

# **EXPLORING THE ECONOMIC & EMPLOYMENT CHALLENGES FACING U.S. VETERANS:**

A Qualitative Study of Volunteers of America  
Service Providers & Veteran Clients

**USC** School  
of Social Work

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

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**Volunteers of America®**

Helping America's most vulnerable™

*Volunteers of America is the charity that always steps forward to help the most vulnerable. For more than 115 years, we have taken on the most difficult tasks to help the underserved.*

*Throughout our history, Volunteers of America has empowered successive generations of veterans, beginning with those who served in the Civil War. Today, we are one of the largest providers of support to homeless and other vulnerable veterans in the United States, serving more than 40,000 of these men and women annually. We currently operate more than 400 programs for veterans nationwide, including healthcare, housing, and employment and training programs. These programs enable our clients to forge new paths to independence and self-sufficiency. When veterans are on solid ground, they make our communities stronger and more stable.*

*One of the biggest challenges that Volunteers of America's programs grapple with every day is the task of helping homeless and vulnerable veterans find and keep good jobs. In an effort to more effectively address this challenge, and continually improve our programs and services, we decided in early 2015 to sponsor this original study exploring the economic and employment challenges facing America's most vulnerable veterans. Partnering with the Center for Innovation and Research on Veterans & Military Families at the University of Southern California School of Social Work, this research will be used to identify important themes that will guide our programs for vulnerable veterans in the future.*

*Every generation of veterans has served our nation proudly. Believing in America and the freedom we all cherish, they ask little in return. Yet far too often, society fails to understand the challenges veterans face in transitioning back to civilian life. As a national organization, Volunteers of America provides an integrated system of support for men and women who have given so much – and deserve a great deal in return. The needs of today's veterans are vastly different from the Civil War veterans Volunteers of America first served at the turn of the 20th century. In the future, these needs will continue to change, and just as surely, we will be there to serve the courageous men and women who have served the United States of America.*



Mike King  
National President & CEO  
Volunteers of America

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Study Background

Commissioned by Volunteers of America (VOA) as part of an ongoing effort to better understand the needs of their veteran clients and continuously improve veteran services, the purpose of this study was to explore the economic and employment challenges facing U.S. veterans today and identify best practices for helping impoverished veterans find and retain stable, living-wage jobs. Three approaches were used to examine these challenges and best practices, including a comprehensive literature review, one-on-one interviews with VOA service providers, and focus groups with VOA veteran clients.

## Employment Challenges and Risks for Unemployment

### 1. Unpreparedness for Civilian Employment

Interviews with both VOA service providers and veteran clients revealed a lack of preparation for finding civilian employment when leaving the military to be a large contributor to veteran unemployment. This included unrealistic expectations for the kinds of job opportunities veterans qualify for, as well as salary, the veteran perception of having to ‘start over’ as a civilian, and difficulty understanding how military experience translates to civilian employment.

### 2. Unaddressed Mental Health and Substance Abuse Issues

Unaddressed mental health (most often PTSD and/or depression) and substance abuse problems manifested themselves in several ways in relation to employment. Described by both VOA service providers and veteran clients, these included the impact on motivation to find and keep employment, difficulty placing veteran clients with mental health or substance abuse issues, and the ability to keep and find success in a job.

### 3. Continuation of Military Identity

VOA veteran clients described their inability to relate to civilians, discomfort around civilians, and difficulty adapting to civilian employment culture. Veteran clients often attributed their comfort with VOA programs to the support they received by peers with similar experiences and a shared military identity.

#### 4. Criminal Background and/or Dishonorable Discharge

Along with the unique challenges that come with finding veterans employment, a criminal background or a less-than-honorable discharge creates additional barriers, particularly the unwillingness of employers to hire these veterans and lack of available jobs.

#### 5. Stigma Associated with Hiring Veterans

Both VOA service providers and veteran clients described a reluctance on some employers' part to hire their veteran clients. This was most often attributed to concerns over issues of mental health, long gaps in employment history, and an unwillingness to hire those with a dishonorable discharge and/or criminal background.

#### 6. Veteran Client Age

Although some employment barriers are relevant to all VOA veteran clients, older and younger VOA veteran clients each have their own specific barriers that must be addressed.

#### 7. Availability of Appropriate Jobs

Both VOA service provider interviews and veteran client focus groups revealed the lack of available jobs that are appropriate to veteran skills and experience and that also pay a living wage to be a significant barrier for veteran employment.

## Resources and Policy Recommendations

- 1. Establish a civilian “re-training” program for new veterans accessing VOA services.** Develop an evidence-based “re-training” program for veterans using VOA services that clearly articulates some of the unique challenges that may affect military veterans in the transition process.
- 2. Expand VOA’s holistic model of support to “first contact.”** VOA’s holistic model of supporting veterans in need of housing, employment, health, and disability support is an exemplary model that can be expanded to veterans as a prevention and early intervention program by initiating a comprehensive veteran assessment at first contact with VOA.
- 3. Create an employment program for veterans with less-than-honorable discharges.**
- 4. Establish veteran support services and programs that recognize that recent military veterans may have needs different from older veterans.**
- 5. Participate in a campaign that enhances the value of military veterans.** VOA could take a leading role in working with other governmental and nongovernmental agencies in the development of an effective veteran communication campaign that works to dispel these myths and misperceptions, while acknowledging that veterans do require assistance and understanding in some areas.
- 6. Strengthen communication of the VOA national network.** The continued growth and strengthening of this national network could help improve the dissemination of innovations and best practices developed and identified within VOA, as well as support the culture of innovation and information-sharing through webinars, conferences, and funding “pilot” projects to address enduring or challenging veteran issues.

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## BACKGROUND

**V**olunteers of America (VOA) is one of the nation's largest and most comprehensive human services organizations, providing assistance to more than 2 million people each year in hundreds of communities across the United States. VOA's national network of affiliates provides affordable housing, healthcare, and human services to some of America's most vulnerable populations, including older adults, impoverished children, youth and families, the mentally ill, and the homeless.

In recent years, VOA has started serving a growing number of economically challenged U.S. military veterans and their families. In 2013, VOA provided emergency shelter, healthcare, housing, behavioral health services, employment assistance, vocational training, and rental assistance to more than 40,000 veterans and their families across the nation. As part of an ongoing effort to better understand the needs of their veteran clients and to continuously improve veteran services, VOA sought an independent research organization to carry out a qualitative research study aimed at exploring the economic and employment challenges facing U.S. veterans today and best practices for helping impoverished veterans find and retain stable, living-wage jobs. With that, this research was guided by the following questions:

1. What are the most pervasive economic and employment-related challenges facing U.S. military veterans today?
2. Which groups of veterans (e.g., women, veterans without college educations, veterans struggling with mental health issues and addictions) appear to be at greatest risk of long-term unemployment, poverty, and housing instability in today's economy?
3. What, if anything, can we learn from Volunteers of America's network of veteran service providers about how to best help high-risk/high-needs veterans to find and keep stable, living-wage jobs and build their income, savings, and long-term economic security?
4. What programmatic resources and policy changes are needed to help struggling veterans achieve better economic and employment outcomes?

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## METHODS

**T**hree approaches were taken to address the four research questions. Described in detail below, these approaches included a comprehensive literature review on the economic and employment status of U.S. military veterans, one-on-one interviews with VOA service providers, and focus groups with VOA veteran clients.

### Literature Review

A comprehensive yet focused literature review was undertaken in relation to the economic and employment status of U.S. military veterans. This review drew on academic resources and grey literature (reports originating from governmental resources and military organizations). The literature search strategy sought to capture studies from the United States published in the last five years, using data collected within the past 10 years. This date range was chosen to capture papers relevant to the current state of U.S. military veterans. Single case studies were excluded from the review. The review searched three key electronic websites, including: PsycINFO; Web of Science; and PubMed. Search terms included: “veterans” OR “military veterans” OR “U.S. veterans” AND “employment” OR “unemployment” OR “economic challenges” OR “financial barriers” OR “financial challenges” OR “employment challenges” OR “vocational rehabilitation” OR “poverty” OR “homelessness.” Reference lists of relevant studies were manually searched for any additional literature missed from the search.

The literature search across all databases initially produced 907 results. After removing duplicates, single case studies, literature from outside the U.S., and reading the abstracts, 34 articles were deemed relevant to addressing the research questions. The most relevant findings across these papers were then synthesized for inclusion in the report.

### Interviews with VOA Service Providers

To gain information needed to address study research questions, 16 service providers were recruited and interviewed individually over the telephone. VOA service providers were recruited with the assistance of a VOA Program and Research Manager who sent recruitment emails to 124 people working at VOA in various roles across the country. The emails introduced the study and directed the recipients to the attached study invitation, information letter and a link to a website where they could complete a short survey asking them about their job role at VOA and their availability to take part in the study. Of the 124 contacted, 28 completed the online survey of which 21 reported working directly with veterans. Telephone contact was made

with each of these potential participants by a member of the research team. All of those who answered the telephone agreed to take part, and a suitable time to conduct the interview was then made. Once 16 had agreed to take part, no more potential participants were contacted or recruited.

The age of the service provider participants ranged from 26-52. The participants were dispersed across the United States with job roles that varied from case manager to regional vice president. Length of time working for VOA ranged from four months to 11 years. All 16 telephone interviews were recorded using an electronic recording device. A semi-structured interview schedule was used to conduct the interviews.

Open-ended questions were designed to gain information from the service providers to address research questions and covered the following areas: their experiences and the types of veterans they worked with; what types of veterans they perceived to be most at risk for employment problems; the barriers they believed veterans face in terms of employment; how VOA services met the needs of employed veterans; what gaps they perceived exist in VOA services; and, how VOA worked with other agencies. The interviews lasted between 20 minutes and an hour. All interviews were transcribed by an external transcription company.

## Focus Groups with VOA Veteran Clients

Four focus groups with veterans currently using services at VOA centers in Los Angeles were also conducted to gain information needed to address research questions. The aim for these focus groups was to have groups of employed veterans and groups of unemployed veterans separated by pre- or post-9/11 service era. Unfortunately, due to the nature of the services offered by VOA, only a small minority of the participants was employed, and those who were employed were most often employed by VOA. This, however, showed a true representation of the situation among most veterans using VOA services, and thus arguably the most vulnerable veterans; those of interest for this research.

Participants were recruited via contacts at Los Angeles VOA centers. The contacts at the various VOA centers were asked to invite veterans to take part in a focus group that would ask questions about unemployment and attempts to find employment since leaving the military. Focus groups were to contain eight participants each. Recruitment and sign-up for

focus groups ceased once each group was filled. Thirty-three veteran clients participated in one of four focus groups. Two of the focus groups included veterans who served pre-9/11 (n=16) while the other two included veterans who served post-9/11 (n=17). Focus groups were divided this way in order to ensure the ability to grasp the different employment challenges each group faces. The range of time since the veteran participants had left service ranged from one year to more than 30 years. Participants served across all branches and had various employment experiences since leaving. All pre-9/11 veteran participants were residents of a transitional housing unit. Of the post-9/11 veteran participants, one group was independently living whereas the other group resided at another transitional housing facility.

Semi-structured interview schedules were created to guide the focus groups and asked open-ended questions aimed at gaining information to address research questions. The semi-structured interview schedule covered the following topics: experiences of gaining employment since leaving service; methods used to find employment; barriers faced in finding employment; challenges in maintaining employment; what led them to using VOA services; and their experiences using VOA and other available services for veterans. Focus groups all lasted approximately one hour. All focus groups were recorded using an electronic recording device and transcribed by a professional transcription service. All research procedures were approved by the University of Southern California Institutional Review Board.

## Data Analysis

Interview and focus group transcripts were analyzed using exploratory thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2008). An initial analysis was first conducted by two members of the research team. Both researchers read all transcripts and made notes of emerging themes. This process was repeated until initial codes were developed, leading to the development of initial themes and sub-themes. Using the themes developed by the initial analysis, two other study team members analyzed all transcripts, adding additional themes where appropriate. Once all transcripts had been analyzed by the second set of researchers, the study team met to examine the sub-themes and themes in terms of their convergence and divergence and how they might illuminate each other or be merged, leading to the production of a final list of master themes and relevant sub-themes.

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## RESULTS

### Review of Literature

**T**he majority of veterans transitioning to civilian life tend to be resilient, able to adapt, and transition to the civilian workplace with success (Morris, 2012). There are, however, many veterans who do not make this transition as successfully. Research has revealed that difficulty in transitioning to civilian life is largely attributable to challenges finding employment (Prudential, 2012). It has been reported that the unemployment rate of veterans ages 18-65 is higher than the unemployment rate of similarly situated non-veterans (Loughran, 2014). What differentiates veterans who do not transition successfully and are most at risk of experiencing employment and economic challenges was investigated in recent U.S. literature.

A key problem experienced by some veterans looking for employment is understanding how the skills, occupational experience, and qualifications gained during military service can be translated into skills, experience and qualifications relevant and appropriate to civilian jobs. Research indicates that there is a lack of understanding and difficulties experienced by employers and veterans regarding suitable positions based on how military-specific skills, responsibilities, and experiences can translate to civilian environments and workplaces (Hall, Harrell, Bicksler, Stewart, & Fisher, 2014; Harrell & Berglass, 2014). The ability to match military skills and experiences to civilian job qualifications and requirements has been highlighted as one of the most significant employment-related challenges (Faberman & Foster, 2013; Hall et al., 2014; Harrell & Berglass, 2014).

Challenges experienced by many veterans with resume-writing, interviewing, professional networking, career advancement, and negotiating salaries and benefits are identified in the literature as impacting the ability to translate skills, experiences, and qualifications when making civilian job applications (Prudential, 2012). One method that has been highlighted to aid veterans in managing these challenges is for them to attend vocational training. However, while some programs, such as the Veterans Affairs (VA) Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) program, provide structured vocational training and support, they still have difficulties in their inability to consistently provide veterans with competitive employment upon program completion (O'Connor et al., 2013).

Some research indicates that many employers do have effective recruitment strategies, activities, and veteran programs in place that demonstrate best practices for veteran recruitment (Hall et al., 2014). However, the majority of employers' efforts have been focused on recruit-

ment and less in managing or retaining veteran employees once they have been hired. Consequently, it is suggested that employers should allocate recruitment resources strategically so they can evaluate their current recruitment activities and direct resources to activities showing the greatest results, including broadening their efforts to include veteran performance and career development which are likely to aid retention (Hall et al., 2014).

Readjustment to civilian life is a challenge for some military personnel, particularly for those with physical and psychological injuries (Burnett-Zeigler et al., 2011; Elbogen, Johnson, Wagner, Newton, & Beckham, 2012; Horton et al., 2013; O'Connor et al., 2013; Smith, 2014). It is reported that veterans facing health challenges as a result of their military service report greater employment concerns, especially in finding and maintaining work (Faberman & Foster, 2013). In a survey of 1,845 post-9/11 veterans, 65 percent reported having some kind of physical or psychological complaint. Those with such complaints reported more difficulties transitioning to civilian life, including employment challenges. Of those with physical and/or psychological health complaints, 23 percent reported being unemployed, compared to 18 percent unemployed without any health complaint (Prudential, 2012). Moreover, in a study of Vietnam-era veterans, a veteran with a lifetime diagnosis of PTSD was 8.5 percentage points less likely to be currently working than was a veteran who did not meet diagnostic criteria, and of those veterans with PTSD who were employed, they were more likely to have a lowered hourly wage compared to those without a PTSD diagnosis (Savoca & Rosenheck, 2000). It has also been reported that veterans with increased vulnerability, such as having mental or physical health problems, are less likely to qualify for, initiate, or complete VR&E programs (O'Connor et al., 2013). Kleylamp (2013) reports that a further challenge for those with mental health problems, especially PTSD, is employers' concerns that veterans have high rates of PTSD and are wary of incurring the costs of dealing with PTSD in the workplace.

Due to policy surrounding eligibility for use of services provided by the Department of Veteran Affairs (VA), not all veterans can use VA programs and services. The eligibility for each program varies; however, for most programs, veterans must meet a length of service requirement, may need to have served during "wartime," must have served in the active military, air, or naval services, meet discharge criterion, have higher than a 10 percent disability rating, or anticipated 20 percent rating for service members pending separation (Collins, 2012). This leaves service members who received other

than honorable, dishonorable, bad conduct, entry-level separation or administrative decision discharges, or disabilities not deemed severe enough, without benefits. Recent policy changes have expanded the length of service provision for veterans to include up to four years of retraining; allowed use to veterans who had previously depleted unemployment benefits; issued a year extension to those who had already completed the program; and recently amended the policy to allow veterans the use of both the Vocational Rehabilitation training and the Post-9/11 GI Bill (Collins, 2012). Though these changes have increased the number of veterans assisted under the Vocational Rehabilitation Act by approximately 1.2 percent over a four-year span, many veterans remain excluded based on the eligibility requirements listed above. Those service members who are not eligible to use VA services are arguably at high risk of experiencing a plethora of challenges.

Further challenges and risk factors for unemployment experienced amongst veterans have been identified as the impact of cultural barriers and negative stereotypes, acclimation to the civilian life and workplace, and a lack of financial literacy (Elbogen et al., 2012; Griffin & Stein, 2015; Harrell & Berglass, 2014; Prudential, 2012). Females have also been identified as a specific group that may be at high risk for difficulties due to their nuanced needs and challenges they face (Morris, 2012; Smith, 2014). Further research, however, is required to develop our understanding of these and other potential barriers and risk factors related to unemployment and economic challenges for U.S. military veterans.

## Interviews and Focus Groups

The following outlines the results of the thematic analysis related to each research question. Utilizing quotes from interviews and focus groups, findings are described in detail below. First described are the employment challenges and risks for unemployment facing veterans, followed by what can be learned from the VOA approach to serving high-risk/high-need veterans and a set of recommendations for moving forward. When interpreting these results it should be noted that the veterans described in the service provider interviews as well as those interviewed as part of the focus groups are not representative of the larger U.S. veteran population. Instead, they represent a small minority of VOA veteran clients who are facing extreme economic and employment challenges. Results should therefore be interpreted with this in mind. However, the results from interviews and focus groups are consistent with existent literature.

## SERVICE PROVIDER AND VETERAN CLIENT THEMES

- Lack of preparation for civilian employment during transition from the military creates unrealistic job expectations and difficulty understanding how military experience may or may not translate to civilian employment.
- Unaddressed mental health and/or substance abuse issues create barriers to finding and sustaining civilian employment.
- The continuation of military identity impacts veteran clients' abilities to adapt to the civilian work culture.
- Veteran clients with a dishonorable discharge and/or a criminal background are at particular risk for chronic unemployment and have specific challenges related to finding civilian employment.
- A stigma exists regarding veterans that make some employers reluctant to hire those who have served in the military.
- The age of veteran clients creates specific barriers related to finding civilian employment.
- A lack of available jobs that are appropriate to veterans' skills and experiences, but that also pay a living wage, is often an additional challenge to veteran employment.

## EMPLOYMENT CHALLENGES AND RISKS FOR UNEMPLOYMENT

### 1. Unpreparedness for Civilian Employment

Interviews with VOA service provider participants revealed their clients' employment challenges could be partly attributed to a lack of preparation for finding civilian employment when they left the military. Part of the lack of preparation for civilian job placement included unrealistic employment expectations. Almost all of the service providers interviewed described their veteran clients as lacking knowledge in the kind of jobs that would be available to them when they left the military. The service providers also described veterans as having unrealistic expectations regarding at what level they would enter the workforce and what kind of compensation they would receive. The VOA service providers interviewed felt as though their veteran clients leaving the military thought their military service would allow for job opportunities at a similar rank and pay as what they received during military service. VOA service provider participants described these expectations.

*"People who were used to earning, I don't know, \$80,000 a year, and then they expect they're going to earn the same [as a civilian]."*

*"I think it has to do with the fact that a lot of times ... the military [instills] a lot of confidence and so if [a newly discharged veteran] exits at an E7 or E8, ... they come in with the expectation, 'Well, that's what I should be getting in the civilian world,' and that's the mindset that really trips them up."*

VOA service provider participants discussed their veteran clients as often feeling as though they had to start over completely and that their transition out of the military was not the steady progression of career advancement they expected. Despite this, VOA service provider participants described many of their veteran clients as extremely motivated and willing to work their way up through civilian employment opportunities. But they also described what often happens to their veteran clients when these expectations are not met. Faced with having to start from the bottom or in entry-level positions, their clients often became very frustrated. One service provider participant described how that frustration can often affect motivation:

*“When you say to a veteran, ‘Well, I have job interview for you and the pay is thirteen dollars an hour,’ they may not feel motivated to go, because they feel that with everything they’ve gone through and everything that they have done that they should get a job that pays more.”*

*“Many expect to start at mid-level and supervisory positions, and become angry when they don’t, and then they are not willing to accept lower positions.”*

This appeared to create a unique challenge in finding employment for some VOA clients. In some cases, these clients are willing to risk homelessness before taking one of these lower-paying jobs.

Also related to the lack of preparation was the inability or difficulty translating their skills, or understanding how their skills may or may not translate into specific positions. One VOA service provider described a client who applied for an upper-level management position within a local organization. The veteran client felt that his oversight of more than 300 people in Iraq provided the necessary managerial experience for the job. However, his military experience included oversight of service members placed all over the region and therefore did not include everyday engagement with and management of subordinates. This did not translate into the experience the organization was looking for and the client had a very difficult time understanding why he was not being considered for this position. This theme appeared to be a common one among many of the service provider interviews. Many provided examples of veteran clients applying to positions where they felt they had the necessary experience only to be told by employers that their experience did not equate to what the employer was looking for. Therefore, it wasn’t that their clients simply needed assistance developing a resume; they needed help understanding the scope of their military responsibilities and how they may or may not translate to civilian employment.

*“There is a disconnect between their training and the job market. They come back, and the skills that they learned in the military either aren’t recognized in the civilian world or they don’t know how to translate the language into the civilian language that is out there.”*

VOA veteran clients also felt that the lack of preparation during military separation impacted their ability to find post-service employment. When asked if they felt prepared

for finding civilian employment after leaving the military, the majority of the veterans across all of the focus groups said they were not at all prepared. Many of the participants, especially the pre-9/11 veterans, had not attended any transition brief, and those who had, mostly post-9/11 veterans, reported the transition services provided did not translate into real skills or opportunities for employment. The majority of veteran client participants felt that they had not been well briefed or informed about what to expect when they transitioned to civilian life.

*“When I discharged, honorable discharge, there was nothing there other than just the certificate of discharge. There was no help, no guidance, no counsel, there was nothing” (Pre-9/11 veteran).*

*“When you’re getting out, they’re more worried about the people who are staying and it’s kind of like... oh you’re not staying, forget you” (Post-9/11 veteran).*

This under-preparation for transition for the civilian world was evidenced in the veterans’ feelings that there was no clear translation or transference of their military experiences and skills into civilian jobs.

*“The experience you get in the military, it’s not like they come over to the civilian side. Or where you might have certain certifications that don’t come over. And so basically, you know, they don’t count for anything. It’s like you’re 23/24 coming out with all this experience, but you can’t get a job” (Post-9/11 veteran).*

Due to this lack of translation and transferability of the skills, qualifications and experience gained during service in the U.S. military, many of the veterans felt as though they were starting over.

*“The skill that I learned in the military when I got back into society, it was nothing related to that field, so I had to start over again. I took a computer class and I finally come (sic) up to date” (Pre-9/11 Veteran).*

*“So I have to start a new career. And being older, being 28, and then starting again from scratch, it kind of like it’s just hard, because you have to start from the beginning, from the bottom, with the 19/18 years old college (sic), and it’s just different” (Post-9/11 veteran).*

“

**I think that they have the skills for employment, but ... mentally and emotionally, I don't know if they're quite ready.**

**- Service Provider**

”

The VOA veteran client participants described the frustration that came with having to begin again in the civilian workforce. Participants described the only jobs available to them were at fast food restaurants or stores working for less than \$10 an hour. After their time in the military, accepting these as the only options was very difficult.

*“I was going to be a general manager of a [fast food restaurant] and the idea of that just [explicit] made me want to hang myself, you know. After Afghanistan and all of that, I just couldn't do it” (Post-9/11 Veteran).*

Almost all of the veteran participants were not aware of how difficult it would be to find civilian employment. This focus group exchange between three pre-9/11 VOA veteran clients demonstrated that lack of awareness.

*Veteran Participant 1: “They tell you, that's the first thing they sell you when you go in...I don't care what force you service, that's the first thing they try to sell you on is that when you get out you will be able to get a job.”*

*Veteran Participant 2: “You're a priority because you're a vet.”*

*Veteran Participant 1: “Exactly, and that's the furthest from the truth. That's the last thing you'll get.”*

*Veteran Participant 3: “Yeah you have skills, but nobody wants it.”*

## 2. Unaddressed Mental Health and Substance Abuse Issues

A common theme for both barriers to employment as well as risk factors for unemployment for VOA veteran clients was unaddressed mental health and substance abuse issues. Every VOA service provider interviewed described these as significant challenges in finding employment for their veteran clients. Many described the issues as often inter-connected, with clients using substances as self-medication for lingering mental health issues, most commonly PTSD and/or depression. These problems manifest themselves in several ways in relation to employment. First, they are relevant in the motivation to find and keep employment. Service providers reported that some veteran clients have appeared not quite ready to address their mental health and/or substance abuse issues. Service providers described these clients as less motivated to work through the VOA programs. One service provider participant described this as follows:

*“I think that they have the skills for employment, but you know, mentally and emotionally, I don't know if they're quite ready.”*

Another service provider agreed.

*“The folks we've had that haven't done well usually it's a substance abuse or mental health issue that they're not willing to address yet.”*

In addition, VOA service providers revealed that veteran clients with unaddressed mental health or substance abuse issues are difficult to place. One service provider described employers as very reluctant to hire someone “if something seems off even a little,” indicating that if an employer even slightly suspects a veteran may be experiencing mental health issues they are most often not willing to hire the client. Although this is most likely true for hiring civilians, the stigma of mental health issues that has come to be associated with military service appeared to make employers, from the perspective of VOA service providers, especially concerned when hiring veterans.

Lastly, participants discussed how mental health and substance abuse issues impede clients' abilities to keep and find success in a job. VOA service providers described these

challenges as often causing their veteran clients to miss work, have difficulty with other employees, become easily frustrated and ultimately lose or quit their job.

*“You know so a lot of them will come home and get a good job, but they lose it quickly just because, the depression sets in, or the drugs and alcohol kind of take over, and then they end up losing it.”*

VOA veteran client participants also brought up issues of mental health as impeding their ability to find employment. However, it was not as prominent of a theme as in the service provider interviews. Many of the veteran client participants did acknowledge that issues of mental health, most notably PTSD, disrupted their ability to find employment or keep employment.

*“A lot of it had to deal with PTSD. So PTSD led to substance abuse and then that led to me losing my job” (Post-9/11 Veteran).*

*“It’s also hard to like handle your mental state, too, sometimes. It’s not the best when you get out, you don’t really like, there’s things that you didn’t even know you had to deal with about the military that you start dealing with when you’re home. You know, and you can’t talk to anybody else that’s not a member, or wasn’t a member of the service, because they don’t understand. They don’t get what you’re talking about. They don’t understand that you just pushed through everything, and bottled it all up, and sometimes the bottle gets shaken, and it explodes. And you’re not even mad at who you think you’re mad at. It’s just that you haven’t really dealt with a lot of the things. And I think that’s one of the biggest hurdles that you have to overcome is going from a war mentality into a, I guess, more passive mentality” (Post-9/11 Veteran).*

### 3. Continuation of Military Identity

One of the most common themes across all VOA veteran client focus groups was the indication and expression of how the veteran participants continue to see themselves through a military identity. The impact of their training and military experience was still evident in their actions, behaviors, and thoughts, as well as their ability to relate to civilian friends,

family and employers. Almost every focus group participant described feeling more comfortable around those who had also previously served in the military.

*“As a Marine coming back to the civilian side of the world, it’s just like we think a certain way. We expect a certain degree of professionalism, a certain degree of respect. Like that we give respect, we deserve respect. And it’s just hard to talk to somebody ... I don’t even have friends anymore to be honest, because I can’t speak to them [civilians] anymore ... I don’t connect with them anymore ... the only really group I have is veterans, and that’s probably it, I can’t speak to anyone out there ...and it’s difficult” (Post-9/11 Veteran).*

The military identity appears to be an additional barrier and challenge inhibiting veterans’ abilities to adapt and transition to civilian life, especially in terms of gaining and maintaining employment. This was evidenced in their difficulty adapting to civilian work culture. A clear theme that emerged from the focus groups was that even when veterans had secured work, many of them had found it hard to maintain their employment as they had not settled well into the civilian work ethic and culture:

*“I found that I have a really the jobs I’ve had since I’ve been out working with civilians, it’s really difficult for me, as opposed to working with veterans ... I’m working with civilians that don’t seem to have that same dedication, it really grinds. And it becomes really difficult to not be, not standoffish, but almost confrontational with them, when you see them not performing to the level that you know they’re capable of, and the veteran’s deserving of...I purposely commit to I’m only going to work in the veteran field, because if I land in a civilian center, probably be two or three months, before I’d say something that’s going to get me fired” (Post-9/11 Veteran).*

VOA veteran participants also describe the military culture instilled in them as a barrier in how employers view them. This is evidenced by an exchange between several pre-9/11 veteran participants:

*Veteran 1: "I think it intimidates them when they see how serious we are."*

*Veteran 2: "Because we're early. We're not on time."*

*Veteran 3: "If you're not 15 minutes early, you are late."*

*Veteran 2: "We come early."*

*Veteran 1: "So they look at us like, 'wow, why is he early?'"*

*Veteran 4: "Except for this. And it makes the other employees, civilian employees look kind of that we show up 15 minutes early and the last ones to leave. That's the way we were trained."*

Several of the VOA veteran participants made comments about how they had been trained to be military personnel, to abide by military ethos and ideology, but that on leaving the military they had not been un-trained or "de-militarized." The participants highlighted, as demonstrated so far, how not being able to relate to civilians and the civilian world impeded their abilities to transition effectively back into civilian life, often feeling alienated from friends and family, struggling to maintain work and forge positive working relationships with employers, and for some leading to a criminal record:

*"Well, they don't detrain us to live with civilized people where if somebody gets in your face, you get into those reptilian mode fight or flight. The Marine Corps doesn't teach you to retreat so I have gotten in trouble. I've got a record. I'm not saying it's just because of that but they train us one way. I think that they should kind of like help us out with our mind to readjust back to society" (Pre-9/11 Veteran).*

*"A lot of people joke that there's no un-basic training. Like I notice when you go in the military you have that little nine-week period where they just like erase everything you know and just teach you. But then once you're out there's, like I didn't know there was help out there or anything" (Post-9/11 Veteran)*

#### 4. Criminal Background and/or Dishonorable Discharge

The most prominent theme from service provider interviews regarding the risk factors for unemployment in their veteran clients was a criminal background and/or dishonorable discharge. Service providers described these clients as the most difficult to employ and the most at risk for chronic unemployment. Along with the unique challenges that come with finding veterans employment, a criminal background or dishonorable discharge creates additional barriers, particularly the unwillingness of employers to hire these veterans and lack of available jobs. One service provider participant described the challenge these clients face:

*"I didn't realize when coming to this job that I would really I didn't even think that I would encounter that. And now I'm realizing that they [veteran clients with a criminal background] make up a very difficult group, so to speak, as far as how to engage and how to find them employment because it's so limited as to what they can do."*

VOA service providers described veteran clients with a criminal background and/or dishonorable discharge as also particularly difficult to keep motivated. Although most are ready and willing to

find and keep employment, constant rejection from potential employers causes frustration.

*"You know, they're trying to get their life together and they do what they need to do, and they apply for all these jobs and keep getting turned away, and they lose that motivation to continue to look for employment."*

This experience described by the service providers is consistent with the findings from the VOA veteran client focus groups. Several of the veterans in both the pre- and post-9/11 groups reported having been dishonorably discharged and/or having a criminal record. For those that had one or both of these risk factors, they reported having challenges finding employment and being rejected from available posts they applied for.

*"Yeah, I think I could get more help like the rest of these men are talking about if it wasn't for my discharge. They see my discharge, they see it was drug related and that's holding me back right now" (Post-9/11 veteran).*

*"My past, I had my first DUI five years ago, so as a commercial truck driver they look at that like their insurance is going to go up" (Pre-9/11 veteran).*

#### 5. Stigma Associated with Hiring Veterans

An additional theme from both VOA service provider interviews and VOA veteran clients was overcoming the stigma associated with hiring veterans. Service provider participants described reluctance by some employers to hire their veteran clients. This was most

often attributed to concerns over issues of mental health, long gaps in employment history, and an unwillingness to hire those with a dishonorable discharge and/or criminal background.

*“So for me, my main barrier of finding a lot of these guys employment is finding the employers that are really knowledgeable enough ... to kind of understand the value of hiring vets ... and so if an employer finds that they have a dishonorable discharge, that will be a huge barrier.”*

VOA veteran clients were very direct about the stigma they perceived facing while trying to enter the civilian workforce. Veteran participants felt as though relaying their military service to potential employers automatically put them at a disadvantage. Most relayed employers' concerns about possible mental health issues.

*“They asked me, ‘Are you a former Marine.’ And I was like, ‘No, I was former Army.’ And they're like, ‘Okay, cool. Because those Marines are crazy’” (Post-9/11 Veteran).*

*“And then they asked me how long ago did I leave combat zone? And I told them like three years. And then they told me, ‘Oh, then you're good, because we don't want to deal with guys who just came back’” (Post-9/11 Veteran).*

Many described being better off not reporting their veteran status to anyone, including employers.

*“I feel like it is better off in society to not even mention you were, that you were ever in [the military]” (Post-9/11 Veteran).*

## 6. Veteran Client Age

When looking at specific risk factors for unemployment, VOA service providers often brought up age as a significant factor that may make their veteran clients susceptible to unemployment. However, there was a mixture in responses regarding at what age clients were most vulnerable. Some participants felt the older veteran clients were most at risk for unemployment. Reasons provided included older veterans have outdated skills, have difficulty using technology, and are more likely to have been chronically unemployed with long gaps out of the workforce.

*“I worked with a lot of veterans that have not been in the workforce for a very long time, and are over or almost 60.”*

Other VOA service provider participants felt the younger generation of veterans was more at risk for unem-

ployment. Participants described younger veterans as more likely to have mental health issues, not prepared to focus on gaining employment, not willing to get help, and at risk for creating long gaps out of the workforce that will make them difficult to employ.

*“The newer veterans [are more at risk], just because of the fact they still have that mentality that, ‘I can do it on my own. I don't need any help.’”*

*“The young veterans are thinking about being free and not necessarily focusing on the next thing. Instead sort of reacting and indulging in that feeling of being free from the military.”*

The differentiations in the impact of age were also reported by the VOA veteran clients during the focus groups. The pre-9/11 veterans reported that they felt they were frequently being

“

**I feel like it is better off in society to not even mention you were ever in [the military].**

**- Post-9/11 Veteran**

”

turned down for employment because of their age and their lack of technological skills, which was also often a barrier in applying for positions. Whereas, the post-9/11 veterans reported a nuanced problem for them was leaving the military during the recession and problems motivating themselves to find work when they first returned.

*“And another thing, is the age. They look at our age and where we been and what we come through back then to where we at right now...he’s 62 years old, we can’t use him” (Pre-9/11 Veteran).*

*“When the company went under, I still did what I had to do to maintain a job, and then the economy in 2008 took a crap so then we got laid off again” (Post-9/11 Veteran).*

*“I feel like I know that our military branches probably don’t provide the best resources practically, but it’s also the people that are getting out. Let’s not forget guys that when we’re getting out we’re not thinking about jobs or anything like that. We’re thinking about skating, not going to work you know, just getting the things that you need to get done” (Post-9/11 Veteran).*

## 7. Availability of Appropriate Jobs

Both VOA service provider interviews and VOA veteran client focus groups revealed the lack of available jobs that are both appropriate to veteran skills and experience and pay a living wage to be a significant barrier for veteran employment. Although all VOA service providers discussed a lack of jobs, this was particularly relevant for service providers that worked in rural areas.

*“Well, probably in our area maybe just a lack of positions. We do have agencies that we work with and there are positions that we encounter—we’re a fairly rural area that we surround. So there’s just not a lot of opportunity.”*

Many of the veteran participants also reported that one of the challenges they face in finding employment is identifying available jobs that are appropriate to their skills and experience but also that pay them a living wage. Both pre- and post-9/11 veterans said that, in their experience, the only work available to them was as security for private compa-

nies, bars or nightclubs, fast food restaurants, or other low-skilled positions. The lack of appropriate and fairly paid work impacted on many veterans’ motivations to apply for jobs and maintain work once they had been offered a job.

*“Yeah they gave me the choice, what are they, bouncer, you can either move to Vegas to be a bouncer, come to LA to be a bouncer and be security or do security and work at a restaurant, retail” (Post-9/11 Veteran).*

*“That always happened, yeah, overqualified when I got out. The only thing they put out for us is to become a mailman” (Pre-9/11 Veteran).*

*“It’s just like you don’t have very many options” (Post-9/11 Veteran).*

## WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM VOLUNTEERS OF AMERICA

### 1. Positive Multi-Agency Community Collaboration

One theme that was evident in all of the VOA service provider interviews was the importance of multi-agency and community collaboration. Although each VOA service provider was located in a different VOA office across the United States, every provider interviewed described great awareness and professional relationships with their local Veterans Affairs office, local and state government, and community organizations. This allowed for interagency collaboration in meeting the specific needs of each of their veteran clients. VOA is known within these communities as an organization where veterans can receive holistic support. Each service provider interviewed described how the building of these relationships was an important aspect of their agency strategy, how they regularly interacted and communicated with agencies within their communities, and how they viewed their agency as one part of a community working together to meet the needs of veterans.

*“Personal communications, an aligned mission, that one-to-one collaborative approach. People work together, not systems ... that relationship-building is the key to developing those supports.”*

*“We work real close with the Veterans Administration. We have a close relationship with their social workers and have ongoing probably weekly if not sometimes daily contact with them.”*

*“Well, I think it has to do with our relationships with the agencies that we work with. We know where to refer them to, and we have good relationships with them.”*

## 2. Service Provision

VOA provides a unique set of services that when combined, create a comprehensive strategy for improving the lives of their veteran clients. These are described in detail below.

**A. Information & Service Connection** – VOA connects veteran clients to information on where they can access services. This includes information on their healthcare and disability benefits, applying for local and federal support and how to access community support services. VOA examines each client for eligibility for benefits.

**B. Peer Support** – VOA connects veterans to one another. This provides an environment where most veterans feel most comfortable; allows their clients to explore shared experiences; and shares information on successful treatment and/or employment.

*“That peer support is always big so if they can kind of make a connection with someone that’s been through kind of the same thing they’ve been dealing with, where they were able to come out of it successful that usually works pretty well.”*

**C. Holistic Strategy** – Part of the VOA strategy is an understanding that a holistic strategy is essential for long-term employment success. This means that VOA addresses issues of housing, employment, finance management, mental health, and substance abuse.

*“I think we do a pretty good job of addressing the vocational needs of our veterans. We wear many hats in our program. We do a lot of the clinical counseling, crisis intervention. Then we also have the vocational aspect which we try to address as best we can but we do rely a*

## VOA SERVICE STRENGTHS

- Development of and engagement in multi-agency community collaboration.
- Connection of veteran clients to information.
- Use of peer support.
- Holistic strategy to addressing veteran client needs.
- Follow-up and follow-through after veterans find employment.
- Requiring accountability in veteran clients.
- Use of evidence-based practices.

*lot on the services offered in the community and with the VA hospital. With us, the best resource we have is our relationship with the clients. We know them better than any of their practitioners and so we kind of cultivate relationships with employers in the community and knowing our guys, match them appropriately.”*

**D. Follow-Up and Follow-Through** – The holistic strategy of VOA services also includes follow-up support. Veteran clients who are placed in employment are followed up on to make sure any ongoing needs are met. Many VOA offices even incentivized follow-up appointments to ensure follow through with their veteran clients.

*“We have people that are actually following up with the veterans. We don’t trickle out and forget about them. We continue to follow them.”*

**E. Accountability** – As veterans use the services provided by VOA and find employment, they are required to be accountable to the agency. This includes having veteran clients pay rent and put aside money into savings while learning financial management skills. Using VOA services comes with a sense of structure that includes strict house rules. Some service providers felt this kind of environment provides structure similar to what they experienced during military service.

**F. Use of Evidence-Based Practices** – Many of the VOA service providers interviewed were able to describe specific use of evidence-based practices with their veteran clients. Often mentioned was the use of motivational interviewing, which has been shown to be particularly effective with veterans.

*“I’m very much a proponent in evidence-based practices in reference to motivation, and so in my interactions with clients I’m using MI, I’m using trauma-informed care, I’m using critical time interventions, all of those types of things.”*

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## RESOURCES & POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

### **1. Establish a civilian “re-training” program for new veterans accessing VOA services.**

Develop an evidence-based “re-training” program for veterans using VOA services that clearly articulates some of the unique challenges that may affect military veterans in the transition process. Focus of this skills training should be on adapting their military identity to their new civilian life; focusing on perceptions of employers and civilian colleagues; setting realistic expectations around job opportunities and compensation; and how unresolved mental and physical health issues can lead to more severe behavioral health issues that impact employment opportunities. This skills training program could serve as a model for other nongovernmental and governmental agencies.

**2. Expand VOA’s holistic model of support to “first contact.”** VOA’s holistic model of supporting veterans in need of housing, employment, health and disability support is an exemplary model that can be expanded to veterans as a prevention and early intervention program by initiating a comprehensive veteran assessment at first contact with VOA. Outreach for VOA services could be expanded to target separating service members and connect them to VOA services in the communities in which they relocate after separation. By initiating a proactive approach to assessing veteran needs early post-military service, many transition issues can be addressed before they become severe or chronic.

**3. Create a veterans employment program for veterans with a less-than-honorable discharge.** Veterans with a less-than-honorable discharge are especially at risk for having a difficult transition. These veterans include those with discharges, such as other than honorable, bad conduct and dishonorable; most who will not have served any jail or prison time. Develop a special employment network of employers willing to hire these vulnerable veterans, including VOA providing ongoing support to these employers until a successful transition has occurred.

**4. Establish veteran support services and programs that recognize that recent military veterans may have needs different from older veterans.** In particular, veterans are likely to differ in job skills and severity and chronicity of health issues, as well as in their military identity. These and other issues need to be considered in the design and development of a successful transition plan. Avoid a one-size-fits-all approach.

**5. Participate in a campaign that enhances the value of military veterans.** There are many misperceptions and myths surrounding military veterans that hinder veteran transition, especially employment. VOA could take a leading role in working with other governmental and nongovernmental agencies in the development of an effective veteran communication campaign that works to dispel these myths and misperceptions, while acknowledging that veterans do require assistance in understanding in some areas.

**6. Strengthen communication of the VOA national network.** VOA launched a national veterans' services communication network and learning collaborative in 2013. The collaborative hosts regular telephone calls and webinars for VOA affiliates (including quarterly webinars on new and innovative practices). However, a common theme from service provider interviews was the need for opportunities to share best practices and program information throughout the VOA network. The continued growth and strengthening of this national network could help improve the dissemination of innovations and best practices developed and identified within VOA, as well as support the culture of innovation and sharing of information through webinars, conferences, and funding "pilot" projects to address enduring or challenging veteran issues.

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