

Illinois Army National Guard institutes new community relations policy

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SPRINGFIELD - The Illinois Army National Guard has instituted a new policy designed to focus support for community events from Illinois Army National Guard units to the local communities where those units are based.

Beginning with requests received by the Illinois National Guard Public Affairs Office after July 22, 2016; most community relations requests including speakers, vehicle static displays, and parade support will either be supported by a unit within 50 miles of the event or will not be supported.

"The Illinois Army National Guard is a community-based organization and it is vital that we continue to communicate with and support the communities where our Soldiers live and work," said Brig. Gen. Michael Zerbonia, the Commander of the Illinois Army National Guard and Assistant Adjutant General – Army of the Illinois National Guard.

"At the same time, we have a responsibility to the taxpayers to conserve training time and resources for both our state and federal missions. This policy focuses support from local units to local communities."

Color guards are expensive requiring a minimum of four Soldiers and additional training time and therefore are further restricted. Color guards in a paid status will be restricted to those in the unit commander's yearly training plan or to events of statewide or national impact.

In addition, Soldiers will be allowed to volunteer in a non-paid status for community relations support outside the 50-mile radius as long as the support falls within U.S. Army regulations. Soldiers could wear a U.S. Army dress uniform when they volunteer, but they would be responsible for any transportation costs and could not operate any Army equipment.

The policy allows the Illinois Army National Guard Chief of Staff to grant exceptions on a case-by-case basis. There are more general exceptions to the policy. For example, the Illinois Army National Guard's 144th Army Band has a statewide community relations mission and therefore will continue to support events throughout the state.

"We have about 50 facilities scattered throughout the state, so the vast majority of Illinois communities fall within 50 miles of one of our units," said Lt. Col. Brad Leighton, the Illinois National Guard public affairs director. "What we want to avoid is having Soldiers driving half-way across the state to support events. There is a process to grant exceptions when such support is in the best interest of the Illinois Army National Guard."

Additional guidance within the policy addresses safety and liability concerns in supporting community events and sets administrative deadlines to allow full review of certain community relations requests.

For example, Army National Guard helicopter static displays are expensive and already require full review by Illinois Army National Guard leadership as well as the National Guard Bureau in Washington, D.C. To get that review completed, the Illinois National Guard public affairs office needs to have the request at least 90 days before the event.

Requests for the 144th Army Band must also be submitted a minimum of 90 days before the event or the request will not be supported.

"All Department of Defense community relations events are supported by existing training dollars. There is no separate funding for support to community events," Leighton said.

"Supporting community relations events benefits both the Illinois Army National Guard and our communities. Our Soldiers derive training value from supporting community events and we are also able to develop and strengthen relationships with our communities by being active locally. However, most of our Soldiers only get limited training time per year. There needs to be a good balance between community relations support and other training requirements."