

State defense forces: Challenges and opportunities of recruiting and retention

Effective recruiting and retention is a challenge for any volunteer organization and SDFs are faced with several challenges in recruiting and retaining quality personnel



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State defense forces (SDF) are volunteer military forces which each state, along with the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, the US Virgin Islands, and the District of Columbia, are authorized to maintain pursuant to Title 32, Section 109 of the

(Photo courtesy American Military University) US Code. Currently, 19 states and Puerto Rico maintain SDFs, which fall under the exclusive control of their governors, through their adjutants general. SDFs can be a potentially significant support asset for a state's National Guard during state military and disaster response operations.

Unlike National Guard forces, these forces are not subject to federalization, and according to Title 32, Section 109, SDF members are not entitled to “pay, allowances, subsistence, transportation, or medical care or treatment, from funds of the United States.”

Effective recruiting and retention is a challenge for any volunteer

organization and SDFs are faced with several challenges in recruiting and retaining quality personnel. The first is creating public awareness that SDFs actually exist! Often SDF leaders are overwhelmed with trying to figure out how to create organizational awareness, particularly given the financial constraints SDFs are challenged with. Overcoming such impediments can be difficult, but is certainly not impossible.

The first step toward creating public awareness is the development of a recruiting and marketing plan. In the corporate world, businesses devote substantial time and resources to create awareness of their products and to promote their “brand.” Business plans are essential tools in making this happen. SDF leaders can use the same business, or marketing plan to achieve a similar result. Having a quality public affairs officer (PAO) and personnel with a background in marketing can help in this effort. Examine your available advertising resources, public and/or private funding resources that may be available to support your efforts, and activities and events across a broad spectrum that can be used to create awareness. Establish marketing themes and recruiting goals. Most of all, involve all members in promoting the organization. The state defense PAO should also work with the National Guard PAO for that state and explore ways that each organization can provide mutual support.

Another challenge is providing the necessary financial support to SDFs. Unfortunately, this is not a perfect world and while funding varies across states, in many cases it is inadequate. This funding deficiency is no fault of the states. State National Guard forces have seen reduced Federal funding in recent years and as a result of this decrease, adjutants general have had to repurpose state funding to leverage those funds to compensate for the Federal reductions. In some cases, National Guard forces have had to reduce overall levels of spending, or, at best, maintain current levels. This would result in the reallocation of state funds that might have otherwise been available to support state defense forces to support higher priority National Guard functions. SDF members understand and accept that there will be some

personal costs associated with membership. They understand that in the militia tradition, they will probably have to provide their own uniforms and personal equipment, and that they may have to cover some other types of personal costs, such as food and transportation. It becomes more problematic, particularly from a retention standpoint, when members have to cover their own costs for things such as office supplies and unit equipment that are necessary to make a unit function and able to carry out the mission.

Despite the associated cost constraints, there are still actions that both state and Federal government can take to help reduce the financial strain on SDF members and improve unit readiness and soldier morale to promote more effective recruiting and retention. Some of these actions may require changes in state law and policy. At the state level, a few steps that can be taken to support members at a minimal cost to the state include:

- State- paid term life insurance.
- Specialty license plates for SDF members.
- Free tuition or tuition discounts at state community colleges and four-year universities.
- Employee discounts offered to other state employees for various goods and services.
- State tax deductions or credits for SDF membership to compensate for expenses members incur as a result of SDF membership. This particular benefit could also be extended to National Guard members, if a state does not already provide for it.
- Making National Guard soldiers who are retiring or are being discharged aware of the state defense force, and that membership would provide an opportunity for continued service.

While Federal law limits what type of SDF support the Federal government can provide, some forms of support can still be offered, although it may require modification of regulations or changes in Federal law. The first type of support is to make surplus military uniforms and equipment available to

SDFs that would otherwise be repurposed to other state agencies, destroyed, or sold to the public. This policy would treat SDFs in the same manner as other state agencies, county governments, and local governments in accessing this equipment. This demilitarized equipment and uniforms could then be issued to SDF units and personnel, thus reducing the cost of serving to both the member and to the state.

The other area where the Federal government can provide SDF support is training. Land SDFs generally utilize Army doctrine and train to Army standards, insofar as it pertains to the SDF mission. The readiness and professionalism of SDF members and leaders could be greatly enhanced if they had access to training materials that reflect current doctrine and had the opportunity to attend certain types of military courses, particularly courses related to professional leadership development. H.R.206 – State Defense Force Improvement Act, which was introduced by Representative Joe Wilson in 2009, attempted to address some of these issues. While this bill never made it out of committee, the context of the legislation could perhaps be revisited as a means to achieve some of the objectives stated above.

Finally, it is vital that SDF leaders examine how our soldiers' time is being managed and to ensure that it is being managed effectively and also to ensure that their soldiers' activities have meaning. This begins by the SDFs having missions assigned by the state's adjutant general that our members are qualified and able to do. Next, it requires that SDF leaders understand that a volunteer's time has value and if that time is being wasted, the organization will be unable to retain members. Therefore, it is important that training that is conducted in a unit is mission-focused, realistic, and that it allows the soldiers in the unit to learn and grow.

SDFs are a low- cost resource available to a state that can be a force multiplier and asset in support of a state's National Guard force. As volunteers, SDF members are dedicated and have a strong, altruistic sense of service to their fellow citizens. With some minimal support, the state and Federal

government can help to promote readiness and professionalism among SDF soldiers and leaders, can help to promote effective recruiting and retention efforts, can help to provide some tangible value to the service of their volunteer soldiers, and can help to promote public awareness of these organizations.

About the Author

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