

# HELPING VETERANS RETURN TO WORK

Best Practices for Behavioral Health Practitioners

A report on a conference held June 7, 2013 at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey



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### **Best Practices for Behavioral Health Practitioners**

Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, Busch Campus Center, Piscataway, NJ — June 7, 2013

Sponsored by: Prudential, Johnson & Johnson, LifeCare, FEI Behavioral Health, Employee Assistance Professionals Association—NJ Chapter, Rutgers School of Social Work's Institute for Families, the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey, and the University of Southern California Center for Innovation and Research on Veterans & Military Families



### **OVERVIEW**

Since 2001, more than 2.6 million troops have been deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan. Their reintegration back into civilian society can often be met with difficult transitions, such as depression, relationships, health challenges, and unemployment. Alone, they are unique struggles to overcome, but, as is often the case, many of these challenges overlap and can have an adverse impact on a veteran's functioning and quality of life.

Securing gainful employment has been seen as a key goal to a successful transition from military to civilian life, not just for the financial stability it creates for the veteran, but also for the social secondary benefits it engenders for the veteran and the community at large. Veterans are leaving a military culture that promotes unit cohesion, leadership and mentorship. In the civilian workplace, veterans are looking for teamwork, structured work schedules, and social activities, all of which can promote a successful transition and improve their quality of life and well-being.

Nonetheless, despite numerous efforts and recent gains, the unemployment rate for post-9/11 veterans remains stubbornly high. According to the U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics, in August 2013 the jobless rate for this population rose to 10 percent, almost 3 percentage points higher than the national rate.

Obstacles persist in both (a) preparing veterans for careers outside the military and (b) educating civilian employers about the strengths and challenges facing veteran workers. A coordinated approach to increase communications will help bridge that knowledge gap and, hopefully, go a long way toward increasing the employment rate among veterans, who have a lot to offer their communities.

### INTRODUCTION

In an attempt to share cross-sector best practices to meet the needs of veterans in the workplace, nearly 300 behavioral health practitioners gathered for a daylong conference at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey. Helping Veterans Return to Work: Best Practices for Behavioral Health Practitioners focused on a comprehensive approach to veteran's health, which included physical, emotional, social, spiritual and financial components. Attendees had the opportunity to learn from experts in the field health care providers, university professors, corporate leaders many of whom are military veterans. They were engaged in such topics as the benefits of partner-



Stephen L. Robinson, VP External Veteran Affairs, Prudential

ing with employer-based services, like, health and wellness activities, veteran networks and employee assistance programs (EAPs).

EAPs were created to target the treatment of problems that impacted work performance and productivity. Originally, their focus was on alcohol, but today they've broadened their aim to improve the overall health and well-being of employees, such as promoting work-life balance, wellness, and stress reduction. They are conveniently situated to help ease a veteran into a civilian workplace, and because many EAP providers are behavioral health providers, like social workers, counselors, psychologists and nurses, it is important for them to understand the unique needs of veterans and the military community.

Prudential's Vice President of External Veteran Affairs Stephen L. Robinson said the company realized early on that in order for their managers and EAPs to be most effective, they needed some form of military cultural competency to understand veterans and their unique needs, along with comprehension on what could be provided in-house and what required partnerships with Veterans Affairs. "A more informed manager, a more informed hiring manager, a more informed EAP professional can provide better services, leadership and direction to any veteran they serve," he said.

The enthusiastic turnout of the conference and the desire by many EAP professionals in attendance for further guidance has Robinson hopeful that this could be the beginning of a larger, national conversation about informed advocacy on behalf of veterans returning to the to the workforce.

### **KEYNOTE**



Anthony M. Hassan, EdD, LCSW

**Director**, Center for Innovation and Research on Veterans & Military Families

**Clinical Associate Professor**, University of Southern California School of Social Work

Major, U.S. Air Force (Ret.)

The keynote address at *Helping Veterans Return to Work: Best Practices for Behavioral Health Practitioners* was given by Anthony Hassan, Director of the Center for Innovation and Research on Veterans & Military Families at the University of Southern California School of Social Work. A retired Air Force officer, Hassan previously directed a master's degree program in counseling and leadership at the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, Colorado. Hassan also has experience as the executive of a top-ranked military community mental health clinic.

Hassan reminded the audience that the war in Afghanistan is now the longest-running war in American history, and it is being fought with a small, all-volunteer military made up of less than 1 percent of the United States population. Though they entered the ranks prepared to sacrifice their lives, the military service members have grown weary after more than a decade of war.

Men and women are returning to their homes, families, and communities with physical and psychological wounds and often little notice from other Americans. This transition from military to civilian life and employment can be difficult and is not always negotiated successfully.

Hassan shared his concern that there appears to be no end in sight to the ongoing stressors for the military personnel and their families. Now and in the future, veterans and their families must cope with the mounting burden of repeated combat deployments and community reintegration challenges that, if unaddressed, will jeopardize the continuation of the all-voluntary military force and national security.

#### **MILITARY CULTURAL COMPETENCE**

Throughout his career, Hassan said the most important thing for health practitioners and employers to understand is military culture to make "the connection" on the first encounter. "We are framed and guided by core values. You should know what we live by, our experiences, and what we believe in," he said. Understanding these realities and the general military culture will help not only behavioral health providers, but also EAPs, human resource managers and supervisors to strengthen veterans' transitions to civilian life and their new workplace.

Supporting veterans begins with increasing military cultural competency. Cultural competency is particularly important with veterans given the stigma associated with their profession's warrior ethos and their reluctance to seek help. Their military rank, combat experience, and job specialty are important aspects of their identity, and everyone supporting the veteran should consider assessing how these factors interact or influence current and future behavior.

Veterans are transitioning from an environment with a clearly delineated mission to one that may lack that structure, leading many to question their sense of purpose in the work-place and community. A culturally responsive supervisor or clinician is essential in helping the veteran integrate their experiences and identify the connections between military and civilian life that facilitate the relationship-building process, whether it is therapy, performance-based supervision, or a combination of both.

It is also critical that employers and clinicians recognize that not all veterans struggle with Post-Traumatic Stress (PTS) or Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), and that sometimes their main struggle is to achieve life goals related to the transition to civilian life. These can include going back to college, maintaining a job, having a child, or buying a home.

Helping veterans achieve these goals is vital to their healthy transition to civilian life. Failing to achieve gainful employment can have a direct impact on a veteran employee's mental health and daily functioning.



### PANEL DISCUSSION

MODERATOR Stephen L. Robinson

Vice President, External Veteran Affairs, Prudential

PANELISTS R. Paul Maiden, Ph.D.

Vice Dean and Professor, University of Southern California School of

Social Work

Editor, Journal of Workforce Behavioral Health

Jeffrey P. Hoerger, LPC

Lieutenant Commander, U.S. Navy (Ret.) Team leader, Bucks County Vet Center

Melissa Tippett

Military Police Officer, Force Enforcement Specialist, U.S. Army (Ret.)

Vets4Warriors, Peer Support Hotline

Kevin O'Neill, LCSW, LCADC, CEAP, CCGC

U.S. Navy

Senior EAP Counselor, NJ Transit EAP

#### **VETERANS IN THE WORKPLACE**

Given the number of current returning veterans and those expected as the military draws down in Afghanistan, it is key to understand that every transition is different. Understanding general strengths and weaknesses will help shoulder the burden and aid veterans to find their place in civilian society.

The panelists spoke about the need to provide individualized treatment. By getting to know veterans, mental health providers will be better able to communicate with them and to draw out responses that will be key in both their treatment and successful reintegration. That is the aim of the USC School of Social Work, which in 2009 created the nation's first large-scale military social work program meant to increase the number of culturally competent social workers to work with veterans and their families.

Not every veteran needs clinical treatment. Sometimes frustrations creep up when veterans realize they have spent a military career operating multimillion dollar equipment,



but cannot find a civilian job. The next best thing might be as easy as helping them find a sense of purpose within the community, like coaching a softball team.

"Something small can be so meaningful," said Jeffrey P. Hoerger with Bucks County Veterans Center. "It's rebuilding their resilience."

The panelists shared some of the biggest misperceptions that many civilians and treatment professionals demonstrate, including that all veterans have PTS, TBI or are suicidal. Avoiding these generalizations opens the door for employers to see the far-reaching benefits of hiring veterans. They are self-motivated, well-disciplined, organized and analytical. They place an emphasis on unit cohesion and teamwork. They respect a clear chain of command. They have experience working with diverse populations.

Instead of thinking of them as trauma victims that will burden the workplace, just connecting them to EAPs, veteran centers, and workplace health and wellness activities may be enough to ease their transition.

### TIPS FROM THE FIELD

Many of the invited guests to the conference had experienced their own transitions from an active military life. Some had comparatively easy transitions, while others struggled with a sense of loss and purpose. They offered some personal advice that can help return veterans to work.

**UNDERSTAND MILITARY CULTURE AND VALUES.** The military culture fosters unit cohesion and teamwork. Though these values are not exclusive to military, veterans will put the group first.

**UNDERSTAND THE NEED FOR A MISSION AND PURPOSE.** A returning veteran is moving from a very specific directive-oriented environment to one that may lack such structure. Without a sense a purpose, veterans may find themselves frustrated at work.

**UNDERSTAND THAT NOT ALL VETERANS SUFFER FROM PTS OR TBI.** In fact, very few separate from the military with physical and/or psychological challenges. Most of the struggles reintegrating into society stem from typical "life adjustment issues."

### CONCLUSION

In his concluding remarks, Raymond Weeks, Prudential's Vice President of Veterans Initiatives, said that just showing up to the conference was an important first step toward learning about the current and future needs of veterans in the workplace.

The hope is that practitioners not only learned key takeaways about what can be done to help veterans, but also what should not be done: Don't assume all veterans have psychological trauma; don't devalue a veteran's service; don't treat veterans as separate from the rest of the workplace.

Creating connections and sharing resources in the community is one of the most effective approaches to helping reintegrate a veteran into civilian workplace. Their success in the workforce is tantamount because, as Weeks reminded the attendees, "employment is a necessary component of wellness."



Raymond Weeks, VP Veterans Initiatives, Prudential



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