



# Larry Shellito, Commissioner, Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs

Interview with The Civic Caucus

8301 Creekside Circle #920, Bloomington, MN 55437

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## **Notes of the Discussion**

**Present: Verne Johnson (chair), David Broden, Audrey Clay, Janis Clay, Diane Flynn, Matthew Flynn, Paul Gilje (coordinator), Lucas Johnson, Sallie Kemper, Dan Loritz (vice chair), Dana Schroeder, Clarence Shallbetter.**

**Summary of discussion: Larry Shellito**, Minnesota's Commissioner of Veterans Affairs, paints a picture of serious problems facing returning veterans and argues that readjusting to civilian life, not finding jobs, is the greatest problem. He says Minnesota has been more proactive than most states in helping both deployed troops and their families and returning vets, but more needs to be done. He closes the discussion with concerns about the impact of likely forthcoming military downsizing on programs and services for veterans.

### **A. Introduction of the speaker.**

**Larry Shellito** has been Minnesota's Commissioner of Veterans Affairs since January 2011. Previously, he spent seven years as Adjutant General of the Minnesota National Guard, where he helped build a national reputation for the state's force. It is the nation's fifth largest National Guard formation, with more than 14,000 members operating 63 facilities across Minnesota.

As Adjutant General, Shellito was instrumental in establishing the Beyond the Yellow Ribbon Program, which is a nationally recognized program to reintegrate National Guard and Reserve military service members following deployments.

Major General Shellito began his career in 1968, when he enlisted in the United States Army. His active duty service included time in Vietnam. In 1973, he enlisted in the Minnesota Army National Guard, where he served for 37 years until his retirement in 2010. His awards and decorations include the Distinguished Service Medal, Legion of Merit and the Bronze Star, among many others.

Before accepting the post of Adjutant General, Shellito served as president of Alexandria Technical College. He holds degrees from Moorhead State University and the University of Minnesota and is a graduate of the Army War College.

**B. Discussion.** Commissioner Shellito outlined the problems facing returning veterans, including their employment, educational and social challenges. He discussed the outlook for federal spending on veterans' programs and various programs aimed at helping reintegrate veterans to civilian life.

### **Veterans returning to private life in Minnesota do encounter serious problems.**

Jobs. Among challenges facing veterans is the uncertainty of getting a job, even though it's difficult to state that vets are having a tougher time than others, Shellito said. Some statistics say veterans have it tougher, but it depends on whom you ask, he contends.

He cautioned about reading too much into unemployment statistics for vets, because some returning vets decide to go straight to school and many don't want to go back to their old jobs. The vets often think they have outgrown their old jobs during their time in the service.

Veterans sometimes feel that job-seeking opportunities would be better if their service records were left off their resumes. That's because "people think vets are 'messed up,'" he said.

Speaking of the job situation for vets in Minnesota and the amount of help available to vets looking for jobs, Shellito said, "We don't have a crisis. If they don't have a job, it's not as if they haven't had an opportunity." Unemployment of vets in Minnesota is not the major problem, he said.

There can be a mismatch in job skills versus the job market if vets decide they want to go back to their smaller hometowns outside the metro area.

Overcoming trauma. But, Shellito said, jobs are not going to be the main problem. The larger problem is how can we bring vets "all the way home" from deployment, for many, the most traumatic experience in their lives. Vets need lots of help in overcoming the impact of those traumatic experiences.

"Pandora's box has been opened and jobs are only one of many things coming out of that box," he said. He described seeing vets who have "the look." "They're not there; they're somewhere else, reliving their experiences in Iraq. Flashbacks don't go away; they just hunker down for awhile."

"We don't know what we don't know," he said. "We've never experienced these traumatic experiences and traumatic injuries. We don't know what will happen as a result in 4, 8, 12, 24 years."

Homelessness. This is a big issue for vets, Shellito said, especially single vets. He suggested that the Hastings veterans' home, for example, could be converted to a place for vets to stay when they return from deployment. They could receive services there to "get them reintegrated into our civilian sector," he said.

Traumatic injuries. He noted that 58,000 soldiers died in Vietnam and over 6,000 have died in Iraq and Afghanistan. "There are still 58,000," he said, "but this time they're coming back wounded. They will create a tsunami of returning veterans with special needs."

A number of vets are returning home with traumatic brain injuries. "There's always been a major growth in medical science with wars," Shellito said. "For this war, the signature one will be traumatic brain injuries." Medical doctors and scientists are finding some exciting things in the field, he said, because they have a pool of people on whom they're doing the research.

### **Problems of veterans are long term and no one solution fits all vets.**

"We celebrate when the vets come home and then we leave them on their own," Shellito said. But it's a long-term problem. Sometimes issues don't surface right away. "We think of dealing with vets in 30-day, 60-day or 90-day periods, " he said. "But it's usually the 18- to 24-month period when the family tells vets to shape up."

Shellito said there is no one "magic solution" to every veteran's problems. "We have to deal with the 95 percent of vets who get it, but also with the five percent who don't," he said. "We're just starting to deal with the low-hanging fruit."

"The best thing the state can do for vets is to not rush them," he said. Everyone is too focused on vets finding a job right away, when they have other important readjustments to make to fit into civilian life.

### **Veterans in Minnesota are a \$2.1 billion industry .**

- Minnesota gets \$2.1 billion in federal funding for veterans.
- Medical expenses are by far the largest part of spending on veterans, followed by compensation and pensions, the GI bill and then home loans and life insurance.
- \$900 million of the funding goes to two veterans medical centers, one in St. Cloud and one in Minneapolis.
- \$16 million is spent through the GI Bill.
- There are 371,000 vets in Minnesota. The largest number of these is the group that is age 65 and over, including Vietnam vets as they age. We lose 10,000 vets a year, especially World War II vets.
- 38,000 recent Minnesota vets have served in combat zones.
- Minnesota has 60,000 active service members. Over half are or have been in combat. A large number of National Guard and Reserve troops have been deployed from the state, but two-thirds of the 60,000 service members are active-duty troops and one-third are National Guard and Reserve members.

### **Returning vets have money to spend on educational programs.**

The federal government spends \$16 million a year on GI benefits in Minnesota, Shellito said. In past years, vets were more apt to go to college and more likely to drop out. The creation of Vet Centers on campuses has helped greatly in retention and graduation. He cautioned that the state university system must keep its vet centers on the campuses.

Shellito said the education system is in the business of "selling credits-the more, the better," so it sets prerequisites for courses that ignore the skills vets have learned during their deployment. "Sometimes the education system is its own worst enemy," he said.

He gave the example of a vet in Iraq who had the most miles driving trucks of anyone during the deployment. When she returned, she couldn't get her commercial driver's license without going through an entire truck-driving program.

Shellito suggests there is too much emphasis on four-year colleges, rather than on technical or community colleges. He said when he was president of the Alexandria Technical College, the graduation rate of its students in bachelor's degree programs was the same as that of the four-year state universities. People often get a two-year degree at the technical college, work for a while and then go back to get a bachelor's degree. Meanwhile, the dropout rate for state universities was 25 percent of the freshman class.

**The number of vets being processed for various federal benefits or programs in Minnesota is increasing dramatically.**

The number of "case dealings"-that is, processing of paperwork for a vet to be eligible for a program, benefit or medical care-has risen as follows:

<u>Year</u>	<u>Case Dealings Per Month</u>
2001	176
2005	305
2010-11	720
2012	950

**There are other programs in place in Minnesota to help deployed and returning vets, but more needs to be done.**

Minnesota is one of the most proactive states in helping both deployed troops and their families and returning vets, Shellito said.

- Beyond the Yellow Ribbon is a program started seven years ago by the Minnesota National Guard when Shellito was the Guard's Adjutant General and Mark Dayton was U.S. Senator. The program originally got state funding, but now it's a national, federally supported program.

The program focuses on the families and spouses of troops who are deployed, Shellito said. The goal is to make sure troops' families and spouses are taken care of while the troops are deployed. "Yellow Ribbon encourages neighbors to perform random acts of kindness to the troops' families," he said. "It's the community taking care of its own."

- Case management, Outreach, Referral & Education (CORE) . This statewide program is run through a \$500,000 contract with Lutheran Social Services (LSS). Originally, the program was open only to newly returning vets, but it's now open to all vets. Shellito said the program is focused on "bringing the vet all the way home." CORE provides counselors to veterans "as close to the families as possible," Shellito said. The program will find a pathway to help the vet, whether it's through insurance or learning how to interview or counseling - whatever service might assist with reintegration into the community. When it's appropriate, the program will refer the vet to an agency that can help. "With what we have, right now we're doing well," Shellito said. "But there's a high pent-up demand and only so much money, so they've had to manage it by limiting visits to the counselors. LSS would say we need additional funding."
- Minnesota Military Families Foundation . People donate to this foundation which uses its funds to help troops and their families in need. The foundation makes sure the families are taken care of, so the troops "can focus on their mission overseas," Shellito said. He gave an example of how the foundation bought a new washing machine to replace a broken one for a family with a parent deployed overseas. Help with financial management is one of the most requested services, he said. "Some of these brides are only 18 years old. They need some education."
- Veterans Organizations. Shellito described the problem of helping vets readjust to civilian life as a "local problem." He said veterans' organizations, such as the American Legion and the VFW, must be involved in helping vets get links to the community. For example, he said, many vets living in a community know who's hiring and should share that information with newly returning vets. He said the younger generation tends not to join veterans' organizations. Often the organization just drops off a membership form and the young vets say, "They've not done anything for me, so why should I join?" He recounted his own experience in going to an American Legion meeting when he first returned from his service in Vietnam. He identified himself as a Vietnam vet and a World War II vet replied by saying, "Let me tell you about a *real* war..." Shellito, while today still a member of the Legion, has never gone back to another meeting. He said there are many good veterans' posts in Minnesota. The best emerging organization, he said, is Student Veterans of America, because of their networking among each other. "They stay connected," he said.
- Voluntary programs by major employers . Shellito said industry is "bending over backwards to help vets." Target and Best Buy have sent people to Iraq to train the troops on how to apply for a job and how to interview. "One problem might be the veteran's rigidity in an interview, such as the habit of always replying 'Yes, ma'am, no ma'am,'" he said. But, he said of the voluntary programs, "We've gone back to the trough too often-people are war-fatigued. Volunteers are being tapped out. We must start investing public funds."

**Winding down our involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan could lead to military downsizing, sending large numbers of vets back to civilian life.**

Jobs for vets don't seem to be a major problem now, but "what's going to happen when the Department of Defense says we're going to downsize?" Shellito asked.

Some of these returning vets will be older-in their 30s to 50s-midcareer vets with significant job skills. Will they find a match in the civilian job market?

"The heavy lifting is now going to begin," he said.