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Moon: Georgia State Defense Force supports troops, serves communities

They are men and women who wear the uniform of the U.S. Army. They devote about a month's worth of personal time annually to training and drill. They stand prepared to serve in case an emergency threatens the citizens of Georgia. And all for no pay.

The Georgia State Defense Force is an almost unknown volunteer organization that is part of the state's Department of Defense and augments Georgia's disaster preparedness infrastructure. The GSDF, which reports to the governor, operates in much the same manner as the Army National Guard although it cannot be federalized or deployed outside of the state. Indeed, the primary purpose of the GSDF is to essentially "fill in" for the National Guard when state Guard units have been mobilized for overseas deployment. Currently, the Georgia National Guard's 48th Infantry Brigade - the largest unit in the Georgia Guard - is scheduled to leave the state in late March for advanced training in California, to be followed by a tour of duty in Iraq sometime this summer.



Georgia is one of 19 states with a state defense force. Most state defense forces were formed during World War II, when a need for homeland defense organizations became apparent. State defense forces nationwide experienced a revival after the

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Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, as Americans looked for ways to support their country. The renewed interest coincided with serving a real need, as Reserve and Guard units around the country began to be mobilized to fight the global war on terror.

The non-profit Freedom Foundation calls state defense forces "the most cost-effective means of providing increased homeland security." In the recently completed fiscal year, Georgia State Defense Force members contributed nearly 40,000 volunteer hours at a civilian marketplace value of over \$4 million. The GSDF receives little state funding.

Despite being a uniformed military organization, the Georgia State Defense Force comprises people from all walks of life, including many with no prior military experience. Volunteers can be from 18 to 64 years of age, and while there is an initial entry training program, it is not nearly as strenuous as a traditional Army "boot camp." There is no weapons training. In fact, GSDF members are barred from carrying firearms while on duty, so Rambo wannabes need not apply.

To the contrary, the professionalism and commitment of GSDF members impresses all who become involved. One of those is consumer advocate Clark Howard, who, like many citizens, wanted to do something to give back to the community after Sept. 11. Howard now serves as a captain in the GSDF Public Affairs Office, promoting the organization through public service announcements on radio and television. Promoting the GSDF has become a priority in recent months, with new volunteers needed to fill the shoes of the 3,200 National Guard soldiers from the 48th Brigade who will be leaving the state soon. Right now, the GSDF can field only about one-fourth of that number.

After joining and going through initial orientation and training with the State Defense Force, volunteers are assigned jobs that match their work experience and educational backgrounds. The GSDF uses the U.S. Army's command structure, so volunteers can take advanced training to earn non-commissioned officer and officer ranks, and also earn the greater responsibilities that go with higher ranks. The GSDF operates with a military command structure to ensure that, if called upon, it can operate during an emergency as a cohesive and competent team.

But the State Defense Force serves Georgians in more ways than just disaster preparedness. The GSDF has provided medical and crowd control support for community events such as the Peachtree Road Race, the Homeless Veterans Salute and University of Georgia home football games. The organization has five brigades around the

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state serving their local communities.

If you've been trying to think of a way to support the troops, the Georgia State Defense Force may be for you. Anyone interested in volunteering should visit the GSDF Web site, www.gasdf.com. And remember, you don't need any prior military experience to join - just a heartfelt commitment to serve your fellow Georgians.

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