

TOP STORY 

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States try to help veterans find jobs

By Pamela M. Prah, Stateline Staff Writer

Missouri Governor Jay Nixon, visiting troops in Afghanistan recently, was taken aback by the answer he got when he asked a soldier suiting up to go on patrol what concerned him most.

"He didn't say he was most worried about facing the enemy that night," Nixon said last month. "He looked me in the eyes and said, 'Governor, I'm worried about whether there will be a job for me when I get home.'"

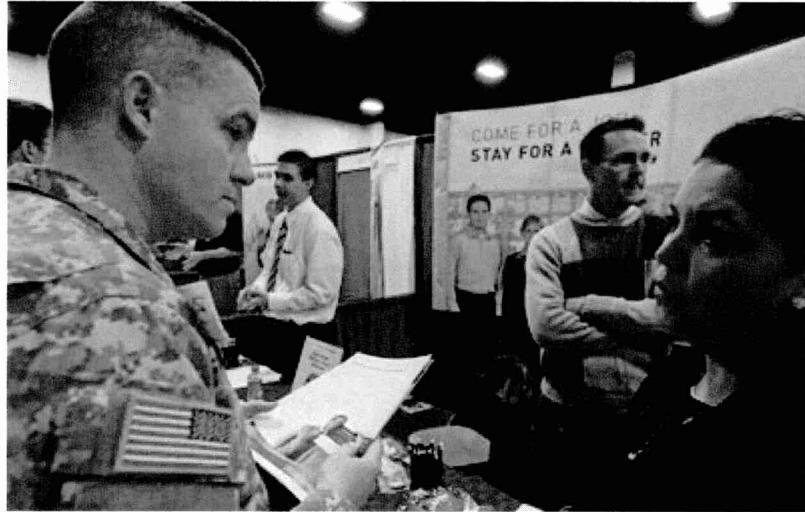
There's good reason for that

soldier to be worried. The unemployment rate for veterans who have served in the military since 2001 is 11.5 percent, higher than the national average, which is now 8.3 percent. But the situation is much bleaker for veterans aged 18 to 24 — they averaged a staggering 30 percent unemployment rate in 2011, according to unpublished data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

With U.S. combat troops slated to leave Afghanistan next year and U.S. forces already out of Iraq, states are preparing to welcome back a large number of returning troops, many of whom will be seeking work. Nixon was among several governors who used recent state of the state addresses to outline plans to help make it easier for veterans to find jobs. "Every veteran who needs a job should be able to get one," Nixon said.

State governments commit more than \$4 billion of their own resources annually to support the country's estimated 22 million veterans and their families, according to the National Association of State Departments of Veterans Affairs. The benefits range from tuition assistance to helping veterans buy homes.

In Missouri, Nixon, a Democrat, pledged to expand his Show-Me Heroes initiative, launched last year, in which private employers agree to put military veterans at the front of the line when hiring. More than 1,000 veterans have found jobs through the program, the governor said. Missouri also is among more than a dozen states that offer some kind of preference for veteran-owned businesses in procuring state contracts, according to the National Veteran-Owned Business Association.



George Frey/Getty Images

With U.S. forces out of Iraq and combat troops slated to leave Afghanistan in 2013, states are readying for an influx of returning troops who will be looking for work.

Colorado Governor John Hickenlooper would like his state to be on that list. The Democrat wants to give veterans preference in state hiring as part of his efforts to make Colorado “the most pro-military state.” He also wants to make it easier for military spouses to use their occupational licenses and credentials and work in Colorado if they are already licensed in another state.

Oklahoma this year launched a new job market website, described by Republican Governor Mary Fallin as “a comprehensive reemployment resource for returning military men and women who have bravely served us.”

Employer tax breaks

Another new development involves offering tax breaks to private employers who hire veterans. Idaho launched a Hire One Vet program last April that gives a sliding-scale income tax credit to employers who pay \$12 to \$15 an hour or more plus benefits, and meet other criteria.

“The Hire One Vet effort is more than the right thing to do,” Republican Governor C.L. “Butch” Otter said last month when he encouraged employers to take advantage of the credit. “It is our responsibility to ensure that our troops have the tools they need to resume their productive civilian lives.”

In Minnesota, Governor Mark Dayton, a Democrat, wants to give a \$3,000-per-employee tax credit to businesses that hire veterans. In New Mexico, Governor Susana Martinez, a Republican, proposes a \$1,000 tax credit for doing the same. “These men and women should not fight for our freedoms abroad only to be stuck on the unemployment line when they return home,” Martinez said.

President Obama has made a big push to help veterans get jobs, including the creation of a Veterans Jobs Corps that will help communities hire veterans as cops and firefighters. Veterans issues were one of the few areas in which the president and Congress agreed last year. Just in time for Veterans Day last November, Congress passed legislation that provides federal tax credits to companies that hire vets.

But not everyone agrees that tax credits actually help veterans find jobs. “Research suggests that the credit has not been effective in improving employment outcomes,” according to a review by the Tax Policy Center, a joint effort of the Urban Institute and the Brookings Institution.

Republican U.S. Senator Jim DeMint of South Carolina was the only senator to vote against last year’s Veterans Day measure giving employers a federal tax break for hiring veterans. “I cannot support this tax credit because I do not believe the government should privilege one American over another when it comes to work,” he said. While DeMint stressed his appreciation for veterans, he said, “we don’t pay them back for their service and sacrifice with false promises of government programs that have proven not to work.”

Help on retirement and tuition

New Mexico Governor Martinez also wants to allow retiring veterans to exempt 25 percent of their pension income from state taxes, another idea that more than a dozen states offer, according to a tally from Military.com.

Missouri passed a similar law in 2009. Military veterans there will not pay any state taxes on military pensions by 2016. "That law is a strong signal that we want military veterans to move to Missouri, to work in Missouri, and to make Missouri their home," Nixon said.

Tuition assistance also is popular. Virginia Governor Robert McDonnell, a Republican, wants to provide in-state tuition for all members of the Virginia National Guard, regardless of how long they've lived in Virginia. In Iowa, the first measure to hit Republican Governor Terry Branstad's desk this year added \$1.3 million to a tuition assistance program for National Guard troops returning from deployment.

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By Jackson Griffin on Feb 13, 2012 2:01:04 PM

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