

# OPINION

## AN ECHO PRESS EDITORIAL



Celeste Edenloff / Echo Press

Members of the Freedom First Riders follow behind a veterans memorial semi along the Memorial Day parade route in Alexandria last year.

## How does state treat its veterans?

Here's a bit of good news for those serving in the military.

Minnesota is treating its veterans fairly well when compared to other states, according to a new study from the personal finance website, WalletHub. The study was released in May – Military Appreciation Month – and also coincides with Memorial Day.

Minnesota ranked as the seventh best state for military retirees.

In an effort to help members of the military plan their years after service, WalletHub compared the 50 states and the District of Columbia across 29 key indicators of retirement-friendliness toward veterans.

Minnesota's total score was 56.3, about 7 points behind the top-ranked state, Virginia. Oregon and the District of Columbia ranked the lowest.

The data set ranges from job opportunities for veterans to housing affordability to quality of Veterans Affairs hospitals. Here's how Minnesota stacks up (1 is best, 25 is average):

- ▶ Fifth lowest percent of homeless veterans.
- ▶ Fifth best for providing veteran job opportunities.
- ▶ Housing affordability – 12th.
- ▶ Percent of veteran-owned businesses – 29th.
- ▶ Quality of VA hospitals – third.

WalletHub experts noted that people typically view retirement as the end of the line – a time for rest, relaxation and the pursuit of interests long ago put on the back burner. But the story is far different for military retirees who must deal with the trials of re-assimilation into civilian life.

For starters, the average officer is only 45 years old – 42 for non-disability enlisted personnel – upon retirement from service, according to WalletHub.

"Many of those who reenter the job market face tough challenges during the transition while others struggle with more difficult problems, such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, disability and homelessness," WalletHub noted. "As such, military retirement can be a far more complicated issue than one might assume, given the extent to which state tax policies on military benefits vary, the relative friendliness of different job markets toward veterans and other socioeconomic factors."

For the full report, go to <https://wallethub.com/edu/best-states-for-military-retirees/3915/>

WalletHub also provided some facts to ponder about Memorial Day:

- ▶ 96 – number of members in the 116th Congress who have served in the U.S. military.
  - ▶ 25 – number of American cities that have claimed to be the birthplace of Memorial Day.
  - ▶ 818 – number of hot dogs consumed every second from Memorial Day to Labor Day (7 billion total).
  - ▶ 20 to 80 percent off – discounts shoppers can expect during Memorial Day weekend sales.
  - ▶ \$139 million – estimated value of items that will be lost this Memorial Day weekend.
- This busy holiday weekend, make time to attend a Memorial Day service and remember the sacrifices of our brave service men and women that helped give us the freedoms we enjoy today.

## LETTER

### Freedoms, democracy and selecting literature

To the editor:

One person's freedom ends where another person's freedom begins. This fact has been affirmed from Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes to John Stuart Mill to Abraham Lincoln.

People fortunate enough to live in a democracy understand this, because it is a fundamental tenet of their government. It's both a deep philosophical concept – and as simple as taking turns at a stop light.

It's closely related to freedom of speech, another fundamental tenet of democracy, one which guarantees that all voices have the right and the opportunity to be heard.

The grand purpose of public schools in America is to produce

citizens who understand and perpetuate our democracy, and literature is one of our most powerful tools for doing this. In both fiction and non-fiction, it teaches that all kinds of people, with all kinds of lifestyles and beliefs, can learn to understand each other and work together for common goals.

Of course, we need to use good judgement in selecting literature that is age-appropriate and exemplifies good quality writing. As mature adults, we are certainly able to do this, and when we, as human beings surely will, make mistakes, we are certainly able to deal with them according to our democratic principles of equal rights and freedom of speech, and to move on, with a common purpose.

Carol H. Varner  
Alexandria, MN

### Submitting letters to the editor:

The Echo Press encourages readers to voice their opinions through letters to the editor. Please, however, keep your letters brief and to the point. Letters of more than 300 words or excessively long letters may be edited to a shorter form by the newspaper staff. Personal attacks against private individuals will not be printed. All letters must be signed and include the writer's address and telephone number. Letters published will include the writer's name and the city of residence only. Writers are limited to publishing one letter every 30 days. Submissions can be emailed to [aedenloff@echopress.com](mailto:aedenloff@echopress.com) or submitted to the Echo Press office at 225 7th Ave. E., Alexandria, MN 56308. For information, call (320) 763-3133.

## IT'S OUR TURN

# Home is where the heart is

Everyone wants a place to hang their hat, to call home. Many are fortunate to have such a place, a house that they own or are making payments toward that end.

However, for many people, owning a house is out of reach. Houses can be expensive, and that's true of the Alexandria area, with an abundance of lakes and quality of life making this a sought-after place to live. For those who can't afford them, living conditions can vary greatly.

That really hit home – pardon the pun – for Angie Heidelberg. The vice president of mortgage lending at Bell Bank in Alexandria was born and raised here, but until she became involved with Habitat for Humanity by joining its homeowner selection committee, she didn't realize the extent of the situation.

Heidelberg, who spoke at last week's Hard Hat Breakfast before a packed hall at Broadway Ballroom, told of how she soon realized she didn't know her hometown as well as she thought she did.

"The home visits revealed another level of brokenness in this world," she said, citing deplorable conditions, including an upstairs that was too cold for children to sleep in the bedrooms, and they were forced to wear winter clothing to go up and play with their toys.

But through all she encountered, another sight was on display: The big hearts of parents working night and day to pay the



ROSS EVAVOLD  
Editor

bills, and kids with the biggest smiles.

Through Habitat for Humanity, some of those people have gotten the opportunity to leave those places and buy their own home. Heidelberg has been seen first-hand what this has meant to applicants. And it has reinforced all that home means to her.

The home she grew up in here has so many fond memories, details of which come floating back. But she has tear-filled memories from that house, too. They all become intertwined with the home, since that is where so much of what's meaningful in our lives takes place.

Tony Loosbrock, senior vice president at Bremer Bank in Alexandria, feels the same way.

"I've realized it's more than the sticks. It's the people and the stories that get represented – your family, your friends, tough times and good times and everything in between," said Loosbrock, who first became involved in Habitat for Humanity while in Brainerd, and since last year has been on the board here.

Having your own home can turn a life around. It did for Sue Wadsworth, who was profiled in Wednesday's paper. Lori Anderson, executive director of Douglas

County's Habitat program, has seen it time and again from hard-working families who need affordable housing.

"Just to hear their challenges and what life has dealt to them is pretty powerful. It inspires all of us. This is why our program exists, to partner with families through circumstances out of their control," she said.

Anderson noted that each story is unique.

"We're partnering with four families this year who all have stories of their own," she said.

Let's get back to Heidelberg's story. In the five years she has been a part of Habitat for Humanity, her story has become intertwined with those of the Habitat homebuyers.

She says that as an adult, what home means to her hasn't changed much.

It's still a place where she sometimes cries into her pillow, and has a never-ending amount of chores awaiting her. But there's more.

"It's where I wake up to hugs and kisses. Dogs that greet me when I walk in the door," she said. And green grass to run and play in on warm summer days.

Thanks to the work of so many through Habitat for Humanity, more families are getting the chance to experience all of that for themselves.

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"It's Our Turn" is a weekly column that rotates among members of the Echo Press editorial staff.

## LETTERS

### Big Ole is a well-liked character for most

To the editor:

(In response to the May 22 letter, "Runestone is authentic; Big Ole is a joke.")

Big Ole may not be a historical figure but I believe he is a well-liked character for most Alexandrians.

As someone that worked at a local resort and was around many out of state tourists I know everyone that made a trip into Alex had family pictures taken standing by Big Ole and they all enjoyed the experience.

Everybody knows Paul Bunyan was a fictional character but Bemidji, Brainerd and Akeley still have their

statues, not to mention all the oversized fish statues that decorate our great state. I enjoy seeing Big Ole standing tall on the north end of Broadway and I think many residents feel the same.

Dale Flemming  
Alexandria, MN

### Please hang up and drive

To the editor:

Another session of the Minnesota Legislature is almost over. They agreed to a budget that reflects compromise on both sides of the aisle, for which they should be applauded.

Among the laws passed this year was the "hands-

free cell phone" bill, an action that was long overdue. I checked into the stats and found legislators from our area voted against this bill. Why? Apparently they aren't interested in a law that hopefully will make our roads safer by cutting down on distracted driving. Thank God there were enough intelligent, informed legislators to vote for this much-needed law.

Beginning in August, drivers using their phones while driving could be penalized. So people, please hang up and drive – or face the consequences.

Carlene M. Dean  
Osakis, MN

# Clean energy heroes are all around

By Steve Kelley  
Minnesota Department of Commerce commissioner,  
St. Paul, MN

Everywhere you turn, in every corner of the state, you will find homeowners, farmers, businesses both large and small, students and others as everyday heroes of Minnesota's clean energy economy. Their individual actions to advance clean energy are building momentum to reverse the course of climate change while creating jobs and saving money in the process, because the economics are undeniable – clean energy is the cheapest energy.

In Minneapolis, two brothers installed all LED light bulbs in the apartment buildings they own, because as small business owners, they know that energy efficiency means fewer repairs, less maintenance costs and lower energy bills.

In Mankato, a Navy veteran named Devin is earning his mechanical engineering degree at Minnesota State University and is looking at ways to put wind or solar on his family's farm, as a new "crop."

In Lake Elmo, Mary Florence designed and constructed a sustainable and energy efficient home that is coupled with "aging in place" features to ensure comfort in the years to come.

In Lake City, a solar panel installer named Taylor combines his love of the outdoors and his construction skills with the instructions his dad gave him as a nature-loving kid: Leave the planet better than you found it.

And recently, a number of Minnesota's largest companies wrote to state policymakers, pledging their commitment to curbing the effects of

climate change and making the case that clean energy policies will boost Minnesota's economy by fostering innovation and "sending a clear signal that Minnesota is open for business."

There are stories like these across the entire state, and Governor Tim Walz and Lieutenant Governor Peggy Flanagan's One Minnesota Path to Clean Energy empowers that momentum. Through policies that lead our state's energy sector to 100 percent clean energy by 2050, we will ensure cleaner air, create jobs and local economic renewal, invest in affordable clean energy and ensure reliability.

I urge our state's lawmakers to adopt the One Minnesota Path to Clean Energy. Minnesotans are already powering this future. It is time we support them.

### Reader Advisory Board helps improve newspaper

In its ongoing effort to improve the newspaper, the Echo Press has a Reader Advisory Board that meets every other month to offer feedback, story ideas and suggestions. Readers can also offer advisory board members their comments. Current members include Louie Seesz, Mary Anderson, Jim Nelson, Don Schoonhoven, Jane McCrery, Mark Hintermeyer, Judy Backhaus, Joel Novak and Mike Dempsey.