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Veterans Service Officer helps with troop re-integration

Washington County's Veterans Service Officer Robby Robinson was part of a team from Minnesota that helped Minnesota National Guard troops with their return to civilian life after overseas deployment during a two-day program in November at Fort Hood, Texas.

Robinson reported on the program, and all the activities of the county's Veterans Service Office, at the Jan. 24 County Board meeting. The office is part of Washington County Community Services. The Minnesota Association of County Veterans Service Officers received a grant from the state to aid in the re-integration of about 90 National Guard members from Company B 2-211. Many of them have Washington County connections, but members are from all over Minnesota and some are from other states.

While at Fort Hood, Veterans Service Officers from Washington, Stearns and Goodhue counties were joined by representatives from the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development, the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities, the Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs Higher Education Programs and the National Guard to meet with the returning troops in groups and individually.

The veterans were provided information about education benefits, employment opportunities and what to expect in the transition from soldier to civilian, Robinson said.

The Veterans Service Officers also met individually with the returning soldiers to help them fill out applications for health and dental benefits, which were delivered directly to the Veterans Administration. The soldiers were also given information about who are their veterans service officers in their home counties or states, to receive further assistance when they return home. "We're the only state in the country that actually sends people to meet their troops when they first get back," Robinson said.

There are just more than 16,000 veterans living in Washington County, Robinson told the County Board at the Jan. 24 meeting. He and Dale Cotch, another Veterans Services Officer, conduct office hours in the county service centers in Cottage Grove and Forest Lake, as well as in the Government Center in Stillwater.

Office hours are 8 a.m. - 4:30 p.m. Monday through Friday in the county Government Center in Stillwater; 8 a.m. - 4:30 p.m. Tuesdays and Fridays in Cottage Grove, call 651-430-6895 for appointments; and 8 a.m. - 4:30 p.m., Mondays and Wednesdays in Forest Lake, call 651-430-6578 for appointments.