

South Dakota National Guard

Public Affairs Office

Phone: 605-737-6721 Email: pao@sd.ngb.army.mil

Web: <https://sdguard.ngb.army.mil>

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October 1, 2011

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

Kelpin ends tenure as ESGR state chair

By Capt. Anthony Deiss
SDNG Public Affairs Office

In 1996, Donald Kelpin decided he wanted to volunteer his time helping those who help others – National Guard and Reserve service members. As a volunteer for the South Dakota Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve, or SD ESGR, he helped to resolve issues between local employers and service members in communities throughout the state.

Nearly 15 years later, Kelpin would find himself at the top of the SD ESGR ranks as the state chair, and steering the efforts of the state's committee; providing leadership, guidance and support to nearly 50 volunteers statewide, where he once started.

On Saturday, Oct. 1, Kelpin turned over the reins of the state chair position to Ronald Mielke, a retired brigadier general who served as the assistant adjutant general for the South Dakota Air National Guard from 1995–2002.

Mielke will continue on with Kelpin's efforts that have left a lasting impression on how employers and service members understand their rights and responsibilities toward one another.

"Don's leadership and dedication as the state chair has been truly outstanding," said Maj. Gen. Tim Reisch, adjutant general for the South Dakota National Guard. "The South Dakota National Guard will be forever in his debt."

For eight years Kelpin served in the state chair's role, where he volunteered more than 5,000 hours overseeing all the activities of ESGR's military outreach, employer outreach and ombudsman services. ESGR is a Department of Defense volunteer agency that seeks to promote a culture in which all American employers support and value the military service of their employees. ESGR recognizes outstanding support, increase awareness of the law, and resolve conflicts through informal mediation.

"It's been a rewarding eight years and I had the opportunity to work with and know the leadership of the Guard and Reserve all the way through the ranks, and to work with the employers and our volunteers," said Kelpin, of Sioux Falls. "It's been an absolute blessing to have the opportunity to do it, and it's been an honor to serve in this capacity for as long as I have."

Before 9-11, the National Guard and Reserve would not fully know the burden to be placed upon them, or their employers that support them, in the midst of upcoming and continuous deployments in two wars over the span of a decade.

Kelpin stepped into the chair's seat at a critical time, just as the South Dakota National Guard would begin to see troop deployment at rates not seen since World War II, and his leadership would prove invaluable to both organizations.

"The Guard members and Reservists of South Dakota, during one of the most intensive periods of reliance upon our nation's reserve components, have experienced exceptional support from the ESGR committee," said Lt. Col. Reid Christopherson, Air National Guard advisor to the SD ESGR Committee. "As state chairman, Mr. Don Kelpin has provided unprecedented leadership and support. His tireless contributions have clearly distinguished him as a patriot and friend."

During the span of his tenure, Kelpin would see more than 4,600 Army Guardsmen and more than 1,000 Air Guardsmen deploy overseas.

"The changes that have taken place after 9-11 have really changed the significance of the work ESGR does today," said Kelpin. "With nearly 50 percent of our military found in the Guard and Reserve, and most of our service members having been activated at least once – some three or four times – it puts an awful lot of pressure on the employers.

"We changed a lot of programs to make them more effective," continued Kelpin. "We wanted to be a more effective spokesman for the employers, as well as the service members."

Kelpin volunteered as an ombudsman during his first seven years in ESGR, where he provided education, information, consultation, and mediation services between employers and service members. In October 2003, he stepped up to serve as the acting state chair and was then selected to the state chair's position for two consecutive three-year terms.

"I served two years longer than what I was supposed to," said Kelpin. "I was the vice chair and I took over when Al Cornella was the state chair and he became the overseas base closing commissioner with Senator Tom Daschle."

At Cornella's request and with ESGR's national headquarters' approval, Kelpin said he stayed on as chair.

"Cornella's (overseas base closing) program ran longer – two years longer – than he expected, and we restructured the committee dividing the state up into four regions, which we didn't have before. Al said he would step down and let me to continue to run with it," he said.

Now more than ever, Kelpin said ESGR and the role of the National Guard and Reserve will be important for years to come.

"Critically important is the job we have and are doing right now," he said. "The Guard and Reserve is no longer the strategic reserve force that it was originally intended to be. It's part of our frontline defense in the United States today, and I don't see that changing in the near future with the downsizing of our regular standing military. There is going to be continued emphasis put on our Guard and Reserve and that's going to make our job with ESGR even more important."

Kelpin said when he first started they were processing approximately 30-35 Patriot Awards a year – an award service members submit for outstanding employer support – working to get those numbers up.

“During the past few years, we have averaged 400 nominations a year. This year with many service members on state active duty for the Missouri River flooding, we’ve processed about 1,000 Patriot Awards,” said Kelpin. “That speaks volumes for the volunteers, service members and employers of South Dakota.”

Additionally, several South Dakota employers have been nationally recognized for their support. In the last eight years, four employers have won the Secretary of Defense Employer Support Freedom Award – the highest recognition given by the U.S. Government to employers for their support of their employees.

Just 15 employers are chosen nationwide for this annual award: South Dakota State University in 2005, South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks in 2006, Winner School District in 2008, and St. John’s Lutheran Church of Yankton in 2011.

“We’ve also had a record four years and four months without one single employer or service member complaint having to be elevated to the national level with the Federal Department of Labor,” said Kelpin.

ESGR volunteers have seven days to resolve a complaint involving the loss of a job or wages, and 14 days to resolve all other issues.

“SD ESGR resolved all cases at the local level without referring to the Department of Labor for almost four-and-a-half-years,” said Kelpin. “I credit that success to ESGR’s really excellent ombudsmen, the service members and employers we have here in South Dakota. That’s a record that will probably never be broke by anybody ever again.”

Kelpin, however, gives all the credit to his team.

“It’s been a team effort and I cannot say enough about our teams – the employers, the military and our dedicated volunteers. They deserve all the credit,” he said. “We’ve been ahead of the ESGR national curve in South Dakota.”

For three years now, the SD ESGR program has been providing Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act (USERRA) training with employers. SD ESGR ombudsmen also work in conjunction with the Department of Labor – something that will become a requirement next year for all ESGR committees across the nation.

Kelpin has also received recognition for his efforts. He was awarded the Secretary of Defense Medal for Exceptional Public Service in 2011, the Spirit of Volunteerism Award for lifetime achievement in 2008 and 2010, the Williamson Militiaman Award in 2007, and the Presidential Volunteer Service Award in 2005 for 4,897 volunteer hours.

“It was such a great honor to receive those awards,” he said.

But by no means is Kelpin done serving with the ESGR program. He still plans to continue serving as a volunteer for years to come.

“ESGR is an extremely important organization working with Guard and Reserve members and employers, and I plan on continuing to pledge my support for years to come,” said Kelpin.

PHOTOS: High-resolution photos for this release are available upon request or at:
www.flickr.com/southdakotationalguard



Kelpin: Donald Kelpin's tenure as the state chair for the South Dakota Committee for the Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve, or ESGR, ended on Oct. 1, 2011. Kelpin served eight years as the acting state chair and state chair for the committee. (File photo) (RELEASED)



060615-A-5938S-051: Donald Kelpin, right, speaks with employers during a South Dakota Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve Bosslift event with the South Dakota Army National Guard June 15, 2006, in the Black Hills of South Dakota. Bosslifts help to educate employers about the mission, roles, and responsibilities of the National Guard and the service members in which they employ. (Army National Guard photo by Sgt. 1st Class Erick Studenicka) (RELEASED)



DSC_0007: Brig. Gen. Keith Corbett, right, former assistant adjutant general for the South Dakota Army National Guard, thanks Donald Kelpin for his support and work in the South Dakota Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve during an employer appreciation event in June 2007 on Camp Rapid in Rapid City, S.D. (Courtesy photo ESGR) (RELEASED)

FOR MORE INFORMATION: Please contact Maj. Brendan Murphy at (605) 737-6721 or cell (605) 431-8753, or e-mail pao@sd.ngb.army.mil.