

Interagency Coordination to Employ Veterans:

Roles of the Department of Labor and Department of Defense

by Joseph Mullins

In today's fiscally-constrained environment, it is critical that federal agencies synchronize efforts and provide more efficient and effective operations. The Department of Defense (DoD) and the Department of Labor are working toward that objective in support of our nation's transitioning military service members and veterans who are searching for meaningful employment.

While the unemployment rate for veterans has dropped from over 9 percent in 2011 to 7.4 percent in 2012, thanks largely to new and aggressive campaigns among the public and private sectors,¹ unemployment among veterans 18–24 years old remains at an alarmingly high rate of 29.1 percent, almost 12 percent higher than non-veterans of the same age.² The promise of a significant drawdown in military force structure which will result in the separation of over one million service members during the next five years,³ combined with the 806,000 currently unemployed veterans in the workforce⁴ and the nation's struggling economy, makes the mission of finding meaningful employment for veterans a daunting task. Another disturbing trend is the steady increase of reemployment rights claims filed under the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act, which protects the jobs of service members (especially those in the National Guard and Reserve) when they are called to federal service.⁵ These struggles highlight why interagency coordination of DoD and the Labor Department is vital to the success of this task, as is the participation of other key partners to include the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), Office of Personnel Management, the White House, and state workforce agencies.

Combining resources from federal agencies should help veterans like Maria Canales, whose story President Obama highlighted during a veteran's employment speech in Washington, DC. Canales's skills in financial and business management proved successful in overseeing millions

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of dollars in Iraq, but she was struggling to find work in the private sector upon her return to the United States. Similarly, technically skilled Soldiers, such as medics who have saved lives during deployments, lack the critical documentation required for public service on American soil.⁶ The creation of these strategic partnerships within the federal government, state governments, and the private sector are critical to resolving the high rate of unemployment among our nation's veterans.

Labor's Veterans' Employment and Training Service (VETS)

One of the best kept secrets throughout DoD is its relationship with the Department of Labor, and the role it plays in supporting service members as they transition out of the military. Labor's Veterans' Employment and Training Service (VETS) is an organization congressionally mandated to support transitioning service members and veterans in finding and retaining meaningful employment after their military service.

VETS is a small agency within the Labor Department consisting of approximately 245 personnel located around the country, including Guam and Puerto Rico. Its mission is to provide resources and expertise to assist transitioning service members and veterans in obtaining meaningful careers and maximizing employment opportunities, while protecting the veterans' employment rights. The agency consists of three core programs and numerous other priority efforts to ensure veterans find employment upon separation from the military: the Transition Assistance Program, the Jobs for Veterans' State Grant program, and enforcement of the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act. Through grants, programs, and key partnerships, VETS is able to serve our nation's veterans in communities across the country.

One of the most critical relationships for

VETS is with the state workforce agencies, which are the state equivalents of the Labor Department. VETS funds over 2,000 state employees via the Jobs for Veterans State Grant program to ensure veterans have access to employment assistance close to home. These state employees work in more than 3,000 local workforce centers called "One-Stop Career Centers" and provide one-on-one job placement services to veterans seeking quality employment. The ability for these state employees to connect veterans with employers in their local community provides a crucial link to the employment of veterans as they separate from the military.

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The "Gold Card" program

A new initiative launched by President Obama in November 2011 and executed by the Labor Department through state workforce agency employees, is the "Gold Card" program. This program affords all post-9/11 veterans the ability to obtain intensive services from the local veteran employment specialists in their communities. Intensive services include a case manager who follows a veteran for six months after he/she separates from the military, enters the program, or finds employment. Additionally, this case manager provides mentoring, career advice, and job readiness training and helps veterans develop an individual development plan to support personal and professional growth, while improving their likelihood for

employment.⁷ This type of case management increases the skills and confidence of veterans along with the likelihood they will find a job.

Transition Assistance Program (TAP)

In addition to federally-funded veterans' state grants, a second core VETS program is the Transition Assistance Program, also known as TAP. DoD and the Labor Department have worked closely together on this program since its inception over 20 years ago.

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The Transition Assistance Program is a five-day course that helps prepare service members for their transition into the civilian workforce. The program consists of instruction on benefits taught by the VA, an employment workshop taught by the Labor Department, and Service-specific material taught by DoD transition facilitators. The material within this program has recently been updated to address today's challenging economic environment and includes information on recruiting and hiring best practices from the human resources community, improved resume techniques, the use of resiliency training, the benefits of social media and networking, and improved interview skills. Participants in the program leave with a strong resume reflecting their skills and an ability to sell themselves more effectively to hiring managers during job interviews. VETS works closely with the Office of Wounded Warrior

Care and Transition Policy and the Office of Military Community and Family Policy, as well as each service's personnel office to ensure transitioning service members and their spouses receive the best preparatory training available. The Army is also working closely with the Labor Department to incorporate some of the employment workshop's best practices in its recently revised Army Career Alumni Program. With the nation embarking on arguably the largest veterans' hiring initiative since World War II; support from a newly-revised, transition program; and a government-wide focus on hiring veterans, DoD and the Labor Department must continually improve to provide relevant, quality employment support to veterans and their spouses.

Enforcement of the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act

The third core program within VETS is its enforcement of the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act. This law ensures protection of service members' jobs during mobilization or call to active duty.

Working closely with DoD's Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve, VETS educates service members and employers on the law, investigates potential violations by employers, and assists service members in regaining their previous positions. Through considerable outreach in their communities, VETS and Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve personnel are able to prevent many potential violations through education and investigation. The vast majority of cases filed result from a lack of understanding of the law by either an employer or veteran.

VETS' Reemployment Rights Act enforcement efforts are primarily focused on supporting National Guard and Reserve service members and has been critical to maintaining the force structure during the past ten years

of conflict with the unprecedented number of mobilizations and federal call ups. This law is essential to the Guard and Reserve if they hope to maintain a quality force during periods of high operational tempos. Without such protection, many members of the force would be unable to support their nation when called upon.

Other VETS programs

While VETS has numerous other programs and initiatives that benefit our nation's veterans, they also coordinate with other agencies within the Labor Department, as well as with interagency partners including the White House staff, Veterans Administration, Office of Personnel Management, and the Small Business Administration (SBA).

One relatively new project is the "Joining Forces Campaign" initiated by the White House and promoted by First Lady Michelle Obama and Dr. Jill Biden, wife of Vice President Joe Biden. The "Joining Forces Campaign" works with VETS and numerous public and private partners to ensure military families, service members, and spouses retain a high quality of life, which includes the ability to find meaningful employment. VETS also has representatives serving on the President's Task Force on Small Business chaired by the SBA. This task force encourages veterans to seek entrepreneurial work, while reducing access barriers to available grants and loans.

VETS continues to work closely with the VA on numerous programs, to include the reduction of homelessness among veterans in America. The government estimates that more than 75,000 veterans sleep on the street every night throughout America.⁸ Coordination among the Labor Department, VA, and others partners who seek to reduce this phenomenon is essential. Finally, VETS serves on the Interagency Presidential Council Subcommittee on Veterans Employment, which meets monthly to focus attention on coordinating interagency

veterans' employment efforts across the federal government. The leadership within this subcommittee often develops new programs and initiatives that encourage all public and private organizations to hire veterans. Although VETS has limited budget and staffing resources, they are able to support these efforts through strong leadership, a dedicated workforce, and assistance from elsewhere within the Labor Department. In fact, one of the reasons VETS is so successful stems from its ability to coordinate within the Department of Labor and utilize resources within the \$13 billion national workforce employment, training, and placement services available through the department.⁹ This network of services enables VETS to connect transitioning service members, veterans, and installation transition managers with an enormous infrastructure of support programs to enhance veterans' employment opportunities.

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The Way Ahead

New and previous partnerships continue to grow throughout VETS; however, VETS is continually striving to improve performance throughout the interagency community. Despite the close work with DoD and the military services, VETS needs to improve the education of its partners on the strengths of both the agency and the Department of Labor as a whole. VETS will never compete with the larger agencies on a budgetary level; however, VETS programs, state and local support, and its large workforce support network could supplement DoD and VA initiatives. Additionally, through proper coordination and proper planning, the

interagency community could launch more beneficial programs for a lower price tag, while retaining scarce monetary resources for other projects. For this to happen, senior leaders in these respective agencies must work to coordinate operations while still providing support to their customers and minimizing the influence of personal and agency agendas.

In addition to improving the education of its partners, the Labor Department and VETS need to effectively market their many valuable resources. Unfortunately, very few people within DoD are aware of the Labor Department's vast resources and how to pass them on to those who need them the most. Finally, VETS and the Labor Department should more effectively leverage private sector partnerships. Whether participating in the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Hiring Our Heroes job fairs across the country or participating in the American Legion's efforts to provide the proper licensing and credentialing required for veterans to transfer their military skills to the civilian sector, VETS and the Labor Department should ensure the maximum utilization of both federal and private sector resources.

In President Obama's 2010 National Security Strategy, he states that "(t)he most valuable component of our national defense is the men and women who make up America's all-volunteer force."¹⁰ During fiscal year 2011, the Army's unemployment compensation to veterans was over \$515 million and expected to rise significantly in the coming years. However, in January 2011 the overall veteran unemployment rate was 9.3 percent; 0.4 percent above the national average. One year later, the February 2012 rate dropped to 7.0 percent; 1.6 percent below the national average.¹¹ While this is very good news, the impending budget constraints, significant downsizing in military force structure, and a struggling economy increase the challenges to the more than one million veterans expected to enter the workforce during the next five years. Thanks to new programs, increased awareness, and the hard work of dedicated people in agencies such as VETS, there is progress and support available to help veterans find meaningful careers. However, the Department of Labor, DoD, VA, and other agencies can provide even greater support through true interagency cooperation.

As President George Washington once said, "The willingness with which our young people are likely to serve in any war, no matter how justified, shall be directly proportional to how they perceive the veterans of earlier wars were treated and appreciated by their nation." If America fails to support today's veterans after the longest sustained conflict in our history, the likelihood of attracting quality personnel to serve in the armed forces diminishes, reducing the security of our nation. **IAJ**

Notes

1 U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Table A-5, <<http://www.bls.gov/news.release/empsit.pdf>> accessed on July 10, 2012.

2 U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Employment Situation of Veterans-2011," March 20, 2012.

3 President Barack Obama, "Remarks on Veteran's Day," Arlington National Cemetery, <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/11/remarks-president-veterans-day>> (accessed on March 23, 2012).

4 U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics.

- 5 U.S. Department of Labor, Veterans' Employment and Training Service data.
- 6 President Barack Obama, "Remarks on the Administration's Work to Prepare our Nation's Veterans for the Workforce," <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/08/05/remarks-president-administrations-work-prepare-our-nations-veterans-work>>.
- 7 U.S. Department of Labor, Veterans' Employment and Training Service, <<http://www.dol.gov/vets/goldcard.html>> (accessed on March 24, 2012).
- 8 Hilda L. Solis, "Senate Veteran's Job Caucus News Conference," U.S. Department of Labor, <http://www.dol.gov/_sec/media/speeches/20120328_VETS.htm> (accessed on March 30, 2012).
- 9 Budget briefing, U.S. Department of Labor, FY 2012, <<http://www.dol.gov/dol/budget/2012/PDF/FY-2012BIB.pdf>> (accessed on March 25, 2012).
- 10 "2010 National Security Strategy," The White House, p.14, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/rss_viewer/national_security_strategy.pdf> (accessed on March 24, 2012).
- 11 U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics.