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Mike Sweat, CEO of Odyssey Systems in Wakefield, is among Massachusetts employers hiring a substantial number of veterans. Advocates want more to follow.

## Employers unite

Grants, programs like Guard Support, push to open doors to make room for veterans

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Mike Sweat has hired a number of active Massachusetts National Guard members to work at his 325-person defense advisory company, **Odyssey Systems Consulting Group**. He had one worker who was deployed for a year, came back for six months, and was deployed again for another year. Yes, it was disruptive, he said. But worth it.

“You have to recognize you are getting a huge benefit from these workers in terms of positive values and intensive education,” Sweat said. “In exchange, you have to accept some sacrifice if they deploy or need to take time off.” Sweat said most of his clients, which hire the company for advice on logistics, communications, command and control and force protection, are government agencies. He said they

understand, for instance, that personnel could change mid-project due to a deployment. Defense contractors have long been a job destination of choice for active or discharged veterans.

But as a wave of new soldiers returns from Iraq over the next few months, Massachusetts and the country will have to look to a much wider spectrum of employers to absorb a group of workers with disproportionately high unemployment rates. Last month President Barack Obama announced that a group of 270 companies including **ConAgra Foods Inc.** and **Tyson Foods Inc.** has pledged to hire 25,000 military veterans and spouses by the end of 2013. This week Governor Deval Patrick rolled out a number of initiatives including grants for job training and named November “Hire a Veteran Month.”

“There is anecdotal evidence that some employers are reluctant to hire veterans because of the prospect of another

# VETERANS: Findings jobs for returning veterans is proving difficult

deployment,” Massachusetts Secretary of Veterans Services Coleman Nee said. “But hopefully, with the upcoming withdrawal of troops from Iraq and the wind down in Afghanistan that reluctance will recede.”

Some employers may also wonder about the impact of injuries and post-traumatic stress on the veteran workforce. Nee and other veterans’ advocates are urging businesses to look beyond stereotypes.

A number of non-profit organizations have sprung up to aid in matching returning vets with work opportunities in the still-tight job market. Guard Support was launched in 2007 by Nate Dalton, President and COO of Beverly’s **Affiliated Managers Group** to provide short-term financial relief to struggling vets. Over the past year the nonprofit has shifted its focus to helping returning Guard members secure long-term employment.

“A friend and neighbor deployed to Iraq in 2007, and I began to think about the deep burden that’s put on service members,” Dalton said. “It just seems unfair that we ask people to serve for us and haven’t found a way to bring them back into the fold for a successful future.”

Guard Support also has a new entrepreneurship fund, which helps

returning Guard members either start new ventures, or re-start small businesses that languished during deployments. One such beneficiary was Helder Machado, whose Worcester-based IT consultants group **Machado Consulting** received a \$40,000 low-interest long-term loan from Guard Support. Machado later decided to hire another returning Guard member, Ben Mehr, who was unable to return to carpentry because of a service-related back injury. Donors to Guard Support include **Eastern Bank, Danversbank and TD Bank**, along with pro bono legal support from **Goodwin Procter LLC**. The organization has a yearly budget of between \$300,000 to \$400,000 and growing. Its list of employers that have agreed to give extra consideration to returning guard members includes **TD Bank**, Cambridge marketing software firm **Hubspot**, national security firm **Securitas** and financial software firm **EZE Castle Software**, which has several offices, including one in Boston.

But underscoring the complexity of translating military skill sets to civilian roles, Dalton said as yet no veterans have been hired here in Massachusetts by **Affiliated Managers Group**, an owner of asset-managers.

“It’s absolutely a challenge, it’s a question of finding the right way to line

up skills and desires, and we haven’t yet found a match,” Dalton said.

Pilot programs are now springing up to help smooth the transition from deployment to civilian jobs. For instance, the health care consulting division of **UMass Medical School, Commonwealth Medicine**, took on two returning service members a year ago for a year-long trial, offering them job training, flexible hours and access to benefits like an employee assistance program to help with counseling or health issues associated with their military service. Those two returning veterans have now been hired full-time by **Commonwealth Medicine’s** human resources department.

But even when there is an easy fit, the weak economy continues to pose an obstacle, including for some employers with a long history of hiring veterans.

“I hired a Vietnam war veteran who became deaf due to artillery fire, and couldn’t return to teaching,” Dick Monroe, owner of **Pak Tech Inc.** in Wareham said. “He was one of the best employees I ever had.”

The six-person company now makes machinery used in making labels, but at the time was in the business of bottling vitamins.

Monroe said he would hire another veteran, disabled or otherwise, in a heartbeat if he had the work available.

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