 1912.

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