

## OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT FOR VETERANS: CURRENT TRENDS AND PRACTICAL APPROACHES

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### Unemployment Among Veterans

As of this year, 2.5 million post-9/11 servicemembers have separated from the armed forces, and these numbers will surely increase as many more return from the current conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq. Most servicemembers leave the military during their prime “working” years (ages 25 to 40 years old), with 95% between the ages of 18 to 54 years old. In a 2009 report, *USA Today* reported that 11.2% of veterans were unemployed. In July 2011, that figure rose to 13.3%. The highest concentration of unemployment among veterans exists between the ages of 18-24, where approximately 27% of these veterans are unemployed.

Although veterans can be at higher risk of suffering from poverty due to experiences which may result in mental illness, physical disabilities, and limited social networks, some of the unemployment among veterans may be attributable to the perceived barriers that veterans experience. According to the Rand Corporation, one-third of the veterans returning from the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq suffer from posttraumatic-stress disorder (PTSD), traumatic brain injury (TBI), or major depression. However, the news media is replete with stories that highlight these traumas among the veteran population, and many employers have expressed concern over hiring veterans. In addition to the difficulty that many face in tran-

sitioning from the military to the civilian workforce, veterans face prospective employers’ fear that they will not do well in their job due to mental health illness, further impeding their search for employment in this tough job market. In order to become competitive job candidates, veterans need support in breaking the perception that employers may have of them.

### Job Support for Veterans

Several policies and programs that support the return of veterans to civilian employment are currently in effect, including Title 5 Code which gives hiring preference to veterans at the federal, state and local levels, veteran recruitment appointments where qualified veterans can be appointed a federal job without competitions, and work opportunity tax credit (WOTC) which provides for up to \$4,800 for each qualified

veteran. In addition, recent pieces of legislation seek to provide veterans with added support in the transition from military to civilian life. The Hiring Heroes Act of 2011 (S. 951) mandates that all servicemembers separating from military service participate in the Department of Labor’s Transition Assistance Program (TAP), which assists transitioning servicemembers in translating the skills acquired in the military to civilian employment. Another bill, the Transition Assistance Program Audit Act (S. 1104), requires a formal assessment of the TAP program every three years.

Besides the policies and programs designed to assist transitioning veterans into the civilian workforce, the future job outlook for veterans is far from bleak. Although most businesses in the private sector continue to shed labor-costs through matriculation and layoffs, the Partnership for Public Service reports strong employment indicators in the public sector, with a heavy emphasis on hiring vet-

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erans to fill many jobs. There is a forecasted demand for nearly 300,000 new employees to fill the talent shortage when baby boomers retire, and it is believed that the government will support hiring veterans to fill many of these positions, since many veterans will have the skill sets necessary to fill federal jobs." These expected job openings include:

- *Medicine / Public Health:* Doctors, nurses, nursing assistants, pharmacists, and other wellness professionals
- *Security / Protection:* Police officers, transportation officers, border patrol agents, and customs officers
- *Compliance / Enforcement:* Attorneys, paralegals, and administrative and program management professionals
- *Finance:* Accountants, tax examiners, auditors, and budget and financial analysts
- *Other:* Engineers, information technology and biological science experts, human resource professionals

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Moreover, employers that hire veterans receive the benefit of a \$4,800 dollar tax credit under President Obama's Returning Heroes and Wounded Warrior Tax Credit, with an additional tax credit of \$9,600 for hiring a service-connected, disabled veteran. These tax credits can be a needed financial windfall for struggling businesses in this harsh economic climate, and studies estimate that during President Obama's term, new hires at various federal government positions will reach nearly 600,000—nearly one-third of the current work force.

However, despite these various policies, opportunities and incentives, veterans still face the fear or prejudice that many employers have about hiring veterans. A practical and diligent approach is required to overcome this roadblock to veteran employment—one which places the support for the veteran at the forefront.

### **A Model to Solve the Problem**

One example of a practical problem-solving ap-

proach to the issue of veteran unemployment is the *Just 1* program, developed and sponsored by Public Counsel's Center for Veterans Advancement (CVA). *Just 1's* mission is to provide veterans with access to viable, long term employment by encouraging employers to commit to hiring one veteran.

For example, CVA will convince the human resources person responsible for the hiring at a local coffee-company to hire one veteran for placement at one of the company's coffee-stores. To ensure that corporations receive the most employable candidates, CVA works with the U.S. Army Reserve Employer Partnership, Military Transition Assistance Programs, Military Spousal Employment Partnerships, the Department of Veterans Affairs, the California Employment Development Department, as well as local and national housing and employment development agencies. The veteran, having been pre-screened to ensure s/he is able to meet the demands of the position, will meet with HR and begin the employment process.

This relationship provides a win-win for both participants—the veteran receives employment while affirming that his/her military work-ethic, efficacy, and overall presence are appreciated in the civilian world, and the employer gains needed labor-value in hiring a disciplined, loyal, and team-focused employee. In addition, employers who participate in the program are also provided with various marketing-collateral, which identifies their brand as a *Just 1* partner.

The *Just 1* concept is an attempt to respond to the employment needs of transitioning veterans and is a viable and inexpensive option. Introducing the *Just 1* concept to select employers met with positive results, and the employers who participated felt that they could contribute to ending veteran unemployment while increasing brand recognition and decreasing costs associated with having to locate and screen qualified candidates. Overall, this program model allows veterans to provide a reticent employer with needed leadership, adaptability, and team-

building skills and helps dispel the employer's fear that veterans do not make good employees.

## Recommendations

President Obama has stated,

*Today, we're saying to our veterans, "You fought for us, and now we're fighting for you — for the jobs and opportunities that you need to keep your families strong and to keep America competitive in the 21st century." And at a time when there is so much work to be done in this country, we need everyone's help to do it.*

Tax incentives and transition programs are not sufficient to solve the problem of unemployment among U.S. veterans—practical solutions and approaches must be developed to address the problem. Our recommendations to address veteran unemployment are:

1. Replication of programs like *Just 1*, which focus on relationship-building and understanding the employer's company culture, not just on "matching the skills with the job".
2. Development of public policy campaigns which highlight positive images of veterans in current employment, to bolster the general public's perception of veterans.
3. Enhancement of current work opportunity tax credits as quarterly credits to the employer for one year, instead of as merely one-time credits.
4. A shift from employment preparation programs to veteran peer-supported programs, which emphasize mentorship and support at each level of employment, from resume writing to veteran apprenticeship on the job.
5. Positive hiring fairs which focus on positive recruitments and interviews on the spot rather than merely gathering resumes or referring candidates to an online job application.

If we can truly appreciate the words of our president, then we all need to help ensure that our veterans' fight is left on the battlefield, and not continued at home.

## AUTHOR BACKGROUND

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