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Troops to Trucks program helps military drivers transition into civilian world

If you have experience driving a truck in the military -- or even if you don't, but want to learn -- you can now earn your Virginia commercial driver's license faster, and get connected to civilian employers, with the **Troops to Trucks** program. The Troops to Trucks program was initiated by the Virginia Department of Motor Vehicles last year to help servicemembers transitioning out of the military -- and veterans within 90 days of leaving active service -- find jobs in the transportation industry. "Our Troops to Trucks program is probably one of the most exciting things that we've done in the last few years," said Richard Holcomb, Virginia DMV commissioner. "It's been nationally recognized."

Troops to Trucks can help expedite the job-hunting experience for servicemembers who want to drive commercial vehicles, in three different ways.

First, the program allows veterans with relevant driving experience to get their commercial driver's license, or CDL, without taking a skills test, as long as they can prove their relevant driving experience. This includes active-duty military, National Guardsmen and Reservists." Our first part of the program -- we're just calling it 'one less test,'" Holcomb said. "If they have driven successfully and their commander is willing to certify that they've been a safe driver, and they're within 90 days of being discharged, they can bring in that commander's waiver and we only have them take the written test." In other words, they no longer have to bring a truck to the DMV to be tested. "If they pass th written test, we go right to issuing them a commercial driver's license," Holcomb said.

Since the program began in July 2012, more than 75 servicemembers have gotten their CDL through Troops to Trucks, Holcomb said. Soldiers on Fort Belvoir can learn more about the program through the Army Career Assistance Program, according to Pam Goheen, Virginia DMV assistant commissioner for communications. "Since July 2012, more than 650 individuals at Fort Belvoir have been exposed to Troops to Trucks," she said. Wounded servicemembers with missing or impaired limbs can also

use the program. "We're very proud that we are the first state in the nation that has been certified to also take our program to our wounded warriors. They are required to take one additional skills test to make sure that their disability does not prevent them from driving a truck or a bus. All of the CDL examiners have been trained and have been certified to do that," Holcomb said.

Second, Troops to Trucks helps servicemembers who don't have the exact experience needed, but want to get their CDL. "Driving a tank in Afghanistan may not necessarily qualify you to drive an 18-wheeler up and down (Interstate) 95," Holcomb said. "Or, there may just be other people who have other MOS'es in the military -- a cook, a court typist -- who say 'Boy, I think I've got more employability if I had some skills driving trucks or buses. So, that's when we went about creating the second part of Troops to Trucks." Fort Lee and Marine Corps Base Quantico are both licensed by the Virginia DMV as skills training and testing sites for Troops to Trucks, and classes are open to all servicemembers in the state. The skills training program lasts around two to three weeks, Holcomb said. The DMV is also working to license Fort Pickett (Virginia National Guard).

Lastly, and most importantly according to Holcomb, Troops to Trucks connects these servicemembers to potential employers through the Virginia Trucking Association, Virginia Motorcoach Association, Virginia Association for Pupil Transportation and Virginia Department of Transportation. Once servicemembers earn their CDL, they fill out an employment placement questionnaire that asks them where they want to live after being discharged, and what type of vehicle they want to drive, such as a commercial truck or school bus. Then, the DMV sends the questionnaires to potential employers. "If we've got a service(member) who says 'I want to live in Richmond and I want to drive a truck,' then, working (with) the Virginia Trucking Association, we're probably going to send that questionnaire to some Richmond-based trucking company that is looking for qualified drivers," Holcomb said.

The program is a "win-win situation" for both transitioning servicemembers and the transportation industry, Holcomb said. "There's a need from the transportation community to have truck drivers and bus drivers and there's a need for our veterans to get good paying jobs," he said. "I think drivers can make anywhere from \$40,000 to \$70,000 a year. "We want to make sure that Soldiers and Marines have the training and credentials necessary to be employed in the transportation field, but we also want to make sure that we give them a step towards actually getting

employed."

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