

By ROBERT PIERCE

• Daily Leader

A new program has been established to help more than 200 guardsmen and reservists who have returned to Liberal after serving the nation in a variety of ways to readjust to civilian life.

There are two guard units and two reserve units in the Liberal, Garden City and Dodge City area that are recruiting new members at all times. There are likewise several units in Texas, Oklahoma, Colorado and New Mexico.

Many veterans have left the active component and have moved back home to the five-state region. Many of these young men and women have seen actual combat and some of them more than once. They are an all- volunteer force who are expected to get "over it" and return to a normal civilian life.

However, for many of them, the "normal civilian life" they left is not the one to which they have returned. Many of them have found that the jobs they had are gone or that they did not have a sufficient job before they left.

Some of them have found their significant other no longer wants to be significant, and most of them do not understand the feelings nor have any idea of how to deal with them.

Ed Poley, a Vietnam veteran, recently started Whirlwind Career Counseling and Guidance Center for Veterans, First Responders and Their Families, an organization to help with such needs.

"I was in the National Guard here in this unit," he said. "I believe I was the first sergeant for 13 years. I was in the unit for 20 years. I was activated with the unit to Fort Riley after 9/11 when the National Guard went on to posts. We were the gate guards to provide security for the posts all across America as the soldiers who were on those posts were deployed to Iraq."

Poley said that job shifted after the Liberal unit came back from Fort Riley.

"At that point, the Guard units as well as the Reserve units across our nation started going to Iraq to serve typically on an 18-month deployment," he said.

Poley said prior to the activation of the battalion, there are many local soldiers who volunteered to go with other units.

"We had soldiers here in the National Guard who participated in airport security right after 9/11," he said. "Those same soldiers took early deployments to Iraq with some of the very first units that went. A lot of the kids have had two tours in Iraq, a tour of airport security and tour of protection. Now, they're getting ready to be activated again next year."

Poley said when people join the National Guard, there are many reasons for doing so, but two in particular that typically are mentioned.

"One is that there are great educational benefits, and two, they're having difficulty in finding quality employment at home," he said.

"They join the Guard to get their foot in the ground in the military and start to get some of those benefits."

Poley said there is no place within the system for returning soldiers to learn about themselves and their strengths.

“Based on their strengths, what kind of employment opportunities might there be for them?” he said. “If they decide on an employment opportunity that they think that they’re interested in, what kind of training do they need to get that position? Where can they go to get that training, and how do they get funded for it?”

Poley said questions swirl in the soldiers’ heads, and that’s where he would like to start with them at Whirlwind.

“The hard part with war is how do you deal with the day to day fear that today something might happen,” he said. “In World War II, they had major battles, and then there would be breaks between the battles. In Korea and Vietnam, there were minor skirmishes. There were some major battles in Korea, but not like they had had in World War II. There were a few in Vietnam.”

Poley said most of the returning soldiers have a hard time asking for help, but he would like to get them to talk about what the situation is.

“I’m a trained school counselor, but I’m not a psychologist,” he said. “I’ve worked with college kids, particularly at that level dealing with some personal things, but I’ve also known when it was time for me to hand it off.”

By establishing a rapport up front and having a non-threatening environment, Poley said soldiers can work through some of those issues.

“That’s kind of the goal,” he said.

Poley said Whirlwind is neither funded through the state nor the federal government, but rather locally.

"I started with the United Way," he said. "Those are the people who fund most of the non-profit organizations here in town. They approved of my idea, and they agreed to fund me. The next place we went was to the city. They have their non-profit funding. That was approved last Saturday."

Based on the support from the city and United Way, Poley said he would like to reach out to local organizations and area foundations to see what funding he can get there.

"Then, it's a matter of setting it up and opening the door," he said.

"I'm aware of how the system works, how to work with the VA, how to work with the Kansas Guard and the Army to get the benefits the soldiers are eligible for."

Poley said his organization is high on the Kansas adjutant general's priority list, and he believes down the road, assistance, funding and support will likely come from the state and federal government.

"Right now, we're looking at trying to do it locally and doing it outside the normal channels of the military because for a lot of those guys, that's not a good way to go," he said. "That's kind of the direction we're going to go."