

South Dakota National Guard

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

July 12, 2016

SD man recognized for exemplary service to National Guard, Reserve

SIoux FALLS, S.D. – A Sioux Falls man was recognized for outstanding public service as a volunteer with the South Dakota Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve for the past 22 years.

Don Kelpin received the James M. Roche Spirit of Volunteerism Award from the National Committee for ESGR.

ESGR is a Department of Defense agency that seeks to promote and maintain active support from public and private employers for the men and women of the National Guard and Reserve and value the military service of their employees. The James M. Roche Spirit of Volunteerism Award is the highest award given to ESGR volunteers for sustained quality service over a substantial period of years.

“I never enlisted in the armed forces, but always felt a strong need to serve,” Kelpin said. “Working with ESGR is my way of serving my country, and honoring those who serve in the armed forces. I am dedicated to this organization because I believe in its mission. To be recognized at this level for my work is a real honor.”

The award highlights patriotism, good citizenship and public responsibility - often achieved by great effort and personal sacrifice.

“Don selflessly gives of himself whenever volunteers are needed, often times being the first to raise his hand to support an event,” said Maj. Lona Christensen, SD ESGR program director. “He continually goes above and beyond to increase community awareness of what ESGR’s role is and its importance to our national defense.”

Kelpin began volunteering with the program in 1994, where he would serve the next seven years as an ombudsman – providing education, information, consultation, and mediation services between employers and service members. In October 2003, he stepped up to serve as the SD ESGR Committee acting state chair and was then selected to the state chair’s position for two consecutive three-year terms.

During his tenure as the state chair, Kelpin volunteered more than 5,000 hours overseeing the activities of ESGR’s military outreach, employer outreach and ombudsman services. He stepped into the chair’s seat just as the SDNG and other Reserve forces began seeing troop deployments at rates not seen since World War II.

“Under Don’s leadership, the SD ESGR committee was revitalized, resulting in impressive gains in business and community support for the National Guard and Reserve through an aggressive educational program,” Christensen said. “Through his strong influence, great concern for, and his immense dedication and professionalism toward the state, employers and service members, South Dakota is able to keep its very best in the Guard and Reserve.”

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After stepping down from the state chair position in October 2011, Keplin continues to serve with the program on the executive committee and in employer and military outreach.

He said one particular homecoming ceremony for a SDNG unit stays with him and keeps things in perspective.

“I will never forget how moving the welcome home ceremony was for Charlie Battery out of Yankton,” Kelpin said. “Hearing the first sergeant call out the names of the Soldiers [role call] ... who gave their lives... with no response back- really says what this is about. They gave their lives... I give my time.

“I have served 22 years with ESGR and if I have another 22 years, I will continue to serve with ESGR.”

The Spirit of Volunteerism Award is named in honor of James M. Roche, appointed in 1972 by President Richard Nixon as the first ESGR national chair. Roche organized and spearheaded ESGR when employer support for the nation’s community-based defense force was first recognized as fundamental to the Total Force Policy. Under Roche’s leadership, patriotic volunteers across the nation were organized to establish programs and services that help build partnerships between Reserve component members, their civilian employers and military leaders.

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High resolution photos are available upon request.



Don Kelpin: (U.S. Army National Guard photo)

For more information about ESGR Employer Outreach Programs and volunteer opportunities, please contact Maj. Lona Christensen, SD-ESGR program director, at 605-737-6540 or lona.m.christensen.mil@mail.mil.