



ELBERT COUNTY GOVERNMENT

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Internship Offers Local Government Experience to Air Force Veteran

*A Second Career in Government Administration is a
Natural Fit for Retiring Lieutenant Colonel Eric Larson*

Elbert County, CO – Internships aren't just for college students or recent graduates anymore. The Veterans Local Government Management Fellowship (VLGMF) offers a 16-20 week program, in partnership with the Department of Defense, to service members who are transitioning out of the military and who have an interest in local government.

Through the VLGMF program, Elbert County was connected to 44-year-old Air Force Lieutenant Colonel Eric Larson, who has worked as an intern for the County since September. As a part of the program, Larson completed the International City and County Management Association's "Government 101" certificate, and worked on a variety of projects meant to expose him to the daily operations of the County.

"I've worked on open records and records management, the industrial hemp permitting ordinance, and economic development, in addition to handling the normal office and administrative duties you find in any organization," Larson explained. "On some level, the county's daily work feels like the policy issues I worked on in the Pentagon, or the bureaucratic processes at Northern Command I experienced over my 22 years of military service," he added.

The Veteran Fellowship is a part of what the Department of Defense calls the Career Skills Program. CSP gives separating and retiring military members up to 180 days to learn new skills that enhance their ability to be hired in the civilian sector, take formal education and training courses that translate their military skills into certificates civilian employers are looking for, or participate in internships with corporate sponsors that value the management and leadership skills military personnel can bring to their organizations. Although the latter option usually means interning with a Fortune 500 company, Larson's internship brought him to Elbert County, a smaller organization, by comparison, where he thought he could learn a lot in a short time.

"Small governments like Elbert County do it all; it's easy to get to know everyone who works here, and you are often confronted with finance, HR, and facilities challenges in the same day – or even the same hour – as I now know from experience," Larson observes.

"No one wants to see a veteran's skills go untapped once they get out, but finding a one-to-one translation of our military skills into civilian terms can be tough," says Larson. He praises the internship and Elbert County's commissioners, management, and staff, noting the internship has given him a great mix of training in new skills and placed him with a team eager to share their experiences. "I've learned I need additional budget, finance, and economic development coursework to fill gaps in my experience and put a formal stamp on some things I did while in uniform. I've been pleasantly surprised, though, that a lot of 'softer' skills like critical analysis,

strategic planning, collaboration, and leadership from the military is easy to translate to the civilian side.”

Larson also describes service with local government as a natural transition from military service. “I’ve had a top secret clearance since I was 22, with access to intelligence and policy discussions that required protection; being accountable for taxpayer dollars isn’t that different. It’s all public service, just a smaller, closer audience.”

Larson doesn’t yet have a job lined up after he retires from the Air Force on December 31, but he describes it as a personal decision not related to the impact of the internship. In fact, even though his internship officially ends on December 20, he’ll likely stay with Elbert County as a volunteer into the spring to continue learning and see some projects through.

“I’m going to spend a few months going to school and working on other projects to round out my resume while my wife – also in the Air Force – figures out where our next assignment will be, potentially as soon as May. In addition to my own transition out of the military, I’m also about to become a military spouse. The good news is that government is everywhere, so wherever we end up, I’m sure my time with Elbert County will have prepared me well to serve that community.”

He smiles as he thinks about the future. “The internship has taught me what I need to do to make transitioning into the areas of local government I’m most interested in – economic development and management – that much easier and increase my value to whomever I end up with. The most important part of this internship has been realizing I really like this work, as much – or more – than I liked my military job.”

Photo caption: Elbert County Commissioners Chris Richardson, Danny Willcox and Grant Thayer, along with County Manager Sam Albrecht, present Eric Larson with a certificate in recognition of his volunteer service to Elbert County through the Veterans Local Government Management Fellowship program.

Pictured from left to right: Sam Albrecht, Danny Willcox, Eric Larson, Chris Richardson, Grant Thayer.

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