

Milteach

By Bill Hobby

When President Clinton gave his State of the Union address recently, he made a reference to a key aspect of the peace dividend--the highly-trained men and women mustering out of the military.

He emphasized his earlier proposal that gives incentives to veterans who seek jobs where they are needed most, in our police departments and in our classrooms.

Many of our veterans were instructors in the service, often training young recruits in the complex workings of highly sophisticated military technology. And what better match for the increasingly hazardous duty in public schools than Uncle Sam's finest, already trained for combat?

Led by Senator Sam Nunn of Georgia, Congress in 1992 added veterans' benefits for veterans who took up their second career in law enforcement, teaching or public health. The National Defense Reauthorization Act of 1992 contains these provisions.

The Texas Legislature in 1993 allowed veterans who become teachers to buy into in the Teacher Retirement System for more of the time spent in the service. Rep. Steve Ogden of College Station shepherded that legislation through.

The foundation for this transition has been laid, and we're already seeing results in Texas.

The Texas Military Initiative was created by an agreement between Governor Ann Richards and the Secretaries of the Department of the Army and of the Department of Education in March, 1992, to assist qualified veterans to enter teaching through the Texas Alternative Certification Program for Teachers.

This is the way the program works. Servicemembers who meet the entry requirements take courses in the summer in basic teaching skills. In the fall, they begin classroom teaching as part of their internship, working closely with a mentor teacher.

During the evenings they continue their education to become certified teachers. It is a very demanding year.

Right now, 69 veterans are participating in the internship phase of the Alternative Certification Program (ACP) through three Army Posts in Texas. An additional 29 veterans are in the internship phases in various other ACP programs, including the 11 enrolled in special education at Texas State University.

Fort Hood in Killeen has agreements with the Education Service Center in Waco, the University of Mary Hardin Baylor and the University of Central Texas to provide on-post training to 24 service members or their spouses.

Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio is working with the local Education Service Center and Wayland Baptist University. Those courses may begin in March.

Of the 69 participants, 20 are Hispanic, 12 are black, 2 are Asian and 17 are female.

A few vets are already on the job, notably Willie Castillo, a former Air Force major now teaching fourth grade at Bellaire Elementary School in San Antonio. You may have seen him featured in "Parade" magazine last month.

Meanwhile, a program the Army pioneered in San Antonio is going statewide. Careers for Army Personnel in Schools (CAPS) has enrolled 62 school districts who have listed 734 jobs with the system. The program serves as a job clearing house for military personnel looking for peacetime opportunities.

School districts have been receptive to this program. Personnel directors at Fort Worth and Dallas school districts have guaranteed positions to veterans qualified to enter the teacher training programs. Personnel in the Houston district have pledged to work with veterans on a case-by-case basis.

Weslaco plans to hire vets through the University of Texas--Pan American program.

This is one of those rare government programs without a downside. Texas schools need teachers, and a good many veterans need jobs. The cost is minimal, certainly a lot cheaper than unemployment benefits. But delay has already excluded some veterans from the program.

The law which authorizes the veterans benefits required an implementing directive. The terms are clear:

- Vets must have at least six years of continuous active duty service with an honorable discharge.
- Vets can apply up to one year after discharge.
- Those who apply must teach five years in a school eligible for Chapter 1 aid, which means a high concentration of low-income families.
- Non-degreed veterans have five years to get a degree and apply for the stipend to become a teacher.
- School districts who hire veterans may be eligible to receive grants up to \$50,000 over a five year period.

Unfortunately, the implementing directive was not signed until January 19--almost two years after Congress passed the law. So none of the 69 veterans now enrolled in the programs qualify for the additional benefits. The stipends are only available to those mustering out after January 19, and school districts can't receive grants for those now in the classroom.

So a number of good men and women weren't included in the incentives the program was intended to provide. With the law now in effect, we'll hope that a good many more decide their future lies in the classroom. Never have we needed them more.

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