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Washington County earns Yellow Ribbon designation

Program is designed to support military personnel and their families



From left: LTC Barbara O'Reilly, LT Tim Norton, Governor Tim Pawlenty, Washington County Chief Deputy Mike Johnson, key organizer Bob Livingston, and Maj. Gen. Larry Shellito.

Washington County was one of 13 entities named to Yellow Ribbon status at a ceremony Tuesday afternoon, Jan. 5, at Century College presided over by Gov. Tim Pawlenty and Maj. Gen. Larry Shellito, the Adjutant General of the Minnesota National Guard.

Washington County and additional organizations were being recognized for their efforts to create a network of support for military personnel and their families, and a way to let families know about that network during a soldier's deployment. These efforts are in addition to the many services that already exist, such as the Veterans Services Offices.

The county's role is to establish a network that links key players from across the county to support those families. Those key players include municipalities, churches, schools, businesses, volunteer organizations and veterans organizations. The county is also expected to review its policies and programs to assure that they are accessible to military members and their families.

Washington County met that criteria, as did Isanti County, which was also recognized at the ceremony. In addition to the Yellow Ribbon counties, Hugo, Stillwater and Woodbury were recognized as Yellow Ribbon cities; North Heights Lutheran Church in Arden Hills and St. John Neumann Church in Eagan were recognized as Yellow Ribbon churches; and Cub Foods, based in Stillwater; the Disabled Veterans Rest Camp of Washington County; Baskfield and Associates of Rogers; Faelon Partners LTD/Today's Business Radio LLC, Golden Valley; and Minnesota State Colleges and Universities were recognized as Yellow Ribbon companies; and Rasmussen College was recognized as a Yellow Ribbon campus.

The Yellow Ribbon movement in Washington County got its start when Lt. Col. John Morris began a dialogue with the Washington County Board of Commissioners in 2008, extending an invitation to talk

about the experience and needs of deployed members of the military, and their families. Later, County Board members expressed their interest in finding ways to collaborate in supporting the troops and their families.

By last January, community leaders were meeting to seek ways create a support network that would add to the efforts of the Minnesota National Guard's Deployment Cycle Support, to lessen the burden on spouses and children while a family member is deployed.

Within the Yellow Ribbon network, Washington County is defined as "a community of 27 cities and 6 townships that are home to our 233,000 residents, including more than 16,000 veterans, the 130 soldiers deployed from the Minnesota Army National Guard and the many others on active duty with the Army, Marines, Navy, Air Force and Coast Guard. It refers to the network of schools, faith communities, service agencies and organizations, the employers and businesses that are the fabric of these communities," and that met the Guard's criteria as a Yellow Ribbon County.

Shellito, at the Jan. 5 ceremony, described the Yellow Ribbon movement as empowering the community to take care of military families. He described how soldiers and their families have their world "turned upside down" when called to deploy. It is support for those troops and their families that helps turn the world right-side up again, he said.

If soldiers feel that their family's welfare is threatened, they will not to be able to perform their duties as soldiers, said Pawlenty. It is crucial for the soldiers' success that their families be looked after, he said. The soldiers have "given up a chunk of their time" to serve their country, Pawlenty said, "and if need be, they are willing to lay down their lives. It is an enormous act of generosity." If they can commit themselves to that endeavor, then it is only fitting that members of the community commit to support them in that endeavor.

The message that every Yellow Ribbon organization provides is "a sense of 'I am not in this alone,'" Pawlenty told the group.

Pawlenty presented plaques to each group, in front of an audience of community and business leaders in Century College's common area. Earlier in the day, members of these groups met to share experiences and best practices, to enhance the efforts that have already been made, and to offer direction to similar groups that are still seeking Yellow Ribbon status. For more information, see www.btyr.org.