

Christie signs legislation to assist veterans and military families

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| **Posted: Sunday, August 21, 2011 12:00 am**

TRENTON — Gov. Chris Christie on Friday signed legislation that will support New Jersey veterans and military families, including creating a way for the public to help fund services for National Guard members.

Christie signed both laws after they found overwhelming bipartisan support in the Legislature earlier this year.

The first established the Veteran-to-Veteran Peer Support Program, a free 24-hours-a-day, seven-days-a-week telephone help line for those who have served.

An annual appropriation will fund the help line, which currently is operated by the state Department of Military and Veterans Affairs in partnership with the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey.

“Serving in a combat zone puts overwhelming stress on the mind and body that the average New Jerseyan will never know. So this program is a critical component of the healing process in the long-term mental health of our service members who return from Iraq and Afghanistan as well as veterans of previous conflicts,” Christie said.

It will help veterans seeking assistance with post-traumatic stress disorder and other issues.

It provides access to a comprehensive network of mental health professionals specializing in post-traumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injuries, and other emotional and psychological disorders.

The peer counselors are trained in other veterans issues that range from marriage and family life to substance abuse and stress management, officials said.

Assemblyman Jack Connors, D-7th of Pennsauken, co-sponsored both laws signed Friday.

“The help line is a great idea that receives and responds to calls from veterans, service members and their families,” said Connors, chairman of the Assembly’s Military and Veterans Affairs Committee.

“We sadly know all too well that many of our veterans need a helping hand once they’ve returned home, and hopefully a peer support program like this will encourage them to seek help when they need it.”

The governor also signed legislation that sets up a council to support the families of those deployed in the Guard.

Through the New Jersey National Guard State Family Readiness Council Fund, residents will be able to voluntarily contribute to the nonprofit by checking a box on their yearly income tax forms.

The services include financial planning, educational programs and other support services, officials said.

“Every day the brave men and women of the New Jersey National Guard put their personal lives on hold, leaving not only their loved ones but their jobs behind to defend our nation and American values,” Christie said.

He previously donated \$141,000 from contributions generated through the governor’s inaugural.

“Over the past decade, the New Jersey National Guard has deployed more than 15,000 service members around the globe safeguarding our state and nation,” said Maj. Gen. Glenn K. Rieth, commander of the state National Guard. “These bills reaffirm the governor’s commitment to our veterans and our (members) and their families, who sacrifice so much for our freedom.”