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Battlefield to farmer's field

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--- — OTTUMWA — If soldiers are coming home to Iowa at a time farmers are leaving rural America, there's a pretty clear opportunity.

"I think agriculture can provide them not just with a livelihood, but also a sense of continuing service," said Ed Cox, a veteran of the U.S. Coast Guard who now chairs the Farmer Veteran Coalition of Iowa. "There's a danger in constantly thanking our military, telling them how great they are, putting them on a pedestal, and then they come home and we don't have a place for them."

The coalition can provide education on agri-business, assist with finding grants or point the way to already existing resources which are in place to help returning veterans, whether they served stateside, overseas, were injured or not injured. But that Cox's group specializes in is finding places for veterans in the world of agriculture. They've been successful in their first year of existence perhaps because it's not just the veterans who benefit, it's the community, too.

We have an aging farm population [retiring], we have people leaving rural Iowa for jobs elsewhere — so bringing in veterans who want to farm can be critical for a rural area and the state of Iowa," Cox said. "At its core, it's about Iowa and rural development, not just another veteran program."

And it's not just a farming program, either, he said. It's about ag, about the people who help the farmers grow the food that sustains a nation. And because agriculture is such a wide sector, returning vets will find multiple opportunities to fit their military occupation. There's also the benefit of landing an employee who can follow instructions yet also demonstrate leadership, keep working under less than perfect conditions and show initiative when appropriate.

Cox mentioned working elevators, being a mechanic at an implement dealership service department, truck driving, and at the high tech end of the spectrum, "technology specialists, particularly with GPS, which is not just being used in the military but becoming increasingly important in precision agriculture," Cox said.

Of course, there's also the big job, the job some young people dream of.

It's not easy to break into farming. There are challenges, even for people coming from farm families, and especially for someone just starting," Cox said. "But if they feel passionate about farming, we will work with them."

But before facing the attempt to get into farming, the veteran can see what the business is really like.

"We'll first link them with established farmers so they can try it," he said.

Cox, who works in the Drake University Agricultural Law Center, said the coalition wants to grow, though their services are already available to veterans in and around Wapello County. They are incorporated as a not-for-profit group with the State of Iowa, and are in the process of receiving their 501c(3) status from the federal government. Though they accept donations (the USDA and ISU have provided grants), they are also looking for farmers who are willing to act as mentors to a veteran considering the farm life, for additional agricultural employers that would be especially welcoming of veterans and a community itself, as the Farmer Veteran Coalition of Iowa looks for entities willing to host small workshops.

Though rural areas make up a smaller percentage of the nation than either cities or suburban spaces, those raised in agriculture-rich regions serve in the military at a much higher rate; Cox said around 40 percent of the military is from farm country.

"The military is a way to see the world, a way to find work — and a way to give [back] to the community," he said. "I think rural America has a strong tradition of service to this country."

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