

Dept. of Military Affairs: Wisconsin has three semifinalists for top ESGR award

Posted on Wednesday, Mar 24, 2021

>> **WisPolitics is now on the State Affairs network. Get custom keyword notifications, bill tracking and all WisPolitics content. [Get the app or access via desktop.](#)**

Three Wisconsin employers are among 140 semifinalists nationwide for the 2021 Secretary of Defense Employer Support Freedom Award. More commonly referred to as the Freedom Award, it is the Defense Department's highest recognition of employers who provide outstanding support for National Guard and Reserve members.

The award is run by Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve (ESGR), a Defense Department program.

The three Wisconsin employers include the Village of Pewaukee Police Department, nominated by a Wisconsin Air National Guard member; Associated Bank, headquartered in Green Bay, nominated by an Army Reserve member; and INNIO Waukesha Gas Engine in Waukesha, nominated by a Coast Guard Reserve member.

Those employers were among nine Above and Beyond award recipients in Wisconsin. According to Chris Campbell, a program support specialist with the Wisconsin ESGR, those nine — Associated Bank, Dedicated Systems, Inc. of Green Bay, Innio Waukesha Gas Engine, Kenosha Police Department, Lutheran Home and Harwood Place in Wauwatosa, Pewaukee Police Department, Pierce Manufacturing in Appleton, the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and WEC Energy Group in Milwaukee — represent large and small private sector employers as well as public sector employers. All were nominated for the Freedom Award, and regardless of who is selected as finalists, all will receive the Above and Beyond Award.

“The ESGR Above and Beyond Award was created to publicly recognize U.S.

employers providing extraordinary patriotic support and cooperation to their employees who have answered their nation's call to serve," said Scott Legwold, Wisconsin ESGR state chair. "Supportive employers are critical to maintaining the strength and readiness of the nation's Guard and Reserve units."

This past year, when the Wisconsin National Guard has served at an unprecedented level in Wisconsin's COVID-19 response effort, underscores the importance of employer support. In addition to federal overseas deployments and COVID missions such as specimen collection, Wisconsin National Guard members have supported the wildfire response in California, provided poll workers for primary and general elections in 2020, and civil support to local authorities across the state during protests as well as at the nation's capitol shortly after the Jan. 6 riot. Some Wisconsin National Guard members have served for extended times away from their jobs, while others have been called away repeatedly as needed. Job security during times like these makes it easier for National Guard members to continue to serve their state and nation.

The Air National Guard member noted in the Pewaukee Police Department nomination packet that the department highly regards the values service members gain in the military, and the department in turn supports its officers who serve in the reserve components.

"In our recent past, the village of Pewaukee Police Department has had several members activated at the same time. With only 17 patrol officers, it can become a challenge to meet our road staffing requirements," the nomination document states. "We have found that all of our members step up, sometimes working double shifts, coming in on off days, working split shifts and supported our enlisted service members."

The Pewaukee Police Department said it kept one deployed patrol officer updated on department news and sent care packages, and supported the wife of a deployed patrol officer by booking appointments at her hairdressing business.

The Army Reservist who nominated Associated Bank said his employer has a long tradition of supporting military employees, and has received numerous other ESGR awards.

"Associated Bank has recognized the value that my military service adds to my professional role," the Army civil affairs specialist wrote. "They do not see it as time

away from my job, but instead as a value-add to my professional experience and skillset ... In turn, I have been able to apply skills and training gained at Associated Bank in my military role.”

The Coast Guard Reservist said in the nomination packet that INNIO Waukesha maintained its support for military reservists after it was sold from General Electric Power. He noted that INNIO quickly responded to his last short-notice activation in August 2019 in response to Hurricane Dorian, ensuring that his customers were taken care of as well as his family.

“Waukesha paid me the difference in salary between my active duty pay and my contract with Waukesha,” the Reservist said. “[They] also continued my benefits. This ensured that the standard of living my family enjoyed remained intact while I was deployed.”

Other Above and Beyond award recipients were praised by their service member employees.

“I have never been made to feel guilty for performing my military obligations,” Tommar Franklin, a chief petty officer in the Coast Guard Reserve, said of the Kenosha Police Department. “Rather, I have often times received statements of appreciation for my military service.”

Lt. Col. Derek Wolter, a chaplain with the 115th Fighter Wing, said the award nomination speaks to many years of extraordinary support he has received from Lutheran Home and Harwood Place.

“Knowing that all is well at work has allowed me to continue my military service,” Wolter said, “providing the experienced leadership that benefits our Airmen and our mission.”

1st Lt. Dave Schroeder, a member of the Wisconsin Army National Guard’s Detachment 1, 176th Cyber Protection Team — currently mobilized in support of the U.S. Cyber Command — said the University of Wisconsin-Madison supported him when he was in the Navy Reserve, and now with the Wisconsin National Guard.

“Knowing I have their support makes it much easier to serve my country,” Schroeder said.

Capt. Joshua Sweeney of the Wisconsin Air National Guard’s 128th Air Refueling

Wing was one of two reservists to nominate WEC Energy Group. He noted that he has been on military duty for approximately 15 percent of the just over 10 years he has worked at WEC.

“WEC has supported me every step of the way,” Sweeney said. “What is so impressive is that I am just one of many military members working for and being supported by the company.”

Thirty finalists will be chosen this month from the 140 semifinalists, and 15 will be selected for the 2021 Freedom Award.