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S. HRG. 119–190

A GRATEFUL NATION: MAXIMIZING VETERANS' SUCCESS AFTER SERVICE

HEARING

BEFORE THE

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS UNITED STATES SENATE

ONE HUNDRED NINETEENTH CONGRESS

FIRST SESSION

NOVEMBER 5, 2025

Printed for the use of the Committee on Veterans' Affairs

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U.S. GOVERNMENT PUBLISHING OFFICE

61–879 PDF WASHINGTON : 2026

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A GRATEFUL NATION: MAXIMIZING VETERANS' SUCCESS AFTER SERVICE

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 5, 2025

U.S. SENATE,
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS,
Washington, DC.

The Committee met, pursuant to notice, at 4:03 p.m., in Room SD–G50, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Hon. Jerry Moran, Chairman of the Committee, presiding.

Present: Senators Moran, Boozman, Cassidy, Blackburn, Banks, Sheehy, Blumenthal, Murray, Hassan, King, and Slotkin.

OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. JERRY MORAN, CHAIRMAN, U.S. SENATOR FROM KANSAS

Chairman MORAN. Good afternoon. The Committee will come to order. I was looking at my opening statement with the intention of shortening it, but I was discovering that the length of time it was taking me to shorten the statement was utilizing up the time that I would've saved.

But I'm delighted that you're here. This is a bit of a different hearing than this Committee has conducted in recent past, and I'm very interested in what each of our witnesses have to say and what conversations it may generate.

The organizations that support veterans are broad, often led by other veterans and their families. We often hear from the Department of Veterans Affairs and the programs and opportunities they provide to serve our Nation's veterans. And today the focus is on the non-veteran administration side of how we care for those that served our Nation.

Each veteran is a significant asset for our country, hugely important to their families and to their community in which they live, and ultimately to the Nation. They demonstrated that in their service. And every veteran is unique and different and their needs are different, one from another.

And so, what has arisen over a period of time in our country is often other veterans, but certainly other citizens who rise to the occasion to try to make sure that veterans needs are being met. And I want to thank those who do that every day. Individuals in Kansas and organizations in Kansas, but across the country who see the needs of those who served are cared for.

Today's hearing recognizes that veterans are civic assets and that their success after service is in our national interest. Much of

the support available to veterans comes from non-governmental community resources, and today we're discussing how those resources support veterans' success and can better integrate with veteran programs such as what the Department of Veterans Affairs provides.

I'll introduce the witnesses after. I now turn to the Ranking Member for his opening statement.

OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. RICHARD BLUMENTHAL, RANKING MEMBER, U.S. SENATOR FROM CONNECTICUT

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Thanks, Mr. Chairman. Thank you for holding this hearing and thank you to all of our witnesses, an unusually large panel, but we appreciate every one of you.

I want to thank particularly Holly Hermes, who is Yale University's Liaison for Military Families and Veterans. This office has enabled two of my sons who have attended Yale Law School to go there with more aid and service and companionship than they would've otherwise won. Marine Corps veteran who served in Afghanistan, the other, a Navy SEAL veteran who actually is there right now. I hope he's in class.

I am really honored to serve as Ranking Member on this Committee along with very distinguished colleagues. And let me come right to the point. We're here because we need to assure veterans that they have the information and services they need when they go from military service to civilian life, often continuing to serve our country.

And I know about this transition because of my two sons, and countless others whom I have watched and seen and sought to mentor as they go through this sometimes very, very difficult transition period when they need help from a VSO in filing a disability claim or how best to use their earned education benefits, connect with local employers or access assistance when they need it most.

And unfortunately, this Administration has increased the difficulty of our veterans, not only in transitioning, but in living through civilian life after they leave the military.

All Americans are struggling with the increased costs of rent, food, electricity, and yes, healthcare, most especially healthcare insurance, which is why we as Democrats are standing firm, that there has to be an extension of healthcare insurance tax credits or subsidies, past the end of the year.

And the Administration, rather than curbing costs for the average American worker, including veterans, is prioritizing historic cuts, and I mean unprecedented cuts in SNAP, Medicaid and healthcare coverage.

Americans often don't appreciate that veterans use these programs and depend on them. More than 1.2 million veteran households use SNAP. Yet this Administration refuses to fully fund the program despite orders from courts that they do so. There's no equivalent service like SNAP through the VA or any other federal program to serve as a safety net. Meaning these cuts have devastating impacts on veterans and their families.

And at the same time, reductions in access to private health insurance, Medicaid, and funding for community health services, we all know about the clinics that exist in communities with federal

support, they will result in veterans relying more on the VA for their healthcare and benefits. Here's the startling number, up to 1.75 million veterans and active-duty service member households rely on Medicaid. Let me just give you that again, 1.75 million veterans and their households rely on Medicaid, and that's nearly one in 10 veterans under the age of 65.

Forty percent of them rely on Medicaid as their sole coverage, often due to ineligibility for Medicare or VA healthcare. Of the 10.3 million individuals who are likely to lose Medicaid coverage because of the "Great Big Beautiful Bill" which I call the "Great Big Blatant Betrayal", 267,000 are veterans. And meanwhile, many veterans who escape the impacts of Medicaid cuts will instead lose their healthcare access when ACA premium tax credits expire, making their healthcare coverage unaffordable.

Our veterans are suffering just as Americans are from looking at the exchanges and the premium on open enrollment, as we speak right now, at their kitchen tables, trying to figure out how they're going to afford health insurance. And they can't do it because premiums are doubling and tripling.

Where are these veterans going to go? If eligible, they'll go to the VA and we'll see a dramatically increased reliance on VA healthcare, stretching the capacities of our docs, our nurses, our VA facilities generally, which are already suffering from cuts and furloughs unnecessarily imposed by this Administration.

Their increased reliance will come on the heels of catastrophic and unnecessary cuts to VA's workforce and resources by Secretary Collins. Cuts that have already eroded the department's ability to support the needs of veterans and according to the department's actuarial firm, for every 1 percent of increased reliance on VA healthcare, VA can expect its cost to increase by 2.6 billion, 1 percent, 2.6 billion. They don't have the money. Those costs have not been accounted for in the department's funding requests or factored into Secretary Collins plans for further cuts in VA resources.

If veterans are not eligible for VA care, there's a real fear that they will simply lose access to healthcare completely. Our veterans losing access to healthcare seems unacceptable to me, but it's going to happen. Given the healthcare and cost of living crises in this country, the services provided by the groups here today are more critical than ever before, so I want to just thank you, every one of you and your organizations for what you do.

I look forward to hearing your insights and recommendations on how we can make sure that veterans get what they need, what they deserve, what we have promised them. Thank you.

Chairman MORAN. Thank you, Senator Blumenthal. I now want to introduce to the Committee those who are testifying today, the first panels—the first witness panel is Colonel Jason Galui, the Director of Veteran and Military Families of the George W. Bush Institute; Mr. Mike Hutchings, Chief Executive Officer, Combined Arms; Colonel Barbara Carson, Managing Director of Programs and Services at D'Aniello Institute for Veterans and Military Families at Syracuse University; Mr. Jared Lyon, the National President and Chief Executive Officer of Student Veterans of America; Ms. Elizabeth O'Brien, Senior Vice President of the U.S. Chamber of

Commerce Foundations for Hiring Our Heroes; and Ms. Holly Hermes, Yale University Liaison for Veterans and Military Affairs.

Again, thank you all for being here, and Colonel, I now recognize you for your testimony.

STATEMENT OF JASON GALUI, LIEUTENANT COLONEL, U.S. ARMY (RET.), DIRECTOR, VETERANS AND MILITARY FAMILIES, GEORGE W. BUSH INSTITUTE

Colonel GALUI. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Chairman Moran, Ranking Member Blumenthal, and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on behalf of the George W. Bush Institute. I'm Jason Galui, the Director of the Bush Institute's Veterans and Military Families team.

At the Bush Institute, we believe that the Nation has a duty to empower veterans and their families to thrive beyond the uniform, so that we can, in the words of President George W. Bush, "Unleash the potential of a generation of resourceful, determined, and experienced leaders."

Veterans can be strong civic assets who inspire others to achieve common goals for a shared purpose. Veterans tend to have good character, competence, and commitment, and thus can earn the trust of—and lead—their fellow Americans. General Dwight D. Eisenhower, as he approached his own retirement from the U.S. Army, wrote that he "faced a monumental career choice with absolutely no experience in making career choices."

If soon-to-be President Eisenhower was concerned about his transition, then we must expect that many transitioning service members will be anxious about theirs. Veterans and their families, like everyone else in society, thrive when they are mentally and physically healthy, are well-informed and prepared for navigating civilian life, and can make meaningful contributions to their new communities.

Therefore, at the Bush Institute, we focus on veteran health and well-being, education, and employment. Thanks to dedicated public and private efforts, there are tremendous resources available for veterans and their families. However, bureaucratic fragmentation and complex navigation can cloud the learning about and accessing these resources.

Fortunately, the unique entrepreneurial spirit of the American people complements federal efforts to reintegrate veterans and their families back into American civilian society. The Veteran Wellness Alliance (VWA) is one example of how public and private partners can achieve the best outcomes for veterans and their families.

Led by the Bush Institute, the VWA is a collaborative network of mental and brain healthcare clinical providers, including the VA, and veteran peer networks that together tackle the effects of the invisible wounds of war.

In 2021, the VWA launched Check-In, an innovative solution that connects veterans, service members, and their families, caregivers, and survivors to high quality mental and brain healthcare regardless of service era and regardless of characterization of service discharge. Check-In's novelty was its creation of a trusted on-

line "easy button" that peer networks could provide to their members.

Leveraging the power of innovation and technology, Check-In solved the navigational and bureaucratic challenges associated with searching for and connecting with the right type of care. Given the many resources available, it can be paralyzing to learn which resource is most appropriate to address the challenge at hand. Check-In eliminates or at least reduces the possibility of such paralysis with respect to mental and brain healthcare.

The VWA is a strong model for how public and private actors can partner to achieve sustained success after service for veterans and their families. Serving beyond the uniform, forming genuine connections, and making meaningful contributions are necessary components for sustained success.

Discovering such opportunities is less clear in civilian life than it is while in service, which can make the military-to-civilian transition challenging. The sooner a veteran can rediscover their purpose, their connections, and their contributions, the more likely they and their family will thrive in civilian life.

It is not unreasonable to ask a transitioning service member, "what do you want to do when you get out of the military?" But that's an incomplete question. What a veteran wants to do might not match what the civilian world needs from that veteran. A more complete question a veteran could ask themselves is, "what do I have that the market needs?" That is, what does the veteran have in their talent set—their skills, knowledge, attributes, experiences, and education—that the labor market wants?

Embedded in that framing is the fundamental labor supply-labor demand match. The sustained success post-transition of our veterans and military families directly affects military readiness. When a service member's final experience in uniform, their transition from it, is positive and enduring, then a new veteran and their family will be great ambassadors for military service and will be more likely to encourage others to serve.

General George Washington was clear when he 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."

Maximizing sustained success for veterans and their families post-military transition is, simply put, an enduring vital U.S. national interest. Thank you again for this opportunity to talk with you today about this all-important national subject.

I look forward to your questions.

[The prepared statement of Colonel Galui appears on pages 45–51 of the Appendix.]

Chairman MORAN. Thank you very much. Mr. Hutchings.

STATEMENT OF MIKE HUTCHINGS,
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER, COMBINED ARMS

Mr. HUTCHINGS. Chairman Moran, Ranking Member Blumenthal, and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak here today. I'm Mike Hutchings, and I serve as

the Chief Executive Officer of Combined Arms, a veteran-founded and veteran-led nonprofit, dedicated to transforming how America supports those who have served.

Each year, about 200,000 service members transition from military to civilian life. Behind that number are families. There are parents, spouses, children who often find themselves navigating a maze of agencies and organizations that were never efficiently designed to work together.

Veterans may face longer wait times, repetitive paperwork, and a lack of coordination that too often may leave them vulnerable. Ten years ago, almost to this day, Combined Arms was created to change that. We have built a technology platform that acts as a GPS for Veteran Services, connecting veterans, service members and their families to the right local resources in hours instead of months.

We do not replace government systems. We complement them by integrating federal, state, and community partners to close what we call the delivery divide. Today, our network includes more than 300 vetted partner organizations operating in all 50 states. Together we have connected over a 100,000 veterans and families to critical support, and coordinated more than 175,000 referrals for things such as housing, employment, mental healthcare, and financial assistance.

These connections have generated over an estimated $603 million in taxpayer savings and economic impact, while reducing the average wait time for help to just 26 hours across the Nation. Our work has been recognized by the Milken Institute and the American Enterprise Institute, as a national program of record for veteran transition and reintegration. A bipartisan acknowledgement that coordinated data-driven solutions can and should be scaled nationwide.

But we also recognize the challenge and oversaturated and hyper fragmented landscape with nearly 45,000 nonprofits in the veteran services space. Thousands of organizations want to help but duplication slows progress. Combined Arms cuts through the noise, veterans complete one intake. They tell their story once and they receive access to multiple services quickly. Our partners are held accountable for timely responses and outcome reporting, ensuring closed loop results instead of open-ended referrals.

Across Texas and beyond, Combined Arms has become a vital conduit connecting veterans and their families to life-changing regional, state and federal resources, a proven model with more than a hundred thousand success stories. So let me share a few.

A U.S. Army Sergeant who was referred to NextOp and found civilian employment in just 15 days. A mother of three, new to Houston, found stability through our network, receiving housing support, food and financial education through Family Houston and other partners. And a Vietnam War veteran, once homeless, found dignity and belonging after being placed in a Texas State Veteran's Home through coordinated action with our state partners.

Even small moments show the power of collaboration. Like the day a VA psychologist reached out to us for help, and a veteran in crisis was connected to the Baker Ripley for housing within hours,

while that federal provider discovered new local resources to help others.

These stories aren't exceptions. They represent a nationally replicable model of coordinated care when local, state, and federal partners share information and act together, veterans are met with dignity, stability, and hope, not barriers and delay.

Our veterans are not liabilities. They're leaders and they're civic assets who vote, volunteer and build communities at higher rates than the general public. When we invest in their successful transition, we strengthen our workforce, we strengthen our neighborhoods, and we strengthen our Nation.

The covenant between our government and veterans is sacred, but it cannot stand alone. Federal systems are vital, but they cannot meet every need. Civil society must play a role. Take for example the Bush Institute, our partners at this table who alongside IVMF, Combined Arms, Wounded Warrior Project and a mixture of best-in-class nonprofits healthcare institutions and federal agencies, have built a connective tissue network for veterans and their families to seek care. No one organization can do this alone.

Combined Arms shows that when innovation, data and compassion come together, we can deliver real results faster, smarter, and more human. Our organization stands ready to work with this Committee, the VA and partners at every level of government on bipartisan data-driven solutions that strengthen the continuum of care for all those who have served.

Thank you for the privilege to speak here today. It has been an absolute honor and privilege. I look forward to your questions.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Hutchings appears on pages 52–55 of the Appendix.]

Chairman MORAN. Thank you very much. Colonel Carson.

STATEMENT OF BARBARA E. CARSON, COLONEL (RET.), U.S. AIR FORCE RESERVE, MANAGING DIRECTOR OF PROGRAMS AND SERVICES, D'ANIELLO INSTITUTE FOR VETERANS AND MILITARY FAMILIES AT SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY

Colonel CARSON. Chairman Moran, Ranking Member Blumenthal and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. I'm Barbara Carson, the daughter, sister, mother of veterans, and a 30-year veteran myself.

On behalf of the D'Aniello Institute for Veterans and Military Families at Syracuse University, I'm honored to discuss how we can ensure that every veteran, and family member can thrive after service. The IVMF was founded in 2011 and has served more than 230,000 people through programs in career preparation, entrepreneurship, and community connection. Our core belief is simple: When we get transition right, our country is stronger.

Each year, about 200,000 people leave active duty and data from our collective and collaborative research with Blue Star Families consistently shows that roughly half of veteran respondents described their overall transition as difficult or very difficult. Broader evidence repeatedly finds that navigating the maze of programs and benefits can be overwhelming.

And while transitioning to civilian employment, veterans and their families often must start over instead of building on the skills and leadership experience that they gained during service. That is why IVMF worked alongside communities to launch the AmericaServes network back in 2015.

AmericaServes is a coordinated referral network that helps veterans and families connect to the right resources at the right time. We grew this model across the country and today many of those original AmericaServes communities are operating independently while continuing to collaborate through IVMF's community of practice.

Through the community of practice, we regularly bring together these local networks as well as nonprofit and state leaders, many of whom are VA grantees of critical efforts like the Staff Sergeant Fox Suicide Prevention Program. Together, they share insights, exchange best practices, and strengthen the depth and breadth of the resource networks that serve veterans nationwide.

In short, along with many others on this panel, we are cultivating what RAND and others have called for; coordinated, transparent and an accountable system. We can all commit to doing the same for transition. How we design and manage these systems matters. Evidence shows that success rates are far higher when a veteran is guided by a trained navigator rather than given simply a curated list of phone numbers.

Looking at just the federal transition landscape, it's easy to understand why the support of a trusted navigator is so instrumental and why the need to monitor the process and results is crucial. RAND and GAO identified 46 programs spread across 12 agencies with the most funding concentrated in education, beyond the GI Bill, and very little coordination or oversight.

The Veteran Metrics Initiative or TVMI, a comprehensive longitudinal study led by Penn State University, found that two thirds of post-9/11 veterans used at least one program after leaving service, and those who used multiple programs had better outcomes. Our research with VA has shown similar outcomes for patients who seek non-VA services through formal collaboration. In other words, connection and coordination drive success. At IVMF, we've taken those lessons to heart.

Earlier today, IVMF and Hiring Our Heroes, along with five proven VSOs in the employment opportunity ecosystem, formally committed to improving our collaboration. Together we'll strengthen referrals and data sharing to better serve a military-connected population and measure our collective impact.

We believe it is time to align our Nation's effort through a national veteran strategy, a whole of nation framework that includes federal, local, and state government, nonprofits, philanthropy, and the private sector. Such a strategy would establish shared outcome measures, better fund the evaluation efforts, and support cross sector initiatives that improve navigation and coordination.

As part of this strategy, we reinforce RAND's recommendation for more oversight and evaluation of transition programs and encourage data transparency across agencies and sectors. Oversight is not criticism, it is critical stewardship.

Veterans are assets to our economy, who bring talent, discipline, and leadership to every industry. They're civic leaders who strengthen the communities where they live. When we measure results, share data, and work together, these assets grow.

We thank the Committee for your leadership, for your continued commitment to those who serve. The D'Aniello IVMF stands ready to partner with you, with federal agencies, and with our colleagues across civil society to turn these recommendations into meaningful outcomes. Together, we can assure that every veteran and every family who served receives the support that they earned and that a grateful nation truly does maximize their success after service. Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Colonel Carson appears on pages 56–63 of the Appendix.]

Chairman MORAN. Thank you. Mr. Lyon.

STATEMENT OF JARED LYON, NATIONAL PRESIDENT AND CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER, STUDENT VETERANS OF AMERICA

Mr. LYON. Chairman Moran, Ranking Member Blumenthal, Members of the Committee, thank you so much for this opportunity to testify. As a Navy veteran and a student veteran who has used earned benefits for an associate's, a bachelor's and a master's degree, while also now in pursuit of a Ph.D., after my benefits have expired, I'm getting——

Chairman MORAN. Next time you testify Dr. Lyon, we will look forward to that.

[Laughter.]

Mr. LYON. As is everyone at Syracuse where I'm pursuing my Ph.D. So, I now have the pleasure to lead Student Veterans of America and we represent over 1600 campus chapters serving over 600,000 student veterans and military-connected students.

SVA is where federal policy meets lived experience. VA and DoD set the standard and we and our partners make it stick on campuses, in classrooms and at the hiring threshold. We don't replace the VA, we extend it through public-private partnerships and philanthropy. We bring additional capacity at no cost to taxpayers, to convert benefits into degrees, careers, and community leadership.

We see what aligned systems can deliver. At SVAs National Conference this past January, alongside the Department of Veterans Affairs and partners, including the Veterans of Foreign Wars, Disabled American Veterans, American Legion, and the Vietnam Veterans of America, we offered a full-service claims clinic that assisted over 400 veterans and family members, and conducted nearly 200 onsite exams in a single weekend. That's the public and private flywheel working. Federal authority plus nonprofit and employer capacity producing fast verifiable results.

Today's hearing asks how a grateful nation maximizes success after service. Give us the right tools and the public-private flywheel will spin faster. We offer three low-cost steps that this Committee can advance now.

First, forecast the transition. Each year roughly 150,000 Americans leave active-duty military service. Most of them are under the

age of 35, many with or starting families. Yet, campuses, employers, and veteran serving organizations plan against imprecise estimates.

You could direct DoD with the VA to publish annual transition forecasts each summer by component, geography and broad demographics. The data exists, organize and share them. With a reliable forecast, the VA, nonprofits and employers can pre-position advising, childcare, internships, and hiring pipelines where they'll be needed most, turning taxpayers' education investment into timely local action.

Better forecasting data could also shorten the time for filing critical shortage in the fields like nursing with veteran talent. Through research funded by Google.org, we're working with state and university leaders to reduce barriers to education and enhance economic opportunity for veterans. Work that better data coordination would strengthen even further.

Second, connect that data. The DoD tracks separations and training. VA tracks education benefits. The Department of Education tracks enrollment. The Department of Labor tracks earnings. These systems don't talk in real time. That leaves Congress and VA flying partially blind on the outcomes.

We recommend that VA lead an interagency transition data taskforce with DoD, Ed, and Labor, to deliver within 12 months a pilot that links one cohort separation data, GI Bill enrollment, and early employment outcomes with a report back to this Committee. Build it privacy first, consent-driven, so that data follow the veteran. Connected dataset Congress oversee impact. It lets VA tune programs and it lets nonprofits and employers, like ours, target resources precisely so that every public dollar works even harder.

Third is to modernize the VA work study program. About three quarters of student veterans work while they're enrolled in college. Too often in jobs that are unrelated to their field of study, slowing career momentum and weakening return on the GI Bill.

Update VA work study to, number one, align placements to a veteran's degree field; two, allow at least halftime students to participate and supporting veterans who are parents and caregivers; three, digitized timekeeping; and four, pilot targeted placements in shortage fields like healthcare, education, cybersecurity and STEM, and related data skills.

Veterans already bring advanced technical and analytical training from their military service. With the right academic pathways and paid work experiences, they can meet the national demand for AI-literate talent and at every major industry as well as the VA actually needs now.

SVA is already working to meet these workforce shortages with partners like the Independence Blue Cross Foundation, expanding pipelines into nursing and Allied Health through their service scholar's model. With better transition forecasting, we can shorten the time to hire in critical fields like nursing by advising critical placements and employer demand ahead of military separation.

And when VA enables career relevant paid work, SVAs career center, made possible by the generous support by the Walt Disney Company, and our employer partners can plug in immediately, opening thousands of aligned roles so that education translates into

earnings faster, no nude entitlement, just modernizing what taxpayers already fund for.

Thank you very much for your time and I look forward to your questions.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Lyon appears on pages 64–71 of the Appendix.]

Chairman MORAN. Thank you. Ms. O'Brien.

STATEMENT OF ELIZABETH O'BRIEN, SENIOR VICE PRESIDENT, HIRING OUR HEROES, U.S. CHAMBER OF COMMERCE FOUNDATION

Ms. O'BRIEN. Chairman Moran, Ranking Member Blumenthal, and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify. My name is Elizabeth O'Brien, I am Senior Vice President of Hiring Our Heroes, an initiative of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation. I am also an active-duty spouse for more than 20 years, during our Nation's longest conflict, and the proud mom of a midshipman at the United States Naval Academy.

I have seen firsthand how critical it is that our Nation's gratitude for service is translated into action. For more than a decade, Hiring Our Heroes has helped transform how the military community connects to meaningful careers. Working directly on installations and through a national employer network, we now serve more than 80,000 veterans, service members and spouses each year, and over 1 million to date.

A grateful nation maximizing veteran success after service embodies the purpose behind our work, standing shoulder to shoulder with the VA, to build innovative pathways that empower veterans to thrive long after they hang up the uniform.

That is why today we are sharing, we're so proud to be a part of the newly formed Veteran Employment Collective, a bold national coalition designed to transform how veterans and military spouses navigate their career journey. The Collective brings together the Nation's leading veteran and spouse serving nonprofits, employers, and government partners around one mission: ensuring every member of the military community has access to meaningful career opportunities.

It tackles a longstanding challenge, too many programs, too little coordination, through a seamless referral and data sharing system, a coordinated approach that removes duplication and shared outcome-based metrics that demonstrate real impact. Last year alone, Hiring Our Heroes made over 44,000 referrals to partner organizations. The volume proves that structured collaboration is not just beneficial, it's essential.

The Collective founding partners are creating a "no wrong door" network where veterans and spouses can access trusted, high-quality support when they enter the system.

For more than a decade, Hiring Our Heroes has operated one of the Nation's largest and longest running SkillBridge programs, the HOH Fellows Program. The 12-week internship places transitioning service members directly into civilian companies. Over the past five years, we have connected over 10,000 service

members with 2,500 employers nationwide. Eighty-eight percent of them receive job offers within three months of completion.

While we strengthen the ecosystem, we're also innovating at the program level. This summer, in partnership with the Lowes Foundation, we launched the HOH Skilled Trades Academy in Jacksonville, North Carolina, at no cost to participants.

The pilot is a six-week, hands-on training program for transitioning service members, veterans and spouses. The first class, eight veterans graduate next week. The pilot is the foundation of a national model, and in 2026, we will add three more Skilled Trades Academy, including one in the National capital region, one near Joint Base Lewis-McChord in Washington State, one in Phoenix, Arizona.

These efforts align with federal policy under Public Law 119–21, and with more than 400,000 open manufacturing jobs as well nationwide. Each program's desire to improve veterans' financial wellness, while easing pressure on the VA to address underemployment and homelessness.

Finally, we must recognize a veteran's success is often tied to the military spouse's opportunity. The Military Spouse Career Accelerator Pilot (MSCAP), which Hiring Our Heroes facilitated in partnership with the Department of War in Deloitte, has become one of the most effective tools to closing that gap.

Since 2022 in December, more than 1,200 military spouses have completed 12-week fellowships through MSCAP with an 86 percent job offer rate and more than half of the positions remote or hybrid. This summer, the department announced a strategic pause in placements as it transitions from pilot to permanent program in 2026. We respect the process, but the timing is difficult. In an environment of furloughs and economic uncertainty, spouses who already faced unemployment at six times higher than their civilian peers, need access today to those opportunities, now more than ever.

Chairman Moran, Ranking Member Blumenthal, Members of the Committee, the Veteran Employment Collective, the HOH Skilled Trades Academy and the MSCAP represent a whole of nation approach to veteran and family success and lead to American prosperity. We remain committed to leading this work with our partners across every sector and building systems worthy of those who serve.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify and I look forward to your questions.

[The prepared statement of Ms. O'Brien appears on pages 72–83 of the Appendix.]

Chairman MORAN. Thank you for your testimony. Ms. Hermes.

STATEMENT OF HOLLY HERMES, LIAISON FOR VETERAN AND MILITARY AFFAIRS, YALE UNIVERSITY

Ms. HERMES. Thank you to Chairman Moran and Ranking Member Blumenthal, and Members of the Committee for having me here today. As an Air Force veteran and actively serving Reservist, I'm deeply appreciative of the opportunities provided to me by the Air Force Reserve, but I'm here today testifying solely in my civil-

ian capacity, as Yale University's Liaison for Veteran and Military Affairs.

I'm here to discuss veterans transitioning out of the military and into higher education and to share Yale's commitment to veterans and their families as well as our partnerships with veterans service organizations. This overview is not exhaustive, but it highlights common services that our veterans frequently use.

Student veterans at Yale College come from the enlisted ranks. They may enroll as first year students, transfer students, or in our Eli Whitney Students Program for non-traditional students. Eli Whitney students take the same in-person classes as other undergraduates and have access to the same majors, faculty, instructors and advisors, extracurricular activities, research opportunities, and international experiences.

The program's flexibility allows students to enroll in courses full- or part-time, and its advisors have experienced guiding adult students. In 2017, Yale College had 17 veterans. Today we have 58 student veterans from every branch of service, including our first Space Force veteran. This almost fourfold increase in eight years is due to Yale's partnership with organizations that support veterans preparing for and applying to college, and Yale's deep commitment for making education accessible and affordable for all veterans.

Yale College continues to meet 100 percent of financial need for all students. As a result, 100 percent of our undergraduate student veterans attend Yale at little or no cost. Veterans are not required to use VA benefits before accessing Yale's financial aid, and many students choose to utilize Yale's financial aid, so they may preserve their VA benefits for future studies or transfer them to eligible dependents.

All 14 of Yale schools participate in the Yellow Ribbon Program. The following services support veterans to and through Yale. The Warrior-Scholar Project was started by a Yale Eli Whitney student 15 years ago, and in partnerships with colleges nationwide, provides intensive one-week academic bootcamps for enlisted transitioning service members.

Having taught at this program at Yale, I can tell you from personal experience, that this program gives enlisted veterans the confidence to know they have the skills to succeed at a school like Yale. Once students have the desire to attend a highly competitive institution, they turn to Service to School, a nonprofit organization that provides free college application counseling to military veterans and service members.

Students also come to Yale through the research experience for veteran undergraduates, a nine-week summer program where enlisted veterans conduct STEM research and build skills to become research scientists. Yale Veteran and Military Affairs, serves as an umbrella program to support students, faculty, staff, and alumni, and to assist veterans in accessing services and resources both internal and external to Yale.

We have permanent space, co-located with our Office of Student Accessibility Services, to offer events, programs and disability accommodations that support our students. Our student veterans have access to VA medical facility in neighboring West Haven, as

well as the Yale Health Plan. Yale Mental Health and Counseling is an additional benefit that offers students a wide range of urgent and long-term services.

One of the toughest parts of leaving the service is leaving a closed team of colleagues who are intent on working toward a collective mission. We are committed to bringing together the broader Yale veteran and military community, to support each other and build camaraderie. Yale has an active veteran alumni group, an employee group, and offers multiple options to earn a commission.

Currently, we have over a hundred students working toward the commission into five branches of the U.S. military. Yale has been teaching and preparing leaders for service in the military and civilian sectors for over 300 years and fully recognizes the important role that veterans play in our society.

Personally, I'm thankful for Yale's support of my own continuing military service, and I'm proud to support my brothers and sisters and ours, as they work toward their future education and career goals. Thank you for the opportunity to testify and I look forward to your questions.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Hermes appears on pages 84–88 of the Appendix.]

Chairman MORAN. Thank you very much, all of you. Let me begin with a couple of questions. There's a significant number of veterans who don't access either healthcare benefits or disability benefits from the Department of Veterans Affairs. I think those numbers are about 51 percent do access healthcare, and 42 percent do access disability.

And it may be, you can tell me this is not true, there may be veterans who don't need those services or services from the department and there may be those who don't know about the services that are available. In fact, I know that is true. And there may be some veterans who know but don't want those services.

What role does any of your organizations or all of your organizations play in meeting the needs of someone who is not enrolled in the VA? And is there a special opportunity or responsibility to meet the needs of those not accessing care in the formal governmental services kind of way? How do you see your role in that and why is that necessary for meeting the needs of those who serve?

Mr. LYON. Mr. Chairman, I'll start. I really appreciate the question because when we look at these benefits that are available to veterans, there's often the—do I need it? Does someone else need it? But they're earned, right? And so, if you earn them, they're available to you.

When you look at those accessing care or the benefits that they've earned, be it disability and compensation, education and training benefits, the VA home loan, all of these things, we see utilization and the VA's own data supports it.

The VA struggles to reach out to one age demographic above all others, veterans under the age of 45. And veterans under the age of 45 that have made a transition most recently are more likely than not to be what we call non-retirees. So those individuals that served eight years or less of active duty, guard, or reserve. And

that population tends to be like myself, former enlisted, making their way through education and training as they move forward.

So, what Student Veterans of America works with is one, to try to educate the population on what they've earned so that if they should decide they need it, it's available to them.

Chairman MORAN. Mr. Lyon, let me ask you, do most of the veterans who you provide assistance to, are they enrolled in the VA or they come to you without that experience?

Mr. LYON. They come to us without it, overwhelmingly, sir. Over 80 percent don't access the benefits that they've earned beyond that of the GI Bill. That's why we're working with the Department of Veterans Affairs to try to provide better awareness for veterans under the age of 45, who were prior enlisted and non-retirees. When you look at the data, it's retirees, most likely that access disability and compensation at far higher rates than non-retirees.

Chairman MORAN. Others want to comment on that topic? Yes. Mr. Hutchings.

Mr. HUTCHINGS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. The veterans that we see coming into Combined Arms' front door, on average, 41 percent are actually already using VA healthcare benefits, 39 percent are not enrolled, and around 18 to 20 percent are in the current application or planning to apply. So, one of the first things that the Combined Arms technology does is, it says, are you interested in being connected to VA healthcare and VA benefits? If so, that's one of the first referrals that gets automated in the system.

So, one of the beginning steps is inform and educate. You know, it's a broad assumption, but what I've heard anecdotally is either unaware of the support services that were out there, or as even some of the Combined Arms employees that are veterans have a great career, great benefits, not interested in it.

My personal vignette is, you know, I had a great transition story on paper and where I was hired and offered full-time employment with General Electric a year before I transitioned out of the military. I didn't do anything with the VA originally. Right. I'm fine, I'm all set. Great healthcare, great benefits with the company. And it actually took my dad, who was a career Army officer, served 23 years Army, kind of bumped me on the head and said, "What are you doing? You should be connecting with the VA." And it's one of the best decisions I've ever made. Thank you.

Chairman MORAN. Let me follow up and there may be others who wanted to comment, but let me follow up. So, how are those who serve these veterans who have not accessed care at the VA, any kind of assistance, why are they able to find you but not the VA? Or why do they want to find you and not the VA?

Mr. HUTCHINGS. I can say how they find us, which is funny and also frustrating Mr. Chairman. You know, we spend a considerable amount of money in marketing dollars to try and reach veterans as far upstream as possible. Get the word out about Combined Arms and our partner network. And it always comes back to us. How did you hear about Combined Arms? We joke in the military, the E-4 Mafia, the Lance Corporal Underground, it is word of mouth and is how our community thrives.

It's trust, delivery of services, and people recommending what's worked for them. After the hundreds of thousands, millions over

the years and 10 years that we spent on marketing, it always comes back to, how did you hear about this? "Oh, a buddy I served with, someone I started with told me about this."

Chairman MORAN. Mr. Galui, you seem to want to answer that question.

Colonel GALUI. Yes, Mr. Chairman. This was one of the reasons why Check-In was created. President Bush inspired this in 2016, and he wanted those who served to get the necessary help, whether it was through VA or not. And Mr. Hutchings mentioned a keyword, that word being trust. And so, at the Bush Institute, we don't necessarily work directly with veterans and their families. We work with the institutions and organizations, the leading ones that do.

So, the way folks find their way to Check-In is through the Veteran Wellness Alliance that I mentioned during my testimony. Organizations like Student Veterans of America are part of the VWA, as is Combined Arms. And so, when veterans decide whenever in their transition timeline, whenever that might be, to join a veteran peer network, it is through that network where someone who they trust on their side will suggest to them that they should check out, Check-In. And that's how they find their way to our program called Check-In.

Chairman MORAN. Trust matters. Senator Blumenthal.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Thank you. Ms. Hermes, I remember well, my own transition, such as it was when I was in the Marine Corps Reserves. I finished the full-time part of my obligation five weeks into the Yale semester. Other law schools that I've been admitted to said, there's no way you can start law school five weeks late. But I showed up at Yale and frankly it all sounded like Greek to me.

In fact, it was Latin stare decisis, collateral estoppel, but Yale, even before its present program, embraced veterans and provided the help that was needed for that transition. And since then, universities and colleges and schools have followed the model of really welcoming veterans as Yale does. So, I want to commend all the schools that have the kinds of programs that you've described that Yale has pioneered.

But I'm frustrated that the VA has failed to do its part. There have been widespread and egregious delays in the GI Bill payments that are causing real harm to our veterans and survivors and their families. They're still left to cover rent and tuition, and schools may be flexible about tuition, but landlords may not get it, because they've got bills to pay too. And the VA's failure to pay these veterans, the Article 35 benefits on time, has real life consequences.

I'd like to enter an article from *Stars and Stripes* into the record, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman MORAN. Without objection.

[The article referred to appears on pages 352–354 of the Appendix.]

Senator BLUMENTHAL. And it says, "More than 75,000 students affected by VA payment delays for education benefits." I also have an article from *Military Times*, if there's no objection, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman MORAN. No objection.

[The article referred to appears on pages 355–360 of the Appendix.]

Senator BLUMENTHAL. "VA tech glitch halts GI Bill payments to thousands, advocates say." And just so there's no doubt, this article quotes one of the veterans' advocates, Ashlynne Haycock-Lohmann, Director of Government and Legislative Affairs for the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors as saying, "The shutdown is not the cause of this, and it needs to be very clear that the reason that this happened is because VA's infrastructure failed, and they chose not to tell us until after the shutdown started." "VA could have told us in August."

These delays began in August well before the shutdown. They are not due to the shutdown, but they've been aggravated by the furloughs and firings and cuts that the Secretary has unnecessarily imposed before and after the shutdown. For example, Secretary Collins' choice to furlough IT technicians and shut down the GI Bill hotline.

I wrote a letter to the VA, October 9th, demanding answers. And so far, VA has provided none. It has not even responded to my letter. Answers about what can be done as well as what the causes are. Perhaps you can speak to how student veterans are affected when VA fails to deliver GI Bill payments promptly.

Ms. HERMES. Thank you, Senator. We are facing the same challenges described in the media for student veterans across the country. We are able to provide some safety net type funding depending on the situation. But many of these benefits, particularly the Chapter 35 that you mentioned, are paid directly to families, where we have less flexibility.

Though we acknowledge that the delay happened before the government shutdown, we have been facing significant customer service delays and interruptions due to the layoffs that also have occurred during the past year. That administrative piece has definitely been felt by our students when they're looking to solve a problem or correct a situation.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Thank you. Mr. Hutchings, Combined Arms connects hundreds of thousands of veterans to high quality resources including food banks, housing, and emergency financial assistance. Your organization has reported, I believe, an increased reliance by veterans' families on food banks and financial and housing assistance.

The Trump administration, as you well know, has refused to distribute SNAP benefits. It's a disaster for many of those recipients, if not all of them, but particularly for 1.2 million veterans who rely on SNAP.

Are there certain populations of veterans who are most at risk for homelessness and hunger? And how do you target them for services?

Mr. HUTCHINGS. Thank you for your question, Senator. It is a very serious concern, and thank you for bringing attention to it. What we have seen, data drives everything that we do at Combined Arms. And so, we look at the data on a daily basis. And we have right now over 70 different data visualization dashboards on the pulse, the health, the demand of veterans and military families

across the Nation, based on real-time transactions that occur in the system.

And so here recently, we have seen a surge in food insecurity and housing assistance requests. For food insecurity, within the past 30 days, about a 46 percent month over month increase in food security assistance. And then around 35–36 percent in housing support, financial assistance, rent, mortgage, utility payments.

And I think that's the beauty of this collective network and organizations like Combined Arms, that if there are gaps and if there are pauses in the government, organizations can stand ready to help fill these gaps from a short-term capacity. Not long term, but short-term capacity.

And I think with continued opportunity for integration with federal agencies, we can be more prepared in the future, and more resilient and ensure that veterans and military families get the support that they need. Thank you.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Thank you. You know, I don't know quite how to say it, but for me, any veteran household going hungry is an abomination. Any veteran going homeless is absolutely abhorrent. And I want to thank all of you because I know you're seeking, and in many instances, succeeding in providing for veterans in the face of these gaps in federal support. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman MORAN. Senator Sheehy.

HON. TIM SHEEHY,
U.S. SENATOR FROM MONTANA

Senator SHEEHY. Hello everyone. Thanks for being here today. As a combat veteran myself, married to a combat vet who got out and had to go through the transition experience, this is a topic particularly poignant to me, and my wife and our family.

So, you know, and anybody can answer, but do you feel that the VA is a partner in the transition process or an idle bystander or an opponent? How do you feel the VA exists in your transition ecosystem?

Colonel GALUI. I'm happy to address this both from the Bush Institute perspective and my own personal perspective, I too am a combat veteran, and my wife is also a combat veteran sitting behind me as part of my support staff today, along with my daughter.

As an individual, VA's been certainly a partner in my transition. I have not personally experienced any delays with VA on both my payments from VA personally, and then also my son who attends Quinnipiac University in Connecticut. And their wonderful veteran coordinator there has been very helpful.

From the Bush Institute perspective, VA, as I mentioned in my testimony, is a member of the Veteran Wellness Alliance. And since its inception, the VA has partnered with us closely across multiple administrations. And it's through that collaboration and cooperation and forecasting that we're able to have a strong partnership with VA, and we can have an open dialogue. Again, this has been true both in this Administration and in previous administrations.

Ms. O'BRIEN. Liz O'Brien, Hiring Our Heroes. We focus solely on economic opportunity. In terms of how the VA partners with us through multiple administrations, they have come alongside of us. To include their CHCO, Tracey Therit, who has worked very closely

with us to ensure that we are creating opportunities for military spouses to go to work within the VA structure across the country. And as you know, that's unbelievably important, that if we can get a military spouse a job, it increases the likelihood of a service member remaining in service.

The VA has also continued to partner with us on local installations. You know, from 2011 to 13, we were hosting hundreds and hundreds of hiring fairs for veterans as they return to their communities. And about halfway through 2013, we said, well, why are we waiting until they return as unemployed veterans? We need to be on the installations, multiple locations, across the globe to make sure that we're meeting them and sharing about transition long before they transition.

And so, the ability to meet service members while they're in service and create educational opportunities around what transition looks like, and the VA has been a part of that through multiple administrations for us. So, we feel like they're investing in economic opportunity for when service members are preparing to transition, and also being supportive of how we put military spouses to work.

Mr. LYON. Senator, I love the question. Thank you for your service and service of your wife. The VA in spirit is a 100 percent collaborative partner in everything that we're doing. And I think all of my colleagues would agree.

In function, some days they are adversarial, right? In particular when it comes to allocating the funds that this body puts forward specifically for like technology improvements.

It's one of the frustrating things about the GI Bill and other VA administered benefits that can be a challenge, in that, by the time the law gets passed, allocations get done from this body, and then get all the way down to the person that's executing them. Sometimes it can be a bit frustrating to see old outdated systems that funds have been put toward that are still old, outdated, frustrated systems. But in spirit, they are partners.

Senator SHEEHY. Yes. And I think you know, there can be great people buried in a bad bureaucracy. And that's true of anywhere. It's not the VA. That's just bureaucracy at writ large. But I think you know, it was a bit of a leading question in that, you know, what you just mentioned is, for example, we are looking at agricultural in America and the slow, it's actually not that slow, pretty rapid death of multi-generation Ag in this country, as we're seeing farms close, we're seeing families recognize that the dirt that the farm sits on is worth a hell of a lot more than the crops that the farm creates.

And they make the decision, which you can't blame them for making that decision. Hey, you know, I'm going to set up my kids for a future and I'm going to sell this farm or ranch and we're going to get out of the business and they can go invest it in the NASDAQ and do a hell of a lot better than soybeans and cattle.

But we also have a system of incentives that doesn't support that, you know. When I was getting out, you can get a VA home loan for Frederick—four-bedroom condo in Miami, but you can't use that same loan to purchase producing agriculture land, which feeds America.

And I think whether you're an entrepreneur, I got out and started a business with an all-veteran founding team. The incentives haven't historically been there to start a business. And sometimes that's good. A lot of veterans shouldn't start a business. They should get a job. But where I'm going with this is, I think as you said, Jared, the spirit is there to support transition. But transition shouldn't be the goal. That's a step in the goal. The goal is to have America take advantage of the tremendous talent that we've invested in and created in our veteran population.

Our veterans are not charity. They don't need handouts. They don't want handouts. And the goal shouldn't be to build a box of freebies for every veteran. It should be let America take advantage of the amazing training and development we've given these individuals, so they come back and they serve our country again in another way, whether it's as nonprofit leaders, whether it's at a top university, whether it's starting a business or feeding America as a farmer, or going to work for a tech company.

And I think our transition process should be less focused on the transaction of transitioning and on the creation of the veterans' benefits, the loans. The programs aren't there to serve themselves, they're there to create a return on investment with that veteran who gives back to America, and finds an empowering career going forward.

And I think we're grappling with this in the wake of America's longest war, as we've had a very tiny percentage of our veterans, very tiny percentage of Americans has served the whole country. We never had this small amount of people do multiple deployments back over and over and over and over again. Now they come home and we have to find how they find the next chapter.

So, thank you for the work you're doing, and I would encourage you to continue to engage with us on how we can help the VA be a really meaningful partner. And also, the branches, the active-duty branches, you know, let's make sure they're alongside in that journey. So, thanks for everything you're doing.

Chairman MORAN. Senator Sheehy, thank you. Senator Murray.

HON. PATTY MURRAY,
U.S. SENATOR FROM WASHINGTON

Senator MURRAY. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. And let me echo something Senator Blumenthal talked about, and really point out something that I think has not gotten enough attention. And that is that 1.2 million of our veterans rely on SNAP, that is about a third of them are over the age of 65 and 40 percent are disabled.

We know right now that President Trump is blocking them from getting the SNAP benefits they need, so they don't go hungry. The money to fund SNAP exists. Trump has chosen not to use that funding and his Administration said they were going to do partial benefits. They'd be late. And then he posted yesterday on to socially, he is going to block it all together.

So now we are of course hearing reports of veterans flocking to food banks. They're not sure where their next meal is going to come from. Mr. Chairman, my family was one of those families. My dad was a veteran. He got multiple sclerosis, and we had to rely on food

stamps for a while. So, this is not something we should tolerate. The money exists, it is supposed to go out, and I hope every Member of this Committee lets the Administration know that they need that money to get out.

So, Mr. Lyon, let me just ask you about that. What are you hearing from your members who do rely on SNAP, and tell me why it's so important to student veterans in particular.

Mr. LYON. Senator Murray, thank you so much for the question and your ongoing support for our community. At Student Veterans of America, we leverage a lot of research. Basic needs have been something that we've been looking into for the better part of the last five years. Food and housing insecurity are remaining challenges for veterans in higher education.

To leverage a Yale example, there was a young naval aviator who got out of the military after World War II, attended Yale as an undergraduate, was a baseball player, got married and had two kids while he was at Yale, all having the GI Bill fund, all of that, that was George H. W. Bush.

That notwithstanding, the GI Bill is not like that anymore. The GI Bill is designed for a single person that heads back to school. And when you look at the modern student veteran, over half are married or in a committed relationship with children when they head back to school. Another 20 percent of us are single parents while we're back in school, and over 75 percent of us are working full-time while we're in school, just trying to make ends meet.

It is very difficult to transition without a military pension, without healthcare for life. And that is what the average veteran is doing when they head back to school. So, it's no surprise to see benefits like SNAP and other things being relied on while you're back in school and trying to make ends meet. When those benefits go away, veterans are impacted, and more than that, their family members that rely on these benefits are impacted as well.

Senator MURRAY. Yes. Well, thank you for sharing that. And again, I urge all of our Committee members to let the Administration know that money is there. They're legally required to obligate it, get it out. We have people who need that.

Let me ask Colonel Hermes's about women veterans. They are the fastest growing demographic of veterans. And I personally have heard from many women veterans that when they return home to civilian life, people don't respect their service or assume that they are a military spouse, not the actual veteran. And it is disturbing that we now have a Secretary of Defense who takes every opportunity to insult women who've been in the military. And that really, I believe, adds to the barriers that women face now when they return to civilian life.

So, talk to us a little bit about some of the barriers that women veterans in particular face when they come home and seek civilian employment.

Ms. HERMES. Yes, Senator. Thank you. That is a very important question for our society to wrestle with. And as I'm here for Yale today, I'm going to frame it in terms of higher education.

In our group of enlisted student veterans, which my testimony focused on, because that's our most vulnerable group, we have a very small number of women, and I'm going to even say parents or fami-

lies. Because it is very difficult, just like Mr. Lyon mentioned, to support a family while you're going to college. The GI Bill benefits, the federal benefits that we're able to give even institutionally, can't support some families as they leave the military.

So that's a huge challenge, and I think that's something that our society needs to keep wrestling with. And we could talk to the VA about programs that could support that in the future nationwide, not just at one school or another.

Senator MURRAY. Thank you very much. I have run out of time, but this is something I'm very concerned about when we hear discussions about DEI and then it impacts women who we need in our military. And not just then, but when they come home and they're a veteran. They actually don't want to identify as a veteran or don't see themselves as a veteran, and they then don't get the services and benefits that they've earned. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Chairman MORAN. Thank you, Senator Murray. Senator Hassan.

HON. MARGARET WOOD HASSAN,
U.S. SENATOR FROM NEW HAMPSHIRE

Senator HASSAN. Thank you so much, Mr. Chair and Ranking Member Blumenthal for this hearing today. And thank you to our witnesses, not only for being here today and sharing your expertise and time with us, and your advocacy for veterans, but to each and every one of you who has served. Thank you so much for your service.

Lieutenant Colonel Galui, I want to start with a question to you. I'd like to discuss the importance of making sure that veterans get connected to resources and how facilitating that connection can often require trust and understanding with a veteran.

In your testimony, you discussed the Check-In program and you detailed how veterans who reach out for help through the program are first connected with one of two social workers who have an understanding of where the veteran's coming from. One social worker is a veteran and the other is married to a veteran.

I think this hits on something really important. Veterans need to trust that when they need help, the person they connect with can understand where that veteran is coming from. And that's something that Senator Ernst and I worked on with the VA and the American Legion through the Buddy Check Week, where veterans are encouraged to check in with each other because we know that peer-to-peer relationships can be critically important.

As a veteran yourself, can you please discuss the benefits for veterans who are seeking resources when they're connected with somebody who understands them and their experiences?

Colonel GALUI. Senator, thank you for that question. I think Senator Moran said this a little while ago, that trust is everything. I mean, it truly is. This entire American experiment that we're all persevering is built on trust, right? And likewise in the veteran transition when seeking care, specifically through the Bush Institute's Check-In program and mental and brain healthcare, it's critically important that the veteran trusts the initial contact that they have.

And as I wrote in the testimony, one of two women who are part of Wounded Warrior Project, again, they're part of the Veteran

Wellness Alliance. Those two women personally respond to the person reaching out for care. And within a short conversation, the veteran on the other side of the phone will recognize that Susan or Kristen truly understands them.

And when we referenced Check-In, it connects people to high quality care. Part of that high quality definition that we partnered with RAND to define, was "veteran-centered."

Senator HASSAN. Sure. And I'm going to follow up Ms. Hermes on the line that Sarah Murray was pursuing, because one of the things I hear in New Hampshire from women veterans, is how lonely they feel in trying to find other women veterans in our small state, especially in our rural areas. So, can you speak to the need of women to be able to connect with other women veterans?

Ms. HERMES. Thank you, Senator. That's definitely true. I think it's true for all veterans. We want the students to integrate into our community and share their diverse perspectives. But we have had great luck with having mentoring groups, social groups, even casual meetups among our grad student, women veterans and undergrad women veterans and cadets and midshipmen, as they prepare to serve.

So, it's a great point that you make, that that connection helps women veterans learn about these resources and take advantage of them and helps them feel supported.

Senator HASSAN. Thank you very much for that and for your work. Colonel Carson, in your testimony you discussed how veterans face what could be a complicated and confusing process to get help during their transition from military service to civilian life. You also mentioned the importance of making sure that these veterans are able to find the right resources at the right time, specific to their individual needs.

Senator Cramer and I worked on this with our bipartisan Solid Start Act that requires the VA to reach out to veterans at least three times within their first year of leaving the military, with a focus on trying to meet each veteran's individual needs. From your perspective, what are some additional things that we can do to help make sure that tailored, useful, timely information is provided to transitioning veterans?

Colonel CARSON. Thank you for the question, Senator. I'll build on what Mr. Lyon said as well, that we want forecasts that can help. And encouraging service members and making it easier for them to be enrolled in VA. They, of course, have agency, but that would be a great assistance.

Each service member does complete an individual assessment. We want the members to have privacy, their concerns considered. But if we can know what they need as they come out through trusted partnerships, which we do have with the VA, we can all better serve them.

Senator HASSAN. Thank you. I'm running out of time. I did want to just touch on with Colonel Carson and Ms. O'Brien, the issue of military spouse employment. I will follow up with a longer question but just really appreciate your work on this because I think one of the things we really need to focus on, Mr. Chair, around this issue is how the problem of military spouses not being fully employed or

employed to their qualifications can really build over years. And it poses kind of this mounting cumulative impact.

So, I'll follow up with a question to the record on that, but thank you both for your attention to that as well as so many other things. And thanks to the whole panel, it's really an important panel for us.

And as the Chairman and Ranking Member said at the beginning, we don't usually get this cross section of nonprofits who are so critical to the network that we need to have, to really make sure we're not only saying how much we appreciate veterans, but showing them with real action that we do. Thank you.

Chairman MORAN. Senator Hassan, thank you. Senator Cassidy you are recognized.

HON. BILL CASSIDY,
U.S. SENATOR FROM LOUISIANA

Senator CASSIDY. I'm going to pick up kind of where Senator Hassan left off, and you'll see why quite obviously. Colonel Carson, Senator Hassan and I have introduced, and she may have mentioned it, bipartisan legislation to extend and enhance the Work Opportunity Tax Credit. Now, the Work Opportunity Tax Credit gives the employer a credit on the amount of money that he or she would spend to hire somebody for like a two-year period. And the idea is to help those who might have an issue with transitioning.

So, think of the one eligibility or the people leaving the service. I like that, as a physician, we've learned that the first six months after someone leaves service is one of the key times in which they may commit suicide. That loss of structure. And sir, I saw your testimony speaking about General Eisenhower, like didn't have a clue how to do a career change.

As Senator Hassan pointed out that we are extending this we hope, to the spouse of someone who is a veteran, knowing that their constant movement may have made it difficult for her to have long-term employment. So, any thoughts about that Bill, the importance thereof, and why not all my colleagues shouldn't be co-sponsors?

Colonel CARSON. Thank you, Senator Cassidy for the question. I appreciate very much, that incentivizes the private sector to be involved in solving this problem with us. And that yes, it's crucial that military spouses are included in that number. I believe the Department of Labor also has looked at including spouses as displaced workers. So, the benefits are there. We help navigate military spouses that we see to these opportunities, and prepare them. The same is crucial for veterans as you said.

That first year is incredibly difficult. Liz O'Brien and I have stacked programs together to build bridges. For example, our program offers credentials. She has pathways for fellowship with employers. And if the employers are looking for our talent that we can help prepare for that opportunity, all the better. So, we're supportive.

Senator CASSIDY. And I'll toss this out, because I can speak from intuition that a spouse who's been a trailing spouse during the career of someone who's in the service, would not have a work record

that looks like they've been able to stay at a job for a long period of time.

But can anybody put numbers on that? And put succinctly, how we can help people understand the importance of giving that spouse opportunity for the Work Opportunity Tax Credit. Ms. Hermes, anyone?

Ms. O'BRIEN. I thank you for the question. I appreciate the nod that military spouses are included in this. For over a decade, I was a college basketball coach and then married my husband. And we went through a process where we moved seven times in nine years. And so, as we moved, you can see where I was coaching at Hofstra University, I was coaching at West Point, I was coaching at University of Hawaii, and then I was coaching at Division II schools as we continued to move across the country and eventually ended up in Germany, where options were slightly limited, as you can imagine.

And so, when we moved back to the States, I had to make a decision. I love to work. It's meaningful, it's purposeful and it contributes income to my family. And so now, can you imagine when I show up at the age of 40 at Hiring Our Heroes, looking for them to help me find a different pathway, and instead they offer me a job as a coordinator, right?

And so, who is offering, who else, but somebody that's in this space is going to understand that there is tremendous value in my work history. And so, one of the pieces that we work on and work alongside the IVMF is one, the research that is out there, how do we translate it for the employers? How do we work alongside hiring managers, not just the recruiters, to make sure they're educated to understand what a non-linear resume looks like, and how to figure out what are the skills underlying in each of those positions?

And so, as we work with our employers, we're also encouraging them to embrace skills-based opportunities. And so, as you look at the Work Opportunity Credit, we're grateful that you're including military spouses. We believe they belong there and encourage employers potentially to provide feedback, in what the administrative burden of being able to include military spouses.

It's very difficult for employers who are highly regulated to ask the status, a marital status of a potential employee. And so, as you work on that, that would be one piece I would flag.

Senator CASSIDY. Wait, so if they would say, I like your term non-linear resume. Oh, you've got a non-linear resume. Well, it's because I've been married to a guy that's been transferred nine times in seven years. But unless you volunteer it, they can't say, hmm, it looks like you've moved a lot. Can you tell me why?

Ms. O'BRIEN. Yes. Well, savvy hiring managers often do, which causes military spouses to be eliminated very quickly. But when Jared applies for a job, or Colonel Carson, you know, you can identify as a veteran, it's very difficult for an employer or a company to put on their military spouse, right? Because that is asking me what my marital status is.

And so, it requires an effort by employers working with their legal teams to be able to put, you know, under the identifying status when you're applying to have military spouse on there. In theory, the companies we've worked with who have been able to navi-

gate it, then puts the military spouse to the hiring manager who is familiar with what a military spouse resume looks like, or a veteran resume.

Senator CASSIDY. Very helpful. Thank you all very much. Yes.

Chairman MORAN. Ms. O'Brien, let me clarify for at least me. So, there is also a downside to indicating that you're a military spouse because it suggests lack of consistent presence. So, it's a double-edged sword, if you're not one of the companies that are interested in hiring the spouses of veterans, you may decide not to hire somebody because of the instability of the circumstance. Is that true?

Ms. O'BRIEN. 100 percent true.

Chairman MORAN. Okay. Senator King.

HON. ANGUS S. KING, JR.,
U.S. SENATOR FROM MAINE

Senator KING. Thank you very, very much, Mr. Chairman. Two points initially. First, I want to thank you for calling this important hearing and assembling this very impressive group of witnesses. Following on that, I want to emphasize something Senator Sheehy said. You know more than we do, and don't let your contributions to our work end today. In other words, keep in touch.

And as thoughts come out of, based on the hearing, let us know and make, give suggestions where we can help with authorities, with programs in the VA, with coordination efforts, all of those things. You are a tremendous resource, and I want to thank you.

And Ms. Hermes, I also want to hope that you'll convey my thanks to Yale, because Yale is the reason for everything I've achieved in my life. The reason for that is that when they rejected me at the law school, I dedicated my life to making them regret the decision. And it served me very well.

[Laughter.]

Senator KING. Really what we're talking about is transition. I believe that the Department of Defense and the VA combined should spend as much time, money, and effort on transition as they do on recruiting. And I think there's a lot of activity, and I think it's improved recently, but it really still is not where it wants to be.

There are two or three issues that I've been involved with, and I'd like your quick thoughts. One is pre-enrolling in VA healthcare before you leave active duty. You're nodding. Is that a good idea?

Colonel CARSON. Yes, Senator. Absolutely.

Senator KING. So that there's not that gap of where do I go and how do I move? Secondly, Form 2648 has a box on it that says, if you opt in, if you want to have your contact information shared with the state veterans agency, we'd like to change that to an opt out. Because people often just don't check boxes and reverse the presumption so that people, unless they object to it, they can have their contact.

My idea is if you get a state veterans organization, that state veterans structure that's in connection with VSOs, I would like somebody to meet the new veteran when they're coming to the airport. And that won't happen unless you have this reverse, this presumption. Is that something Mr. Lyons, for example, that you think is a good idea?

Mr. LYON. You could envision the honor flights that we bring to DC to see the Nation's monuments, to take that same concept to a newly returning veteran to a community. All politics is local. All transition is local. To the extent that we could meet them at the airport, that would be phenomenal, sir. Yes, sir.

Senator KING. But we can't do it unless we know that they're coming. And the only way to know that is if their contact information is conveyed. So, you would support that change?

Mr. LYON. We would support that change, the opt out.

Senator KING. Finally TAP promotion, that is having VSOs involved in the TAP process before the active-duty member leaves. That strikes me as just common sense. Is that—you're nodding. I hope that doesn't go in the record. This guy can't record nods.

Ms. HERMES. Yes, Senator, we agree. Having VSOs involved would be a great idea.

Senator KING. Thank you. And finally, Mr. Hutchings, I'm fascinated by your website and in fact, coming into this hearing, not being fully aware of what Combined Arms did, my suggestion was that the VA should create such a website, but it sounds like you've pretty well done it.

The question is how do we make veterans aware of this really rich resource that you've created? And again, maybe it should be on a form somewhere, that you know, check here if you want to hear from a website provider that can give you access to literally 40,000 resources across the country. How can we help get this resource that you've created into more veterans' hands?

Mr. HUTCHINGS. Thank you for your question, Senator. And to your earlier point, I will keep in touch. Three very commonsensical recommendations you made that I think we all agree with. So that is you know, a question that we're constantly struggling and iterating with as an organization, I think all of the respective organizations here as well, is how can we make people more aware of our partnerships, our collaborations, our collectives, like the one that was just announced here recently? And I think it's continued discussion and continued integration in the form of pilots with federal agencies, with state agencies.

Senator KING. But one thing that might help is if, as a veterans walking out the door, they're handed a card with the website, or with a series of websites saying, you know, if you are planning to go to school, here's student veterans. And, it's a matter of making connections. And again, I'm trying to think of how this can be done through the official process where everybody is passing through, rather than people who hear it by word of mouth. So, make——

Mr. LYON. Senator, if I could, you said it at the beginning of your remarks. If the DoD and the VA were working together to spend as much on transition as we do on recruitment, it's bringing the Department of Defense to the table as well, to hold an equal part and an accountable part to that transition.

Senator KING. Yes, and we're spending most of the time here talking about the VA, but the Department of Defense is a big, big part of this. That's where it starts. So again, share your ideas, but I think this is a very important hearing. Thank you again, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman MORAN. You're welcome, Senator King. Senator Slotkin.

HON. ELISSA SLOTKIN,
U.S. SENATOR FROM MICHIGAN

Senator SLOTKIN. Thank you, Chairman. Thanks to all of you. If you're coming to me, you're almost at the end. I'm at the end of the line here. Thank you for what all of you do. I think you know, I'm a former CIA officer and Pentagon official. I did three tours alongside the military in Iraq, and I was a military spouse. So, thank you for working on this very important issue.

A couple years ago, in 2020 when I was in the House, I had a bunch of veterans come up to me actually at a veteran event in Howell, Michigan and say, you know, they just had no idea what they were eligible for. Right? Typical, like, I heard there's programs, but I don't know. And we wrote, along with Senators on this Committee, something called the Solid Start Act, that was signed into law in 2022, which required the VA to reach out three times in the first year of separation, to ensure that we're showing all the services that the VA has.

Again, many of these would be solved by opting out instead of opting in, if we had just kind of signed people up for VA healthcare originally. But this was my attempt at least having some outreach. And it's good, but I think the thing that I'm struggling with is, with all the programs that you all wonderfully do, how do we make sure that people even have any idea? And while a signing up for something and checking a card and all that might have worked with veterans of my age, right, the 9/11 era, the newest veterans are going to be coming out of service with like, no even history of reading their snail mail, of even reading email. It's all digital, right? It's all how do we get to them?

So how do we, I guess this is a question I'm going to maybe ask Mr. Lyon if you could answer. How do you amalgamate all the services so that our newest veterans will have a one stop shop? And then how do you make it available in a form that they want to consume it in, not what their parents' generation wanted to consume it in?

Mr. LYON. So first off, thank you for your service as well Senator, and I appreciate the question. I wish there were an easier answer and I'm not sure that there is. It starts with organizations like ours here that have been invited to testify today. And we're grateful for those invites. We collaborate outside of rooms like this too, which is important.

But I think that something that should be known as the majority of us that are going to get out, are going to be enlisted like I was. And the majority of those that get out as enlisted are not going to retire. And when we think about the localized aspect of transition and returning back home to a small town in Michigan, or anywhere in the country, it starts with those units.

I mean, people don't get out of the Army, they get out of their unit, they don't get out of the Navy, they get out of the Navy from a ship. They're getting out at the smallest level of service. And if we tied officer promotion evals, for instance, to the transition suc-

cess of their troops, you would see a shocking improvement in the transition process. So that's one radical idea for you, Senator.

[Laughter.]

Senator SLOTKIN. Yes, I like that one. That's good. I just think we need to be thinking about how the next generation is going to be consuming their information. And I was pushing for, you know, hey, let's move from snail mail because people don't know their addresses, where they're going to end up when they separate.

So, let's at least go to email like, I was pushing for the big development of taking their email address when they separated, their civilian email address. But I think we need to think differently. Particularly since our private sector companies certainly know how to target different communities and pump them the algorithms. Like I want to pump the veteran, the algorithm of like, Hey, there's a new program. You can get discounted Disney tickets. Hey, there's a whatever.

Mr. LYON. It's at a unit level; that's the first sergeant or the chief. Right? Like, have them there meeting their troops, kneecap to kneecap where they are.

Senator SLOTKIN. Yes. That's very interesting. So how do we make sure, given that so many of your organizations they're not affiliated with the government in any way, it's just like, really good people wanting to do good things for our veterans.

How do we make sure that there's some strategic use of resources? And we don't have repetitive organizations. You don't have what we call silos of excellence over here that don't talk to each other. I don't know if Mike, you want to take that or who wants to take that, but I'm worried that we have all this great effort, but, it's sometimes redundant in the effort.

Mr. HUTCHINGS. Thank you, Senator. And you are a hundred percent correct. There is incredible repetition within the support space and duplication of effort. I think there was a great component called out from a cohesive and collaboration perspective, a national veteran strategy to better identify the guidelines and principles.

And then a national veteran data commons, like Mr. Lyon said, about integrating disparate datasets together, pulsed in with state agency data, with community-based organization data, data mapped pars standardized to basically have real time needs and demand signals of what veterans and military families need at the national level. So, a strategy and a data informed strategies is what I would recommend.

Senator SLOTKIN. Yes. I feel like if you gave this to a bunch of really smart 24-year-old programmers, like, okay, we have all this data, how are we going to—maybe it's you. Yes. How are we going to make this easy and accessible and we could get at this problem. But my time is over. Thank you, Chairman. Appreciate your work everyone.

Chairman MORAN. Senator Slotkin, thank you. Thank you for your questions. Senator Banks, it's not true that Senator Slotkin is the last to ask questions. It's now Senator Banks' turn.

HON. JIM BANKS,
U.S. SENATOR FROM INDIANA

Senator BANKS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. We've seen a lot of progress in reducing veteran unemployment. The rate right now is 3.1 percent, is even lower than the general unemployment rate, which is really good. But I know that underemployment is still a problem, and I appreciate all the work that your organizations are doing to help match veteran skills to great jobs to help them find meaningful careers.

In Indiana, we have a very successful organization called INvets, that has been recognized by the Labor Department for the important work that they do. And INvets partners with more than 500 employers in our state. And they have placed over 800 Hoosier veterans in jobs. We're very proud of the work that they do.

Colonel Galui, with the veteran unemployment rate near 3 percent, sometimes we forget what a serious problem that rate was in the past. In your testimony, you referenced that unemployment among young veterans was 29 percent in 2011. Can you give us a bit of a history lesson, like walk us through that history and how did we solve that? What were the good things that happened along the way to bring those, that that rate down?

Colonel GALUI. Well, thank you Senator for your question. And a quick version of history is that about 10 or 15 years ago the conversation here would've been about getting veterans jobs. And the response from corporate America was robust. And we saw many companies committing to hiring veterans at high levels, getting them jobs.

Fast forward to today, and we have, as you noted an unemployment rate among veterans, generally speaking, that is lower than their non-veteran counterpart. That's a great news story that veterans are getting jobs. The question now that we're asking at the Bush Institute through our policy work is that, are veterans getting the right jobs? And our claim going into this policy process is that the U.S. economy can employ veterans better.

And so, in my testimony, I referenced reframing of that transition question. Instead of asking service members what they want to do when they get out of service, that's only one half of the equation. The other half is what is it that the labor market wants or needs from them? So perhaps a veteran should be thinking about what it is that the veteran has in their talent set, their skills, knowledge, experiences, education that has evolved during their career.

And I would say that transition begins at accession. And understanding how your skills are evolving is critically important. And that requires leadership at your unit level, such that when the time comes for you to separate and begin to thrive, you have a better way to address your own employment question and try to understand that that labor supply labor demand match.

Senator BANKS. Talk about that more, unpack the labor supply demand mismatch, and how do we solve it?

Colonel GALUI. Sure. I mean, that is a large economic question, you know, broader than just veterans. The better we can employ our human capital and our labor force as a Nation, the stronger

our economy will be, the stronger position we'll be in with respect veterans in their transition.

And this might be a role for the Department of Defense. We've talked a little bit about—Senator King brought up, you know, we've talked a lot about VA. Well, there is a DoD role here to some degree, and that is helping active service members understand how their skills are evolving, such that they, the veterans themselves or the service members that become veterans, can translate not just their military occupational specialty into a job, but really articulate their tangible skills and their intangible skills to employers.

Senator BANKS. I'm a big fan of what the Institute does and I've visited with you all there, visited with you in my office. Has the Institute done any research at all on the impact of artificial intelligence on veteran skills and potential job opportunities in the future? For better or worse?

Colonel GALUI. We were in that process. In fact, the gentleman sitting behind me, D'Juan Wilcher leads our Employment Policy Working Group, which is a collaborative effort across academia, former government officials, and industry leaders that are coming together in an entrepreneurial way to better address these questions. And we will, from the Bush Institute, have policy recommendations next year.

Senator BANKS. Are we optimistic or are we concerned about how veterans specifically will be impacted?

Colonel GALUI. We're optimistic.

Senator BANKS. Good.

Mr. LYON. Senator, if I could add from the artificial intelligence perspective, public private partnerships are a lot of the answer. For us, we work alongside Google. We've done an 11-state deep dive in policy analyses. And the beautiful thing is that by leveraging AI, we have the sort of economies of scale to find what the market trends are for the labor force, and matching those with the skills that veterans and their family members bring to the table.

It's through things like AI literacy, which is a big issue in society today, but veterans based on what they did in the military, are bringing a certain level of AI literacy to the table. So, in addition to Mr. Galui's great work at the Bush Institute you're having this population that already is bringing the baseline to bear.

If we can combine that with the data for where the trends are going, that data lives in Labor, Department of Education, Department of Veterans Affairs, and Department of Defense. We bring that all together, we can match it immediately, skills-based manner to where if you're going to school or not, you have the ability to leverage these things for a future that is already here. And that veterans are very well prepared to support strongly the American economy through.

Senator BANKS. Very good. My time has expired.

Chairman MORAN. Thank you, Senator Banks. We're going to conclude this hearing in a little bit, but not quite yet. And I have a couple of questions I want to still ask and that, therefore equity requires that I ask Senator King if he has anything he would like to ask. I appreciate that. And Senator Blumenthal, I know has a couple of questions. Senator Blumenthal.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Thank you. Just a couple of questions. We've talked a little bit about mental health, but not enough in my view. I recently introduced the BRAVE Act, which reauthorizes the Staff Sergeant Parker Gordon Fox Suicide Prevention Grant Program to increase funding to combat veteran suicide. Just one example of the kind of program that I think is important to reach veterans.

We all know that often they're reluctant to seek mental health help in the military, and even when they transition out for many of the reasons associated with the condition itself, but also what they feel is the stigma of asking for help. I think it's absolutely necessary to increase funding for the VA's mental health program and to enable more veterans to seek help outside the veterans community, whether it is the mental health services offered on campuses or through employers or others.

Colonel Carson, you work closely with community partners who provide mental health care under the Fox Grant Program. Maybe you can speak to why it's so important to fund this program, supporting the mental health of transitioning veterans.

Colonel CARSON. It has been incredibly helpful already, although there are many measures yet to have an available outcome. But the reduction in stressors already from the Fox grantees delivery is outstanding. The proposal to continue and perhaps expand the funding for the Fox grants, along with performance expectations and oversight, seems like a smart way forward.

And I'd also say that there are other contributors from each of the organizations who are here, who are doing the difference. There are many ways to prevent suicide. Economic opportunity, being part of a community, getting an education that takes you to a career that you desire, are also contributing. But this is an important grant, and we are already seeing the performance.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Thank you. Lieutenant Colonel Galui, I know the Bush Institute does a lot of work in this area. Maybe you could talk to that point as well.

Colonel GALUI. Yes. Thank you, Ranking Member Blumenthal. Check-In, as I've mentioned, is led by the Bush Institute, but powered by the Veteran Wellness Alliance. And half of the members of that alliance are clinical providers, the best in the Nation that can deliver high quality mental and brain healthcare for post-traumatic stress, anxiety, depression, substance abuse, military sexual trauma, and mild traumatic brain injury.

The other half of the alliance are peer networks that engage with veterans every day, whether it's through physical activity, whether it's Student Veterans of America, as Mr. Lyon is sitting here with us, whether that is serving in disaster relief, these veterans that are together get connected to Check-In, and get connected to mental healthcare.

The two constraints on Check-In preventing us from realizing the vision, which is that Check-In becomes a front door to mental and brain healthcare access, is clinical capacity and awareness. And we have to balance increased awareness with ensuring that we have clinical capacity funding. And all of our clinical providers have their own pursuits for fundraising and the Bush Institute helps them along that path.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. If we're creating demand for mental health services, you got to provide supply. I want to give a thanks and a shout-out to the VSOs—Veterans Service Organizations, all of them, whether it's Veterans of Foreign Wars, American Legion, Disabled American Veterans, Vietnam Veterans of America, Afghanistan and Iraq Veterans. I'm sure I'm failing to cover some of them.

Chairman MORAN. You're making a mistake Ranking Member you need to——

[Laughter.]

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Not the first mistake I've made, but let the record reflect that the Chairman has interrupted me before I could complete the full list and I could go on. But let me just say we've heard concerns from them and from advocates like yourself, that the VA is not effectively carrying out their referral process to private groups.

By referring veterans from the VA to community partners, trusted partners like the VSOs and yourselves, the VA can ensure that veterans have access to the full range of resources and support available, at least more access, maybe not full, but the VA often fails to follow through to make sure veterans actually connect and receive that support.

They're just handing veterans a business card or an email address or a phone number, rather than directly ensuring that veterans are physically and effectively connecting with the community partners. And I wonder if any of you would wish to comment on how the VA can improve its referral process to better track the outcomes for veterans?

Mr. HUTCHINGS. Thank you, Senator. I would love to comment on this. And I think, organically and hopefully this could be a future iteration of the Fox grant, of where you're investing in community-based organizations to help fill gaps and to help supplement support across VA modalities.

But that there also could be a digital infrastructure for these referrals to occur, to have data standards tracking and accountability. That's the big gap currently, is we can refer veterans into the VA, the VA will receive those referrals, but then we have no visibility on outputs or outcomes or service delivery. We have trust in the VA, but we can't see that.

And in the same vein, the VA has no digital infrastructure tool to refer to community-based organizations. And so very much the solution is a business card written on a piece of paper. And we would advocate and recommend for at least piloting interoperability for bilateral interagency referrals with great vetted validated community-based organizations out there, sir.

Colonel CARSON. Senator Blumenthal?

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Colonel Carson.

Colonel CARSON. If I may, we have research that proves that when these things do happen in a coordinated way, the data sharing that Mr. Hutchings recommended, it is more successful outcome for the veteran, nonclinical as well as clinical outcomes. And we'd be happy to provide that research so that we can see less variability in how VA units around the country interact with commu-

nity service partners. We'd like to see some standardization. Thanks.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Thank you. I want to offer my thanks before we conclude, and I know the Chairman has a couple more questions, but thank you very much for spending this time with us. Much more important, thank you for all the great work that you do.

I just want to make the point that the VA needs more resources and so do your groups. Your groups deserve and need support so you can better help our veterans. The furloughs and firings and contract cancellations that we've seen at the VA began before the shutdown. The shutdown should not be blamed. It may have exacerbated problems, but we need to resolve, as a nation, that we're not going to inflict pain or cause unnecessary sacrifice from our veterans through the furloughs and cuts and cancellations of contracts that we've seen beginning before the shutdown.

And so, I know we live in a very challenging world. You are coping with those challenges in a very courageous and strong way. And I want to thank you.

Chairman MORAN. Sir Blumenthal, thank you. I actually think this has been a really good hearing. So, thank you for your presentation. Thanks for your time.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. I agree with that, Mr. Chairman. Thank you.

Chairman MORAN. No, you're welcome. And I don't know exactly what I expected to come from this, but I am really pleased with the amount of information that I've garnered and the suggestions that at least come to my mind and some that you've made directly about things that we could do to assist the private organizations as they care for those who serve.

A couple of things that I'd highlight, Senator King did this, but I would make this same point again, and you highlighted for us the importance of the Department of Defense. And while that's not our Committee's jurisdiction, so many things that we try to accomplish on behalf of veterans is determinative by whether or not the Department of Defense fulfills its mission, its task, things that they're legally required to do upon transition.

And too often failure to see that happen has a significant consequence in so many ways. And so maybe we can figure out how we work harder to get DoD to do more, while we also work to make sure the Department of Veterans Affairs is doing its job.

I'm also appreciative of the highlighting of a topic that I hadn't thought about coming up in this hearing, and that's the consequences to military spouses. Again, that highlights for me an issue that we ought to pay more attention to and figure out how we solve some of those problems. I suppose we stereotype too often, but I mean, a spouse is a male or a female, a man or a woman, and both can suffer the consequences of the careers of their service member and their family.

And the idea of how we recruit people to find employment, I think we probably underemphasize finding ways to find employment for the accompanying spouse. So, I appreciate that being highlighted. It seems to me, and I may be wrong, but I mean, in part, is that in the position that I occupy, that Members of this

Committee occupy, we meet people who have an organization that's interested in caring for veterans and cares for veterans across our states, across the country.

I don't know that a week goes by, but what somebody doesn't tell me, this is my veterans' organization, this is what we're doing, and I'm in a community in Kansas and somebody says this, you need to come see what we've just started. Tell me if that's true? Is there a proliferation of these organizations like yours, I suppose, particularly on the local level? And is there something significant about that happening that says that the needs of veterans are not being fulfilled?

The alternative to that, I think, could be that there's just people who really care about veterans and are looking for ways to find their role in fulfilling that mission. Is there something that we should know about the seemingly growth? Is there a growth in organizations that you deal with and that you see serve a veteran that has a meaning for me?

Colonel GALUI. Chairman Moran, I thank you for that question. And I mean, I attribute it to the entrepreneurial spirit of Americans in wanting to do right by veterans, regardless of what the Federal Government or state or local government are doing. At the Bush Institute, we see a wide variety of different veterans service organizations from the large ones represented at this table, and have been at these tables before, to neighborhood ones that are just trying to find a way to make a difference.

I think of one just north of Dallas, that's a neighborhood veterans' group that within their homeowners association found a way to provide resources to veterans in their community. And in Essex County, Massachusetts, I know that they're just launching a fund for veterans in Essex County. So, these are popping up, and I just think it's a good-natured Americans doing the right thing and doing what they can.

Chairman MORAN. So, we should feel good about this?

Colonel GALUI. I think so. Yes, sir.

Chairman MORAN. Great. You know, I think of one that even in my own family's life, that was significant. And you know, as I understand, the story started with a realtor in Georgia who decided that World War II veterans in his community should be able to see the memorial built in their honor. And look what's transpired from an idea and one person in one community, to the honor flights that we have today that are so meaningful for so many veterans.

I'm interested in, maybe this is for you, Ms. O'Brien. I think one, I want you to start Hiring Our Heroes in Kansas. You listed some communities, cities, that this is growing, and I want to be a participant in trying to accomplish at least the mission of what Hiring Our Heroes is doing in my home state.

And I mentioned this in another hearing. I read an article in—I still read newspapers. I read an article in a newspaper at home about veterans from Fort Riley, actually service members from Fort Riley soon to become veterans. The community of Wichita and the aerospace aviation defense businesses that are there, brought those soon to be veterans from Fort Riley to Wichita to see what the opportunities were for employment. I know for a fact the opportunities for those veterans are significant.

Those opportunities exist, but we got to figure out how to make the connection. And it's my understanding that that is what Hiring Our Heroes do. And so, I would welcome any suggestions of how we, as Members of Congress in our own states, can be helpful to the process that the Chamber has started. Anything I should know?

Ms. O'BRIEN. Thank you, Senator Moran for the question. I am happy to tell you that we have a presence at Fort Riley. We have a presence at Fort Leavenworth. We come through multiple times a year. We have also—we also hosted an AI round table for small businesses that are in construction and manufacturing just several weeks ago. I believe Caroline, who used to be on your staff, was unbelievably helpful to us in that as well.

I think what's important for anybody who wants to invest in their states, there are several models that work extremely well. The Senator referenced earlier INvets, right? INvets travels with us. We go to over 50 installations around the globe. We're in Germany, we're in UK, we're in the Hawaii, we're in Asia. And so, they bring the jobs of the states with them to service members who would not know otherwise that these opportunities exist. So that's one unbelievably successful model that we have seen work at the state level.

We work very hard to bring SkillBridge opportunities to states, especially for service members that want to return home to that state that they're from. And we are working diligently in Kansas to provide those opportunities.

And then how we create opportunities for military spouses at the community level. You know, we can't do what we do from a national level without those community-based nonprofits that allow us to meet people where they are. And so, they become unbelievably important and we find them for us through our local chambers of commerce.

Chairman MORAN. Is there a way this goes back to lack of information that I think that Senator Slotkin was talking about? Is there a way to know veterans from a state, I mean, that are—how does an organization in either Hiring Our Heroes and what they do, how do you find the veterans to connect them with their home states? Is that possible?

Ms. O'BRIEN. It is for us, because we get to them before they transition. So, if they attend our events that are on installations, or they opt into SkillBridge through us, we are collecting their ZIP Code from their original home of record, that is something that they share with us. And so, then we're able to discern, you know, we know about a third stay, a third return home to their states, and a third return.

Chairman MORAN. Once they disperse, that opportunity is gone?

Ms. O'BRIEN. Yep. And so, we can pull data and share data and make educated decisions on where we think people may go, based on their original home of record. And so, for us, the best piece of what we do is that we're able to connect with them before they transition.

I would also encourage people to really think about, and I'm far removed now, how do we meet young service members and military spouses where they are? And it's certainly not even on email any-

more. What are the digital platforms that they are using to gather information? And it's not the digital platform that I'm using, right? They are not on Facebook, right? They have evolved and it's changing almost yearly.

And so, we have to figure out, we get great results if we're texting folks, nobody's looking at their email. There are wonderful ways in different platforms digitally that exist through social media. I am not our social media manager, for good reason. But it has been an evolution that we've had to learn to embrace, or we're going to miss out on the opportunity to connect.

Chairman MORAN. You've caused me to rephrase the question I was going to ask the panel, which comes a bit from Senator Slotkin. So, what should I be putting on my website that would be able to be helpful to educating those about the opportunities? And the answer, I should change my question now. What in my social media platforms would be effective, what I should say and what mediums I should use to connect with those who are leaving military service and connecting with an organization to help meet their needs?

Ms. O'BRIEN. Yes. we're doing a deep dive now to determine which platform we should be moving our messaging to, based on the fact that we are sharing economic opportunity, right. LinkedIn has been a wonderful platform for us, but I think it's dependent upon the message that you're trying to share. If you are just trying to connect at scale with veterans, it's probably going to be a different platform than LinkedIn for what we're doing.

Mr. LYON. Mr. Chairman, could I just add to—sorry, back over here. So, one of the things that's beautiful about folks that enlist our commission into the Armed Forces is, they come from states. And so, what we know from our data is for non-retiring transitioning service members, 80 percent of them are returning home to where they came from or where their spouse is from.

And so, one of the things you could put on your website, or perhaps even better, is, you know, just literally working with the young Kansans who are leaving Kansas for active-duty service because they're boomerangs. They're coming right back to Kansas within six years. And so, if you have the——

Chairman MORAN. Oh, so you're telling me I'm late, like you're there's an opportunity to do something much earlier?

Mr. LYON. Yes, but you absolutely can. I mean, the big time for enlistments will tend to be toward the summer times, but not exclusively. Boot camps don't discriminate as to what time of year you're there. Harder in the warmer months just from speaking from personal experience. But when you look at the young folks that are coming into uniform service from Kansas, the instinct is to go to the bases there and talk to folks, and that works. It's good. That's happening.

What I see happening less in states across the country is actually working with those that are going into the Armed Forces, making sure that they're aware of what's in Kansas for them when they come back home. Because we make the assumption that if they're leaving Kansas, they're never coming back. They're coming back. And when they do, you can be there to better meet them and support them.

Chairman MORAN. Mr. Lyon, let me take that one step further. So, what should I know about Student Veterans of America and how do we connect with those who are already students in our states?

Mr. LYON. Yes, I mean, you know, if you want to figure out where basketball was invented for the coach over here, there are some good places in Kansas to go and do that. But when you look at transitioning service members, and I'm going to define the non-retiree population, just to segment the population enough to have your niche. That portion of the population, 74 percent of them are going to be in a college classroom within 18 months of taking the uniform off.

IVMF's data tells us that since 2011, the most common reason for an enlistment in the Armed Forces is the opportunity for an education, post-military service. And so, one of the things that we can look at in Kansas or otherwise, is that the majority of that transitioning force that is going to pursue education will do so through community college. But the majority of those that attend community college won't access their GI Bill.

They'll be there for on average three semesters, preserving their GI Bill to where college is more expensive. That's their undergraduate experience and graduate experience.

And so, by finding a way to have better identifiers, this is again, data. I'm a one trick pony. But having that ability at the community college level in Kansas to have an identifier beyond, is this student using GI Bill? Are they a veteran? Or asking the question more broadly, did you ever serve in the Armed Forces? That way you'll know where they are at community college and you can better help them as they look to matriculate into four-year programs and graduate programs.

Chairman MORAN. I assume there is statistical evidence that hiring a veteran has great benefit. Is that true?

Mr. LYON. Massive, sir.

Chairman MORAN. Anything you want to put statistically in front of me that we ought to brag about?

Mr. LYON. So, LinkedIn's data is phenomenal in this, veterans without any access to education training or anything. When they separate from the Armed Forces, they already possess nine out of the 10 most desirable skills. I didn't say credentials, skills that today's employers are looking for.

Chairman MORAN. Okay. We talked about, Senator Blumenthal, I'm about done. I go last mostly so that no one has to stay if they don't want to. We were talking about the Fox grants. I'd compliment Senator Boozman, at least as I recall, that was a legislation that he introduced that was then included in the Scott Hannon Act that I think this Committee is very proud of.

I've introduced legislation, the Hope for Heroes Act, that would reauthorize the program for five years, and the bill would increase the grant amounts to $1 million. This bill passed this Committee unanimously in July. And so, we have a legislative item that would be of interest to you and we'd welcome your support among our colleagues.

And that program is not currently active as I think we were talking about because of the shutdown. But that it's the first time, as

I understood, back in the day in which we did this, that the VA became a grantor agency. In my view, they were slow to implement, but it was one of those things that I thought we were doing that had great potential. And I hope to see the continued use and fruition and benefit that comes from that.

Senator Blumenthal, did I take up more time that you want to respond or Senator King, you're good. Oh, no, I shouldn't have said that.

[Laughter.]

Chairman MORAN. I thought they'd both say no.

Senator KING. You all now know what the filibuster is?

[Laughter.]

Chairman MORAN. I'm supportive of the filibuster.

[Laughter.]

Senator BLUMENTHAL. That's good to hear.

Senator KING. Thank you. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. I'm all set. My thanks to the witnesses.

Chairman MORAN. Alright. Let me do one thing that may prolong the meeting. It did the last time, it doesn't need to, but is there anyone who wants to make certain that something that needed to be said that wasn't said, wants to say it? Oh, Mr. Hutchings.

Mr. HUTCHINGS. Yes, Mr. Chairman, just one point that you were asking the panel of, what should I be informing veterans returning to my home state? What should I put on social media or my website? I think one of the things to look at, especially to Mr. Lyon's point, about 80 percent returning back to the state that they come from or where their spouse is from.

It's looking at the state agency level from a secretary and commissioner of your either department of Veteran Affairs, department of Veteran Services, what systems in place. That's what we very typically see in states, is people returning their communities and very quickly connecting with those state agencies for local support.

We've done an analysis of all 50 states and over 95 percent have no digital infrastructure or service delivery mechanism. It's a website with signposting and a directory which becomes outdated. There is no continuum of care, no closed loop process.

So, looking internally at that state system of support, whether you could recommend that, or provide a little nudge to get the state moving forward would be something I would recommend sir.

Chairman MORAN. That's a really good suggestion, thank you. Mr. Galui.

Colonel GALUI. Yes, Mr. Chairman. Not to prolong too much longer or complicate our challenges before us, I have two comments. One, as we think about taking care of today's veterans and improving the transition experience for currently serving members, I just also encourage us to think about the 12- and 14-year-old kids, who today don't know that maybe in 15 or 20 years, they themselves will be veterans of whatever is ahead. So, our work is doubly or triply important on that front.

The second comment I'll make in terms of how do we reach veterans, specifically what social media platforms we might think about today and into the future. We've learned at the Bush Institute that our foreign adversaries are deeply embedded in some of

our social media and are deliberately targeting veterans to undermine trust in the delivery of care.

And so, as we kind of progress through this evolution of our own transition and how we reach people in the digital space, just recognizing that there are those out there who want to undermine our own way of life, that will make transition that much more difficult.

Colonel CARSON. Chairman Moran?

Chairman MORAN. Yes, ma'am.

Colonel CARSON. I would love to share a bit, as Members of your Committee have said, technology is important, but technology is not the solution. It does enable many of the solutions that we proposed here. And I believe it was Senator Slotkin who said that she wants a one stop shop. I'd recommend instead, no wrong door. And that's what we can provide.

If you picture the different networks that Mr. Hutchings has developed, and we are working with our communities of practice and intend to do even more with the Veteran Employment Collective. I'd say those might be patches of networks, but they can be a quilt that are interconnected, so that there is no wrong door.

And one of the things that the Committee can do with us is build on what Mr. Lyon suggested. The data sharing among the agencies and sharing where possible with VSOs so that we cannot be reactive, we can be proactive in our solutions and have them to be evidence-based and held accountable. We want that from our services and we expect that from our agencies as well.

Chairman MORAN. It's a very nice summary. Mr. Galui, I would say that I always look in the audience when I'm speaking to try to find someone who smiles and nods while I speak. You brought two of yours with you. I've been able to see them both. You have not. They were very supportive of your testimony and answers.

Colonel GALUI. I'm grateful for their support. Let the record show that. Thanks.

Chairman MORAN. We're going to bring this hearing to a conclusion. A couple of magic words I need to say. Each Member of the Committee has five legislative days in which to submit statements or questions for the record. I ask any Senator who would like to submit a question for the record to today's witnesses to do so in a timely manner.

In other words, the Members of the Committee have an opportunity to ask you in writing questions that we would want you to respond to. And we want you to respond to those questions for the record received in a timely manner as well. And with that the Committee hearing is adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 6:11 p.m., the hearing was adjourned.]

A P P E N D I X

Prepared Statements

GEORGE W. BUSH
INSTITUTE

WRITTEN TESTIMONY

Jason J. Galui, Director, Veterans and Military Families, George W. Bush Institute
Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs
"*A Grateful Nation: Maximizing Veterans' Success After Service*"
November 5, 2025

Introduction

Chairman Moran, Ranking Member Blumenthal, and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on behalf of the George W. Bush Institute, where we combine ideas and action to ensure opportunity for all, strengthen democracy, and advance free societies while remaining grounded in the timeless values of freedom, opportunity, accountability, and compassion.

We believe that the nation has a duty to help make the military-to-civilian transition as successful as possible for veterans and their families. Our Veterans and Military Families (VMF) team's main objective is to empower veterans and their families to thrive in their civilian lives, so that – in the words of President George W. Bush – "we can unleash the potential of a generation of resourceful, determined, and experienced leaders."

General Dwight D. Eisenhower, as he approached retirement from the United States Army, wrote that he "faced a monumental career choice with absolutely no experience in making career choices." If soon-to-be President Eisenhower was concerned about his transition, then we must expect that many transitioning service members will be anxious about theirs. General Eisenhower certainly achieved sustained success post-transition by discovering ways to continue his service beyond the uniform.

Many service members find great meaning in a purpose higher than self as they serve the country through the U.S. Armed Forces. Upon transition from the military, it can feel as if such purpose is lost or stripped away, though a veteran's service to country need not end after the military. Their service simply transforms. Recognizing such transformation is key to successful transition.

Many of America's veterans are leaders people trust, and many more have tremendous potential to lead in their civilian lives. A willingness to sacrifice personal comfort for others is strong evidence of leadership potential. For more than 50 years, individuals of varying beliefs and backgrounds from all states and territories have joined an all-volunteer force to provide for the common defense. When we combine the attributes of a veteran with those of a leader, we usually get character, competence, and commitment in our communities.

Opportunities to serve beyond the uniform, to form genuine connections, and to make meaningful contributions to one's community are necessary components to ensure sustained success. Discovering such opportunities is less clear in civilian life than it is during military service, which can make the military-to-civilian transition challenging for many. The sooner a veteran can rediscover their purpose, connections, and contributions, the more likely it is that they and their family will thrive in civilian life.

Rediscovering Purpose, Connections, and Contributions

A successful military-to-civilian transition is hard to define because "success" can mean many things to many people. One might define success as landing a job immediately upon transition. Another might define success as retreating to a faraway place where peace and quiet dominate. Others still may define their successful transition as one in which they focus on their family members. To think about a successful military-to-civilian transition, we need to return to the beginning of one's military career. In fact, the Bush Institute believes transition begins at accession, for transition is an ongoing process throughout a human's life.

If anyone were to ask a military service member why they volunteered for the U.S. Armed Forces, the general response from each service member likely would contain a unique combination of four common themes: *purpose*, *opportunity*, *variety*, and *stability*. Life in the U.S. military consistently delivers high degrees of satisfaction across each of these themes and millions of Americans have thrived during their military service only to struggle as civilians.

When service members and their families return to civilian life – whether after three or 33 years – it can feel as if those raisons d'être were pulled out from under them. Such an immediate sense of loss can prove difficult to recover in civilian life, which can lead to retreat and isolation, and thus hinder sustained success post-transition.

Veterans and their families, like everyone else in society, thrive when they are mentally and physically healthy, are well-informed and prepared for navigating civilian opportunities, and can make meaningful contributions to their communities. Therefore, our Bush Institute veteran and military family work focuses on health and well-being, education, and employment.

Health and Well-Being: The Veteran Wellness Alliance and *Check-In*

Through public and private efforts, the American people have provided tremendous resources to care for and support veterans and their families. Unfortunately, bureaucratic fragmentation and complex navigation can cloud learning about and accessing these resources. Fortunately, the unique entrepreneurial spirit of the American people complements federal efforts to reintegrate veterans and their families back into American civilian society.

The Veteran Wellness Alliance (VWA) is an example of how good faith public and private sector actors can partner to achieve the best outcomes for veterans and their families.[i] Inspired by President George W. Bush and led by the Bush Institute, the VWA is a collaborative network of

mental and brain health care clinical providers and veteran peer networks that tackles the effects of the invisible wounds of war[ii]. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has been a key member of the VWA since the creation of the alliance, and its representatives have consistently provided the alliance invaluable perspectives and insights across the range of veteran wellness issues. Many of the VWA's clinical providers and veteran peer networks work closely with public partners through their various state-level and medical research university relationships.

In 2021, the VWA launched *Check-In* (www.veterancheckin.org), an innovative solution that connects veterans, service members, and their families, caregivers, and survivors to high-quality mental and brain health care[iii]. Regardless of service era and regardless of characterization of service discharge, *Check-In* connects those needing or wanting support for post-traumatic stress, anxiety, depression, substance abuse, and mild traumatic brain injury to the nation's best clinical providers of that care.

The novelty of *Check-In* was its creation of a trusted online "easy button" that the VWA veteran peer networks could provide to their members who were wanting or needing mental or brain health care. Leveraging the power of innovation and technology, *Check-In* solved the navigational and bureaucratic challenges associated with searching for and connecting with the right type of care.

Within 72 hours of connecting through *Check-In*, an individual seeking care will talk with one of two women who are licensed clinical social workers, one of whom is the spouse of a veteran and the other a veteran herself and married to a veteran. Following their noninvasive conversation, the *Check-In* Care Coordinators will then provide a warm handoff to the most appropriate VWA Clinical Provider. The Care Coordinators will also provide information on any VWA Peer Network that the individual may find of interest.

Across a four-year pilot, thanks to the generosity of the Rees-Jones Foundation, *Check-In* has proven not only efficient at connecting veterans,[iv] service members, and their families, caregivers, and survivors to mental and brain health care, but *Check-In* has also proven effective. To assess the effectiveness of care through *Check-In*, the VWA launched an Outcomes Working Group through which the VWA's Clinical Providers shared nonidentifiable data and collaborated in unprecedented ways to show that individuals within their care are, in fact, experiencing reduced symptoms and are satisfied with the care they receive.

The Bush Institute, in a close operational partnership with Combined Arms and Wounded Warrior Project, leads *Check-In* while Syracuse University's D'Aniello Institute for Veterans and Military Families evaluates *Check-In*. All VWA members play key roles in advancing the awareness of *Check-In* through their respective networks and communications efforts.

There are so many resources available to veterans and their families that it can be paralyzing to know which resource is most appropriate to address the challenge at hand. *Check-In* eliminates or at least reduces the possibility of such paralysis with respect to mental and brain health care. The collaborative and innovative VWA stands as a strong model for how public and private actors can partner to achieve sustained success after service for veterans and their families.

Education: Accessing Higher Education Resources

For many veterans and military-connected students, postsecondary education is a critical initial step toward thriving beyond the uniform. The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 (the "GI Bill"), along with subsequent refinements to it, enabled millions of veterans to transform their lives and put the United States on a path to building the world's best-educated workforce to boost American prosperity. The 21st century Post-9/11 GI Bill expanded access to higher education, leading to greater employment opportunities for veterans.

College serves not only as a place for formal learning and skill development but also serves as a low-stakes environment where veterans can readjust to civilian life while rediscovering purpose, connections, and contributions. This process of reintegration helps address some of the core reasons veterans struggle to find work that matches their skills, interests, and education. Veteran service organizations like Student Veterans of America and the National Veterans Leadership Foundation help veterans and their families thrive on college campuses.

For many veterans and military-connected students, postsecondary education is a critical bridge between military service and civilian success. Yet that bridge can be difficult to cross. Veterans face unique challenges as they adjust to new academic and social cultures, manage the psychological impacts of service, and navigate health and wellness resources.

While federal programs exist to support these needs, they are often underutilized due to limited awareness and fragmented coordination. More than 862,000 veterans used their Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits in 2023, yet many encountered barriers that made their transition harder than it needed to be. Improving coordination between federal agencies and higher education institutions would help to reduce those barriers. Veterans deserve a system that helps them not only access education benefits but also thrive once they are enrolled.

Maximizing their success does more than serve individual veterans. It strengthens the national workforce and secures our shared economic future. Every veteran who completes their education and secures meaningful work is not just fulfilling personal potential, they are actively advancing U.S. economic growth, innovation, and American global competitiveness. To fully realize this promise, we must join together – across government, academia, and industry – to ensure veterans and their families have access to the opportunities they have earned. Our commitment today determines not only their future, but also the continued strength of our nation.

In January 2025, the Bush Institute published a set of policy recommendations for the VA to assess the efficiency and effectiveness of Veterans Integration to Academic Leadership and VetSuccess on Campus, which offer resources for veterans' health and wellness that complement federal financial benefits.

Employment: Reframing the Transition Question

It is not unreasonable to ask a transitioning service member, "What do you want to do when you get out of the military?" But that question is incomplete. What a veteran wants to do after the military might not match what the civilian world needs from the veteran.

The more complete question a veteran should ask themselves is: "What do I have that the outside world – *the market* – needs?" That is, what does the veteran have in their talent set – their skills, knowledge, attributes, experiences, and education – that the labor market wants. Embedded in that more complete question is the fundamental labor supply-labor demand match.

Furthermore, this question should not be posed at the end of a military career, but at the beginning. Every service member will transition back into civilian life, and the sooner one begins taking stock of how their talent set evolves during military service, the more likely a veteran and their family will enjoy sustained success after service.

About 15 years ago, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the veteran unemployment rate had risen to around 12%, and for younger veterans between 18 and 24, it was nearly 29%. In response, public and private partners collaborated through a series of compacts to prioritize hiring and supporting the veteran community. Corporate America recognized an opportunity to step up and support veterans transitioning to civilian life during wartime. Those efforts worked.

Today, the veteran unemployment rate generally mirrors, and often falls below, the civilian unemployment rate. That's a success story. A low unemployment rate, however, does not tell the full story. Nearly half of veterans leave their first job after the military within a year. While that figure is not far from that of recent college graduates, the reasons for veterans' departures are distinct: transition difficulties, skills mismatches, and workplace culture, among others.

Adding to these challenges are rising living costs, single-income households frequently at or below the poverty line, and persistent military spouse unemployment averaging 20% over the past decade. These factors reveal that many transitioning service members, while employed, are *underemployed*, which the Bush Institute defines as "the condition in which a veteran's education, leadership skills, compensation, or available time exceed what their current role requires or provides." In other words, veterans can contribute more to our economy.

The U.S. economy does not fully employ veterans. While unemployment rates look healthy on paper, the data suggest a mismatch between veteran labor supply and civilian labor demand. Veterans are getting jobs, but not necessarily the *right* jobs. The result is productivity loss for the nation, increased dependence on public programs, and unnecessary strain on veterans and their families. Recognizing the intangible attributes veterans and their families bring to their communities and companies – such as integrity, respect, perseverance, loyalty, and leadership – will not only more accurately compensate veterans for their added value to the economy but will contribute to making the United States more prosperous and secure.

To confront these challenges and to identify opportunities, the Bush Institute has convened a Veteran Employment Policy Working Group of subject-matter experts from industry, academia,

and former government. This group will develop actionable recommendations for federal, state, local, and private sector levels to improve the quality of employment for veterans and their families and realize their full economic potential.

Conclusion

General George Washington was clear when he 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." Maximizing sustained success for veterans and their families post-military transition is, simply put, a matter of U.S. national security.

The sustained success post-transition of our veterans and military families directly affects military readiness. When a service member's final experience in uniform – their transition from it – is positive and enduring, then a new veteran and their family will be great ambassadors for military service and will be more likely to encourage others to serve.

While our federal and state governments have vastly improved how we care, treat, and appreciate those who choose to defend the U.S. Constitution and our way of life, significant gaps remain for a variety of reasons. Fortunately, the American people – through civil society, their entrepreneurial spirit, and a wide range of nonprofit entities – complement government efforts to increase the likelihood of sustained post-transition success for veterans and their families.

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[i] VWA Clinical Providers are Avalon Action Alliance, Centerstone's Military Services, Cohen Veterans Network, the Department of Veterans Affairs, The Headstrong Project, Marcus Institute for Brain Health, ROGER Wellness Service, SHARE Military Initiative at Shepard Center, and Wounded Warrior Project's Warrior Care Network, which includes Emory Healthcare Veterans Program, Home Base Program, Rush Road Home Program, and Operation Mend.

- VWA Peer Networks are Blue Star Families, Elizabeth Dole Foundation, Team 43, Student Veterans of America, Team Red, White, & Blue, Team Rubicon, Travis Manion Foundation, and Wounded Warrior Project.

- Combined Arms and Syracuse University's D'Aniello Institute for Veterans and Military Families are the VWA's technology and data partners, respectively.

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[iii] The VWA collaborated with RAND Corporation to develop a shared definition of "high-quality care." The four components of this shared definition are veteran-centered; accessible; evidence-based; and outcome monitoring. The RAND research summary is available at Setting Standards for Delivering High-Quality Care to Veterans with Invisible Wounds | RAND.

[iv] To date, *Check-In* has connected with more than 3,800 individuals and provided a personal care journey to more than 1,700 of those connections.

Testimony of Mike Hutchings, Chief Executive Officer
U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Hearing: "A Grateful Nation: Maximizing Veterans' Success After Service"
November 5, 2025

Introduction

Chairman Moran, Ranking Member Blumenthal, and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on behalf of Combined Arms, a veteran-founded and veteran-led nonprofit dedicated to improving how our nation supports service members, veterans, and their families as they transition to civilian life.

Every year, approximately 200,000 service members leave active duty. Each faces a fragmented support system of agencies, nonprofits, and benefits programs, each with its own eligibility rules, forms, and wait times. The result is a delivery divide: help exists, but too often it cannot be accessed quickly or effectively enough to prevent a crisis.

Combined Arms exists to close that divide.

Our Model: A GPS for Veteran Services

Combined Arms operates the nation's most effective closed-loop referral network for veterans, service members, and military families. Our Veteran Services Coordination Platform integrates more than 300 vetted partner organizations, allowing veterans to connect with multiple services through a single intake.

Since our founding, we have connected nearly over 100,000 members of the military community to critical resources nationwide, coordinating more than 175,000 referrals for housing, employment, financial aid, healthcare, and basic needs. This work has generated approximately $603 million in economic impact and taxpayer savings by reducing duplication and inefficiency. Our average response time from intake to first contact is 26 hours, far faster than traditional systems.

Our platform also provides real-time data on unmet needs, giving state and federal partners visibility into service gaps, regional trends, and resource use. These insights enable policymakers to act proactively rather than reactively when addressing veteran needs.

Combined Arms' effectiveness has been recognized by the Milken Institute and the American Enterprise Institute, which have each identified our work as a national program of record in modernizing how veterans access care and transition support. These acknowledgments confirm that our model is bipartisan, evidence-based, and scalable wherever veterans live and work.

Closing Gaps in the Transition Journey

The transition from military to civilian life remains complex. Veterans must navigate multiple systems, repeat their stories, and often wait weeks or months for action. Combined Arms and our partners are closing these gaps, but veterans should never have to rely on chance or emergency measures to receive the support they have earned.

Across Texas and beyond, our model has produced more than 100,000 success stories. Consider a few examples:

- A U.S. Army Sergeant was swiftly referred to NextOp, securing full-time civilian employment within just 15 days of leaving service.
- A mother of three who relocated to Houston found stability through Combined Arms' network, receiving deposit assistance from Family Houston, access to food and financial education, and support for both wellness and employment.
- A Vietnam War Navy Veteran arrived at Faith Mission with nothing but the clothes on his back. Through coordinated action by the Northwest Texas Coalition and Combined Arms, he was placed in the Lamun-Lusk-Sanchez Texas State Veteran Home, enrolled in VA healthcare, and rediscovered dignity and community.

Even in smaller moments, this collaboration matters. When a VA psychologist reached out for help, a veteran in need was quickly connected to Baker Ripley for housing support while also introducing a federal provider to the network of local resources available through Combined Arms.

These stories represent a nationally replicable model of coordinated care, a system that ensures no veteran or family member faces their transition alone. When local, state, and federal partners share information and work together, veterans are met with dignity, stability, and hope rather than barriers and delay.

Navigating an Oversaturated Service Landscape

According to a recent Milken Institute report, there are more than 45,000 nonprofits in the veterans' services space.[1] Many are well-intentioned but rarely coordinated, which leads to duplication, confusion, and inefficiency.

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[1] Milken Institute, *Thriving Beyond Service: Strategic Philanthropy for the Military-to-Civilian Transition* (2025), p. 33.

Combined Arms streamlines this environment. Veterans complete one intake and are connected to multiple community services through a single system. Partner organizations are accountable for timely responses and outcome reporting, ensuring closed-loop results rather than open-ended referrals.

Our platform complements, rather than replaces, VA and government systems. It helps veterans access both public and private resources more efficiently and effectively.

Veterans as Civic and Economic Assets

Veterans are leaders, not liabilities. They vote, volunteer, and participate in civic life at higher rates than the general public.

When we invest in their success, we strengthen our workforce, our communities, and our civic institutions. Every successful transition adds stability to one family and resilience to an entire community. Our experience shows that when veterans have food, housing, and employment stability, they go on to lead, innovate, and give back.

The Role of Government and Civil Society

The covenant between our government and veterans is sacred, but it cannot stand alone. Federal systems are vital but often limited by scale and speed, and they cannot meet every need.

Community-based, nonprofit organizations like Combined Arms provide nimble, holistic, and human-centered support that complements government programs. When we work together, no veteran must wait in crisis while help exists just out of reach.

Policy Recommendations

The Committee has the opportunity to strengthen outcomes for veterans by improving coordination, accountability, and visibility across the entire support ecosystem without creating new bureaucracy. The following recommendations leverage existing systems and partnerships to ensure every veteran receives timely, effective, and connected care.

1. **Establish Two-Way Referrals Between VA and Community Networks**
   Develop a formal mechanism for reciprocal referrals between the Department of Veterans Affairs and accredited community-based organizations. Currently, data flow is one directional. Community partners refer veterans into VA systems but receive no confirmation or outcome visibility. A two-way referral system would enable warm handoffs, verify service completion, and ensure that when the VA cannot provide niche or localized services, veterans are quickly connected to qualified community providers

without falling through administrative gaps.

2. **Modernize the Transition Ecosystem Through a National Vetting and Validation Framework**
   Create a federal framework that identifies and highlights "best in class" community-based organizations and state agencies. This framework would use outcome data, evidence-based performance standards, and interoperability requirements to integrate trusted partners earlier in the transition process, ensuring veterans are connected to proven resources wherever they live.

3. **Create a National Interoperable Veteran Data Dashboard**
   Develop a secure, privacy-compliant national dashboard that reflects the real-time state of the veteran population, supported by shared digital standards for data exchange among federal, state, and community systems. Aggregated, non-personally identifiable data on veteran demand, service usage, and emerging needs would allow policymakers to allocate resources proactively and identify service gaps at every level of government. This visibility would form the foundation for evidence-based policymaking and coordinated delivery nationwide.

Together, these actions would create an integrated ecosystem of care that ensures accountability, honors partnership, and delivers on the nation's promise to those who have served.

Closing

Veterans should not have to navigate a maze of disconnected systems to find help. Combined Arms demonstrates that when technology, data, and compassion work together, we can close the delivery divide and ensure every veteran and family transitions with dignity, stability, and opportunity.

Our organization stands ready to work with this Committee, the VA, and federal and state partners on bipartisan, data-driven solutions that strengthen the continuum of care for all who served.

Thank you for your time and for your steadfast commitment to those who have worn the uniform.

A Grateful Nation: Maximizing Veterans' Success after Service

Prepared for:

Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs

Testimony by:

D'Aniello Institute for Veterans and Military Families (IVMF) at Syracuse University

November 5, 2025

Introduction

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, and distinguished Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today about how we may collectively better support the military-to-civilian transition process, so our nation's veterans and their families thrive after service.

About the IVMF

The D'Aniello Institute for Veterans & Military Families (IVMF) at Syracuse University was founded in 2011, as higher-education's first interdisciplinary academic institute singularly focused on advancing economic, social, and wellness outcomes on behalf of the nation's military, veterans, and their families. Each year, more than 20,000 individuals participate in IVMF programs and services, from entrepreneurship and career training to connecting individuals with local resources in their communities. Since its founding, the IVMF has served over 230,000 service members, veterans, and their families, all underpinned by the Institute's research, evaluation, and community insights team.

Our policy priorities are shaped not only by the data we collect, but also by the lived experiences surfaced through our programs and partnerships. Many of the challenges facing the military and veteran community—such as employment and health—require coordinated efforts across government, nonprofit, philanthropic, and private sectors, our work positions us to identify where policy can better enable collaboration and drive systemic impact. We remain committed to bridging gaps across sectors to strengthen the continuum of support for those transitioning from military to civilian life.

Getting Transition Right

Each year, approximately 200,000 individuals leave active military service. The number grows significantly when we account for military spouses, members of the National Guard, and

Reservists. The transition period—especially the first three years—can be fraught with challenges. In fact, more than half of veterans report difficulty adjusting to civilian life. The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has even labeled the first year post-separation as "the deadly gap," highlighting the heightened risk of suicide during this vulnerable time. Factors like finding purpose and connection, securing employment and financial stability, and receiving the right support at the right time can help mitigate serious personal, social, and economic consequences.

These consequences extend beyond individual well-being to the strength of our society and national security. There is growing concern that not only are younger generations increasingly hesitant to consider military service, those currently serving are also becoming reluctant to recommend military service.

Research from Ipsos, conducted in partnership with the Call of Duty Endowment and Mission Roll Call, found that 55% of adults are unlikely to suggest military careers to teens, and 80% of teens themselves are not interested in pursuing military service—despite generally favorable views of veterans. Nearly half of the adults surveyed believe that recruitment challenges pose a serious threat to national security.

Additional data from our collaboration on the Blue Star Families Military Family Lifestyle Survey (MFLS) shows despite nearly 70% of active-duty family respondents reporting the positive impact of military service on their families, only about one-third would encourage a young relative to enlist. More concerning, forthcoming research, also from the MFLS, found that less than half of veteran family respondents are confident that veterans and their families will obtain the long-term support that they need. In fact, 23% believe that "veterans and their families will be increasingly overlooked."

Our nation's commitment to those who serve must be unwavering, but also adaptive. The support we offer must reflect the evolving needs, experiences, and aspirations of each individual transitioning from military to civilian life. Achieving that goal begins with an honest assessment of today's transition landscape including what's working, what isn't, and where innovation is most needed.

Current Transition Landscape

While each experience separating from the military is unique, one of the most pressing challenges veterans and their families report during transition is navigating the benefits and resources available to them. Data from our community partners repeatedly shows that veterans and their families experience multiple needs concurrently. For example, in a recent analysis of NCServes, a navigation network coordinating referrals across health and nonprofit organizations

in North Carolina, across the last ten years there was a strong correlation between housing and other needs like employment, benefits navigation, and food.

Yet, when looking for help, veterans and their families confront an overwhelming number of options for obtaining assistance during transition—whether from the federal government, state and local government, nonprofit organizations, or the private sector. It is taxing to move between systems of care due to the lack of data sharing and warm handoffs, in turn compounding the burdens on both the individual and these systems. Even within the VA there are obstacles to sharing data between the Health Administration (VHA) and the Benefits Administration (VBA), let alone between federal agencies or from federal agencies to states. More work needs to be done to reduce barriers that would make navigating our maze of support easier, and the results more effective. Solutions like NCServes and similar initiatives prove this approach is possible, but we have a long way to go to scale these models in a way that preserves their efficacy.

Navigation: Everyone Has a Role to Play

Each high-quality program, service, or resource has a place in the system of transition supports; it is more a matter of determining which individuals should be directed to which resources at which intervention point.

There is a growing body of evidence governing how to implement effective navigation and referral models. Research shows providing even a customized list of resources only results in success about one-third of the time, compared to approaches that include guidance from a human navigator. For example, referrals made by trained "care coordinators" in NCServes resulted in success 75% of the time, and we see similar data with our partners across the nation, such as in Pennsylvania and the National Capitol Region. Moreover, these coordinators are able to track when and why help is unable to be provided, which helps communities improve how they serve veterans and their families over time.

Importantly, networks like NCServes, PAServes, and ServingTogether include the ability to make and measure referrals to county and state agencies, VBA, and VHA. Our research conducted with the VA found that veterans enrolled in VA healthcare who also sought services from community organizations had *better* non-clinical outcomes when collaboration with local VA Medical Centers was strong.

Relatedly, The Veteran Metrics Initiative (TVMI), a national longitudinal study of post-9/11 veterans managed by the Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness at Pennsylvania State University, found that during the first three months after transition, 66% of veterans used at least one program aside from TAP and 33% of veterans used multiple programs and services. These

additional programs include both public and private offerings, and **veterans who utilized more programs experienced better outcomes**.

Looking forward, we continue to see promising efforts around the country to replicate these models to address different transition needs. For example, a collective of veteran-serving organizations (VSOs) are formally coming together to refine the referral process for employment services and to report the collective impact of those efforts. This work is about reducing navigation friction for veterans and partnering with organizations that have validated outcomes to deliver the multiple meaningful interventions needed to successfully transition.

The Need vs. Our System: The Example of Employment

Why is resource navigation so central to a successful military transition and post-service life for veterans? Data shows that most veterans are seeking employment after service, even those also interested in school or starting a business—all while they adjust to civilian life. Moreover, recent research from the 2023 MFLS showed that there may be a continuous need for "employment and career development" resources and yet 29% of non-retired, post-9/11 veterans respondents said that they needed but did not get these resources.

Ultimately, the landscape of veteran employment need is complex—veteran unemployment has generally been low; however, veteran *underemployment* remains high even after more than six years post-service, based on self-reported educational attainment and the veteran's current job compared with education required for the job per Department of Labor (DOL) classifications. And yet, the "complexity" in this key aspect of military transition and post-service life and the needs gap that exists is emblematic of the larger systemic issues in the transition process.

First, while many programs exist in regard to military transition, **misalignment between needs and services remains.** According to RAND's comprehensive report on this topic, in the federal government alone, there are 46 separate programs administered by 12 government agencies supporting military to civilian transition. However, RAND also found that 95% of the federal expenditures—over $13 billion per year—is focused on general education services and that there is overlap among these programs while noted gaps remain.

Second, the report **found that these programs lack transparency and oversight, with almost no rigorous evaluation to date.** However, a second report illustrated the important role the nonprofit sector plays in the transition system, propped up in large part by philanthropy. RAND further noted that some nonprofits are tracking their performance and spending, albeit with minimal common standards, and were able to compile some of their publicly available data.

On the ground, many nonprofits are stepping up to fill the gap, particularly around employment and navigation. For example, Onward to Opportunity (O2O), the IVMF's flagship career preparation and employment initiative, fills a need and provides career exploration and employability skills training, along with access to industry-recognized certifications to over 10,000 transitioning service members, veterans, and spouses every year. More importantly, O2O committed to third-party evaluation and demonstrated its efficacy at helping transitioning service members—especially those leaving the military from junior enlisted ranks—secure better salaries.

Additionally, as the nature of work becomes more dynamic, employers will increasingly depend on soft skills such as problem-solving, adaptability, and motivation. Veterans possess many of these in-demand traits, as well as technical and learning capabilities cultivated throughout their service. VSOs augment federal transition programs in supporting veterans. VSOs such as Hiring Our Heroes and VetJobs appoint advisors that help veterans and their spouses identify which career path they prefer, how their expertise and soft skills align with that career path, and can even upskill veterans so that they are sufficiently qualified. VSOs also provide a vital networking connection between employees and veterans that increases the likelihood of successful employment outcomes.

More broadly, veterans also bring valuable skills to our economy, including in key industries like energy and semiconductor manufacturing. Through O2O, we've built a national infrastructure that connects transitioning service members, veterans, and military spouses to high-demand careers. Leveraging that foundation, and with support from Micron Technology, we have established a semiconductor hub for the military-connected community. This initiative provides industry-aligned upskilling, technical training, and direct pathways to employment in one of America's most strategically important and fastest-growing sectors.

For example, the semiconductor industry is projected to nearly double in global revenue over the next decade, driven by rapid advancements in artificial intelligence, defense systems, and clean energy technologies. Yet, meeting this growth will require hundreds of thousands of new skilled workers across engineering, manufacturing, and supply-chain roles. By aligning O2O's proven training model with Micron's leadership and industry demand, the IVMF is helping ensure that veterans and military families are not only part of this growth—but are positioned at its forefront.

Lastly, as we seek to fill the gaps in the military to civilian transition process, the needs of military families, particularly related to the employment of military spouses also require additional work and support. Many military spouses find themselves with employment-related needs during a time of transition; however, the constraints they face often begin well before their families go through the transition process. Reinforcing longstanding research on military spouse

employment challenges, a recent IVMF publication utilizing the American Community Survey (ACS) data found that military spouses have an unemployment rate four times higher than civilian peers. Moreover, they often earn 42 percent less and endure loss of income after each military relocation. These employment-related challenges have long-term implications for the financial health and well-being of military families from time in service, the moment of military transition, and beyond.

Accountability: Better Outcomes, Smarter Spending

As suggested by the comprehensive RAND report, measurement and accountability of transition related programs will be key to understanding what makes impactful outcomes in the long term. Given their unique circumstances and varying levels of need, veterans will accordingly rely on different programs at different times. TVMI data shows prevalent utilization of supports from approximately one year prior to separation through three years after separation. Therefore, methods of evaluation must be more holistic, balancing program level outcomes with measures of individual well-being. We should also take into consideration each service member's assessment data at the beginning of the transition process—so that success is weighed against a baseline.

At the program level, everyone must be held equally accountable, whether government, private, or nonprofit. When determining effectiveness, organizations must track outputs but move beyond outputs to outcomes to demonstrate efficacy. These outcomes should reflect evidence-based aspects of how well an individual is doing. For instance, a veteran obtaining a job is not necessarily a success. Other factors that must be considered are underemployment, whether the veteran has a living wage for their family, and veteran spouse careers.

At the individual level, well-being can be measured across key domains like health, education, employment, and social connectedness. It is essential that these elements are monitored over time, given that 19% of veterans in TVMI reported not feeling fully transitioned after as many as six and a half years.

Ultimately, without clearly defined outcomes that are universally measured, we will not know what actually works, for whom, and under what conditions.

Recommendations

A process as complex as military-to-civilian transition, and with as many well-intentioned stakeholders spanning agencies and sectors, requires a comprehensive and collaborative solution. The IVMF has long advocated for a National Veterans Strategy—a whole of government approach to ensuring veterans and their families thrive after service.

This type of approach has the potential to align agencies and non-governmental programs, rather than exist as a stand-alone proposal within one area of jurisdiction. It would also create more collective accountability and should include a process to revisit the strategy over time to course correct and meet new demands.

Specifically with respect to transition, we suggest a National Veterans Strategy should:

- Create national standards for transition program outcomes;
- Design and implement a holistic evaluation of both transition programs and individual well-being;
- Support cross-sector pilots that improve navigation and coordination.

Outcome Standards

To even understand how well a program or person is doing, collectively we must agree on a set of outcome definitions and benchmarks. Many research and evaluation organizations have established bodies of evidence for different types of programs, as well as the outcomes appropriate for each type. For example, as part of TVMI, PSU has classified key measures by domain, or area of need. The data also suggests correlations between certain types of program elements and better outcomes. Recently, RAND initiated a study funded by The Heinz Endowments to create a standard underemployment definition and metric.

Holistic Evaluation

With standards, we will have the ability to address RAND's recommendation about oversight and rigorous evaluation of federal programs. In turn, this will enable us to streamline duplicative programs, redirect funding to promising initiatives, and make improvements overall. This type of assessment should be ongoing and funded as part of a program's budget. Additionally, we should establish a national longitudinal outcomes study modeled after TVMI. While TVMI is the most representative data we have tracking veterans over time, the current sample includes service members who separated in 2016. This type of information needs to be refreshed to reflect our changing population and national landscape. It should be collected routinely by VA, in partnership with other agencies. Critically, all data should be transparently shared.

Navigation

To achieve this quality oversight and evaluation, we must make warm handoffs easier between federal agencies, as well as between the federal government to states, counties, communities, healthcare, and employers. We need to better support data sharing and enrollment in benefits and services at the VA, DOL, state, and local levels for those that choose to do so once they officially separate from the military. We must decrease barriers for individuals to move between the

military and new systems of care. Programs like the VA's Staff Sergeant Fox Suicide Prevention Grant Program have acknowledged the importance of addressing clinical and non-clinical needs concurrently to meet veterans where they are, upstream from crisis. However, challenges persist for grantees when trying to collaborate with the VA; states and VSOs face similar challenges with federal agencies. A stronger commitment should be made to the models following leading practices, with more investment to empower them to scale.

Conclusion

At a time when those who serve represent a decreasing share of our population, there is an increasing share of civilians who may not understand the barriers veterans and their families face after they separate from the military. While government programs attempt to facilitate the process of military to civilian transition, adjustments are still needed to align the resources available along this complicated journey for veterans and their families. Fortunately, many veteran and military serving nonprofits have stepped up to fill the unmet needs, but more work remains to confirm that programs are indeed addressing the needs of transition in the short and long term.

This work is important not only because our veterans and families deserve a chance at successful integration into civilian life, but it is also an investment that we are making on behalf of our country. Our military veterans and their families are assets in our society. Civically, many care deeply about their communities, and they want to **continue to serve** beyond wearing the uniform, whether it is through volunteering or participating politically. Economically, in many cases, veterans leave military service with decades long experience leading complex organizations and missions. Some have unique skills that can further benefit industries seeking specialized technical know-how. Many transitioning veterans are also eager to learn new skills or seek a bridge that can help harness their existing expertise for further contributions in a new industry. Our nation should harness the skills and the enthusiasm that veterans have to offer—both civically and economically.

Fundamentally, we believe that when we get transition "right," our country is stronger. At the D'Aniello IVMF, we are convinced that achieving a National Veterans Strategy is possible—finding measures we all agree upon, holding ourselves accountable, and making the necessary adjustments along the way.

We are deeply appreciative of the Committee's steadfast interest and commitment to serving those who have served our nation. In return, we reaffirm our commitment to providing timely insights, implementing evidence-based practice in programs, and advocating for what works. Together, we can guarantee that every veteran receives the support they deserve.

TESTIMONY OF

STUDENT VETERANS OF AMERICA

BEFORE THE

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

U.S. SENATE

HEARING ON THE TOPIC OF:

"A GRATEFUL NATION: MAXIMIZING VETERANS' SUCCESS AFTER SERVICE"

November 5, 2025

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SVA

Chairman Moran, Ranking Member Blumenthal, and Members of the Committee: Thank you for inviting Student Veterans of America (SVA) to submit testimony on this important hearing titled "*A Grateful Nation: Maximizing Veterans' Success after Service*".

With a mission focused on empowering student veterans, SVA is committed to providing an educational experience that goes beyond the classroom. Through a dedicated and expansive network of on-campus chapters across the country, SVA aims to inspire yesterday's warriors by connecting student veterans with a community of like-minded chapter leaders. Every day these passionate leaders work to provide the necessary resources, network support, and advocacy to ensure student veterans, military-connected students, their families, caregivers, and survivors can effectively connect, expand their skills, and ultimately achieve their greatest potential.

SVA thanks the Committee for considering this issue that would impact student veterans, military-connected students, their families, caregivers, and survivors in higher education.

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SVA represents more than 1,600 chapters at colleges and universities nationwide, encompassing over 600,000 student veterans and military-connected students. Since emerging from the 2008 grassroots coalition that helped secure the Post-9/11 GI Bill, SVA has served as the unifying voice of student veterans. Our mission is simple and enduring: to ensure that every person who served can succeed in higher education, engage in meaningful employment, and continue serving their community and country.

SVA operates at the intersection of federal policy and lived experience. Through the SVA Advising Center, SVA Career Center, and on-campus chapters, what SVA refers to as the *SVA Success Hub*, SVA transform earned benefits into outcomes, helping veterans select the right program, reduce debt, gain career-relevant experience, and build community. Thus, SVA supports, rather than supplants, Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and Department of Defense (DoD) by converting federal entitlements into tangible outcomes on the ground where SVA acts as VA force multiplier alongside VSOC, SCOs, and campus veteran centers, supporting the GI Bill's role as the front door to the VA.

SVA chapters already operate as localized transition hubs. Each chapter pairs peer mentorship with data-informed advising, helping veterans navigate enrollment, benefits certification, and access to campus services. The SVA Advising Center provides neutral, data-informed guidance on program selection, credit transfer, and benefit optimization so veterans choose the right school, in the right program, with minimal debt. Last year the Advising Center supported over 4,000 transitioning service members, student veterans, and families. The SVA Career Center connects student veterans to degree-relevant roles while enrolled, mentors them through the hiring process, and pilots responsible AI tools with human oversight to expand reach for under-resourced campuses. As of the beginning of the summer, over 30,000 careers had been posted to the SVA Job Board; these are organizations looking specifically at this population for their workforce needs.

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SVA's National Conference ("NatCon") hosts an annual claims clinic, where SVA partners with local organizations to provide VA disability compensation claims assistance from intention to examination to decision. In 2025, the Denver Regional VA joined SVA, the Veterans of Foreign Wars, Disabled American Veterans, the American Legion, and others at NatCon to host a claims clinic and benefits navigation hub. There, this clinic assisted more than 400 veterans and family members with claims, appeals, and enrollment, providing almost 200 examinations on site.

These efforts demonstrate that when government, higher education, and veteran-serving organizations operate in concert, the result is measurable progress in transition, degree completion, career alignment, and family stability for those who served.

To strengthen the continuum from service to success, SVA respectfully offers three actions within this Committee's jurisdiction:

1. Direct the DoD and VA to publish annual transition forecasts.
2. Modernize VA Work-Study (VAWS) to align with degree fields and expand access.
3. Establish a VA-led interagency data task force (VA/DoD/Department of Education/Department of Labor) with a 12-month pilot and report-back.

These recommendations form a single system: better data to plan transitions, stronger work-based learning during education, and coordinated tracking of outcomes that measure sustained success.

The Transition Moment

Each year, roughly 150,000 service members leave active duty, though 200,000 are ubiquitously reported, which include those leaving inactive service.[1] The majority are non-retirees under age 35, more than half with families.[2] For them, transition is both an economic and social shift with a return to community life, a redefinition of identity, and for more than half, an entry into higher education.[3]

The DoD and VA already collect data that could forecast these transitions, but the information remains fragmented

[1] This number is generally found from U.S. Department of Defense. (2024). Defense Manpower Data Center: Chapter 2 Personnel Separations. https://dwp.dmdc.osd.mil, however, this number is imprecise and lacks nuance and context. Some of these separating service members are totally and permanently disabled and will not be expected to enter the workforce. In addition, some have unfortunately passed, but are still counted in the aggregate amongst those joining civilian life.
[2] See generally Student Veterans of America. (2023). SVA Census Survey [Annual survey report]. https://studentveterans.org/research/sva-census/
[3] Institute for Veterans and Military Families at Syracuse University. (2019, November). *Student veterans: A valuable asset to higher education* [Research brief]. https://ivmf.syracuse.edu/student-veterans-a-valuable-asset-to-higher-education/

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and retrospective.[4] SVA recommends that Congress direct DoD and VA to jointly publish an annual transition forecast each summer, projecting separations and anticipated education-benefit usage for the coming year to include component, geography, and broad demographic information. With a mechanism like this in place, campuses, state and community agencies, and nonprofits can plan advising, childcare, and workforce programs ahead of demand. Employers gain predictable signals for veteran hiring pipelines. This "early-warning system" would cost little, relying on data already collected through DoD attrition and VA onboarding systems. It would also enhance oversight, allowing SVAC to measure how forecasted separations correspond with GI Bill enrollments and labor-market absorption. This effort is also likely achievable under existing DoD and VA authority, reinforced by congressional report language.

Education and Work as a Single Continuum

Education is the central throughput of transition for the vast majority of enlisted members leaving service,[5] and SVA's NVEST (2017) data show that veterans graduate at higher rates than traditional students but struggle with underemployment after graduation.[6] Many earn degrees in high-demand fields such as business, health sciences, and engineering but lack direct access to industry pipelines. Instead, veterans often work in positions below their skill level during and after their studies due to limited connections to civilian employers.[7] Even so, the 2023 LinkedIn Opportunity Report points out that veterans come into the workforce with nine out of the ten most sought after skills in corporate America.[8] This isn't an unnoticed phenomenon. S.2494, the *Hire Student Veterans Act* was recently introduced, which would amend the Internal Revenue Code of 1986 to provide the work opportunity tax credit with respect to hiring veterans who are receiving educational assistance under laws administered by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs or Defense. This is a noble first step in encouraging organizations to look at this dedicated, talented, and skilled labor source. SVA also supports legislation such as S.2673, the *Medic Education and Deployment Into Civilian (MEDIC) Careers Act of 2025*, which advances similar public private pathways that prepare veterans for critical healthcare roles. SVA further encourages companies and foundations to expand such programs to include all student veterans, including those who have exhausted their GI Bill or are not eligible for benefit assistance, so that every veteran learner has an equitable opportunity to contribute their skills to America's workforce and community

[4] O'Hanlon, C. E., Williams, K. M., Lotspeich-Yadao, M., Brennan, M., Salazar, H. M., & Maury, R. V. (2025, January 14). Finding and using policy-relevant data about veterans: Availability, accessibility, and avenues for improvement (Research Report No. RR-A1363-17). RAND Corporation. https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RRA1363-17/RAND_RRA1363-17.pdf

[5] According to IVMF (2019, November), 92% either agreed or strongly agreed that higher education is a crucial component in navigating the post-service transitional process from military to civilian life. Also reference SVA Lifecycle Atlas (on file with author).

[6] Cate, C. A., Lyon, J. S., Schmeling, J., & Bogue, B. Y. (2017). National Veteran Education Success Tracker: A report on the academic success of student veterans using the Post-9/11 GI Bill. Student Veterans of America. https://studentveterans.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/NVEST-Report_FINAL.pdf

[7] Morgan, N. R., Aronson, K. R., McCarthy, K., Balotti, B. A., & Perkins, D. F. (2023). Post-9/11 veterans' pursuit and completion of post-secondary education: Social connection, mental health, and finances. *Journal of Higher Education*, 204(3). https://doi.org/10.1177/00220574231168638

[8] LinkedIn Social Impact. (2023). 2023 Veteran Opportunity Report [Report]. https://socialimpact.linkedin.com/content/dam/me/linkedinforgood/en-us/veteran-report-2023/veterans-opportunity-report-2023.pdf

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well-being.

Beyond these pieces of legislation, SVA identified a VA program that can easily be modified to support working student veterans in earning careers in their degree field. The existing VA Work-Study (VAWS), created in 1980, provides income but rarely builds workforce-aligned skills. SVA urges modernization of VAWS to align placements with degree fields, allow participation at least at half-time enrollment, digitize timekeeping, and pilot placements in shortage sectors such as healthcare, education, STEM, and cybersecurity. Alignment with degree simply makes sense both for students and for VAWS host organizations. Students are better able to build their network, learn industry practice, and earn an income to support their GI Bill benefits, while host organizations expand their workforce with talented and committed employees. Expanding this opportunity to part-time students expands the talent pool for VAWS while supporting students who, because of financial, family, or caregiving obligations, cannot commit to a full-time education, but are still eligible for their GI Bill and federal student aid. Digitizing timekeeping brings the VAWS in line with other VA initiatives in technological modernization and is the next logical step in the program.

SVA's Career Center provides proof of concept of placement in critical fields. In partnership with Grow with Google[9] and others, SVA offers certifications in project management, data analytics, and digital skills to thousands of veterans and family members. To further connect this skilled and talented population with sectors urgently needing their expertise, federal programs should deliberately link GI Bill utilization to structured work-based learning opportunities. Veterans possess the discipline, adaptability, and service ethos that make them ideal for professions under strain such as healthcare, education, and technology. The *Independence Blue Cross Service Scholars Program* in Pennsylvania exemplifies this approach by combining tuition assistance, mentorship, and guaranteed post-graduation employment through collaboration among the Independence Blue Cross Foundation, regional universities, and healthcare employers.[10] This model transforms education into a direct workforce solution, bridging the gap between federal investment and local need. These programs integrate career readiness within academic pathways, complementing federal benefits through private innovation.

Within 12 months of these changes, VA could report to this Committee: the percentage of VAWS placements aligned with degree fields, the share of participants enrolled half-time or three-quarter-time, and results from at least ten pilots connecting veterans to in-demand workforce pipelines. This reform requires no new entitlement, only administrative modernization. It would directly connect education benefits to workforce outcomes and help employers address critical national shortages with a ready, values-driven labor pool. There is expected incremental administrative cost to VA, but VA can leverage existing VAWS authority and IT modernization plans. There is also an opportunity to align this effort with legislation from the 118th Congressional session (H.R. 3600 and H.R. 3601) and develop a Senate companion.

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[9] Earlier this year, SVA partnered with Google and their *Grow with Google* program to offer student veterans a head start in career employment while in school with one of Google's Career Essentials certificates, see https://studentveterans.org/info-google-certificates/

[10] See more information at https://www.ibxfoundation.org/pdfs/reports/service-scholars-program.pdf

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Career, Family Stability, and Civic Leadership

SVA's *State Policy Landscape Project* (2025), now operating across eleven states, represents one of the most comprehensive efforts to map how state policy environments shape veteran education and workforce outcomes.[11] Through mixed-methods research combining legislative audits, institutional scans, and focus groups with student veterans, higher education staff, and employers, the project identifies systemic gaps that federal programs alone cannot resolve.[12] The findings reveal recurring challenges across diverse regions: workforce transition supports that lack creativity to support student veterans, inconsistent implementation of credit for prior learning (CPL) policies, fragmented advising structures that separate academic and benefits counseling, and underutilized state veterans' commissions that often lack the resources or statutory authority to coordinate higher education and workforce initiatives.[13] In some states, veterans are still required to repeat coursework for competencies already acquired through military training and experience, resulting in unnecessary debt, delayed graduation, and lost productivity. In others, the absence of state-level coordination leaves campus veteran programs isolated, with limited access to workforce data or employer partnerships. H.R. 1446, the *Validate Prior Learning to Accelerate Employment Act*, would seek to identify or develop assessments that measure an individual's prior knowledge, skills, competencies, and experiences. These assessments would be used to award credit toward, or to grant, a recognized postsecondary credential that is valued by employers in the state for recruitment, hiring, retention, or advancement, and that aligns with an in-demand industry sector or occupation. SVA is dedicated to working with this Committee to create a Senate counterpart that would recognize veterans for their skills and competencies earned while in military service and grant them CPL within their academic or employment journey.

Overall, the outcome of this system should be enduring success with veterans seeing their value in their education, stable employment, strong families, and civic engagement. More than half of all student veterans are married, and more than half are parents.[14] Education after service is therefore a family enterprise. To that end, SVA supports S. 610, the *Ensuring VetSuccess on Campus Act*, introduced by Senators Blumenthal and Rounds, and expansion of the VA *Veterans Integration to Academic Leadership* (VITAL) program to ensure every state and campus has access to a VetSuccess on Campus and VITAL counselor. These counselors bridge VA benefits and health services with campus support, addressing both academic and family needs.

When veterans' families are stable, persistence rises, and intergenerational benefits follow. A child who watches a parent complete a degree with the GI Bill learns that service and education form a single legacy. Beyond individual households, veterans enrich civic life. Research shows that veterans volunteer, vote, and serve in leadership roles at higher rates than their civilian peers.[15] Each successful transition therefore yields both private and public dividends.

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[11] Kinch, A. K., & Barlet, T. (forthcoming) A Comparison of 11 State Policy Landscapes in Supporting Student Veterans. Student Veterans of America (on file with authors).
[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid.
[14] See generally Student Veterans of America. (2023). SVA Census Survey [Annual survey report].
[15] See Wilson, S. E., & Ruger, W. (2020). Military Service, Combat Experience, and Civic Participation. Armed Forces & Society, 47(3),

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Interagency Data Modernization

Every improvement described above depends on data that moves with the veteran. At present, those data remain scattered across agencies, trapped in silos that do not communicate.[16] VA holds benefit utilization files. The Department of Defense tracks separations and military training records. The Department of Education maintains enrollment data through institutional reporting, and the Department of Labor houses workforce outcomes. None of these systems speak to each other in real time.

As a result, even the most basic questions about veterans in higher education remain difficult to answer and requires a data-matching agreement with a several-years delay.[17] There is no definitive source for how many veterans are currently enrolled, how many persist to graduation, or how their degrees connect to employment outcomes. Each agency sees only part of the picture. For example, a service member may complete technical coursework in cybersecurity while on active duty, use the GI Bill to earn a bachelor's degree after separation, and later receive Veteran Readiness and Employment (VR&E) assistance for certification in cloud computing. Today, those three experiences exist in separate databases that cannot be linked without manual reconciliation. That fragmentation prevents policymakers from evaluating how federal programs interact across the full continuum of education and employment.

SVA recommends that the Department of Veterans Affairs lead an interagency transition data task force, working in coordination with the Departments of Defense, Education, and Labor to design and pilot an interoperable, privacy-protected data framework. Within twelve months, the task force should produce a pilot linking at least one cohort's separation data, GI Bill enrollment, and early employment outcomes. The Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs would then receive a report detailing key barriers, the authorities required for broader data-sharing, and a roadmap for national scale.

Such a pilot could begin with a discrete population. For example, the pilot segment could focus on all service members separating from the Army in fiscal year 2026 who use the Post-9/11 GI Bill within twelve months. That cohort could be tracked securely through VA education records and linked to Department of Labor wage files to evaluate employment alignment and earnings trends during school and post-graduation. This limited but concrete example would demonstrate how data integration can illuminate program effectiveness without new statutory

551–585. https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327x20934885 and Bowen, G. L., Martin, J. A., Mancini, J. A., & Nelson, J. P. (2015, April 24). Civic engagement and sense of community in the military (Research Brief). Institute for Veterans and Military Families. https://ivmf.syracuse.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Civic-Engagement-and-Sense-of-Community-in-the-Military.pdf

[16] O'Hanlon, C. E., Williams, K. M., Lotspeich-Yadao, M., Brennan, M., Salazar, H. M., & Maury, R. V. (2025, January 14). Finding and using policy-relevant data about veterans: Availability, accessibility, and avenues for improvement (Research Report No. RR-A1363-17). RAND Corporation. https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RRA1363-17/RAND_RRA1363-17.pdf

[17] Radford, A. W., Bailey, P., Bloomfield, A., Webster, B. H., Jr., & Park, H. C. (2024, February). First look: Post-9/11 GI Bill outcomes for enlisted veterans. American Institutes for Research. https://www.air.org/sites/default/files/2024-02/First-Look-Post-9-11-GI-Bill-Outcomes-Enlisted-Veterans-February-2024.pdf

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entitlements or excessive cost. This effort is low-cost, primarily from staff time and cost in coordination across agencies, aligned with existing federal data-modernization initiatives. SVAC retains clear oversight, with VA as lead, ensuring jurisdiction remains with the Committee.

A functioning data bridge, with the support of extant technological solutions such as Lighthouse API, would allow policymakers to see in near real time whether benefits translate into stable careers, household security, and community well-being. It would also shift congressional oversight from anecdote to evidence, giving this Committee the tools to assess impact rather than intention. For the veteran, it would mean a single, verified record of service, education, and credentials, which are data that follow them with consent and privacy by design. Such a system would make transition not only navigable but measurable, ensuring that every investment in those who served can be evaluated for the outcomes it delivers.

Conclusion

A grateful nation honors its veterans not only with gratitude or benefits, but with systems that work—systems built on efficiency, evidence, and trust. Every generation of veterans has expanded the American promise, and the test of our gratitude is whether the nation's institutions expand with them. SVA stands ready to partner with Congress, the VA, and the broader federal enterprise to ensure that those who once defended the nation are supported by one that functions as well as they once did in uniform.

The three recommendations before this Committee, transition forecasting, Work-Study modernization, and an interagency data task force, represent a roadmap to that goal. Each is cost-effective, actionable in the near term, and measurable through outcomes this Committee can oversee. Together, they would reduce friction at the point of transition, align education with the workforce needs of the nation, and strengthen the families whose stability determines veterans' long-term success. They would also create a model of governance that integrates the precision of data, the compassion of community, and the innovation of civil society.

Veterans are one of the nation's most reliable engines of economic, civic, and moral growth. When government and civil society work in concert, that engine powers more than individual achievement. It drives innovation in classrooms, entrepreneurship in communities, and renewal in the public institutions that hold our democracy together. Building systems that work for veterans is how a grateful nation sustains itself.

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The continued success of veterans in higher education in the Post-9/11 era is no mistake or coincidence. In our Nation's history, educated veterans have always been the best of a generation and the key to solving our most complex challenges. Today's student veterans carry this legacy forward.

We thank the Chairman, Ranking Member, and the Committee Members for your time, attention, and devotion to the cause of veterans, military-connected students, their families, caregivers and survivors.

Hiring Our Heroes
U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation

Statement of Hiring Our Heroes, U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation

ON: "A Grateful Nation: Maximizing Veterans' Success after Service"

TO: U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs

BY: Elizabeth O'Brien, Senior Vice President, Hiring Our Heroes, U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation

DATE: November 5th, 2025

BEFORE THE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS OF THE U.S. SENATE

"A Grateful Nation: Maximizing Veterans' Success after Service"

Testimony of:
Elizabeth O'Brien
Senior Vice President, U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation,
Hiring Our Heroes

Good afternoon, Chairman Moran, Ranking Member Blumenthal, and distinguished members of the committee. My name is Elizabeth O'Brien. I am an active-duty military spouse and senior vice president of Hiring Our Heroes (HOH), an initiative of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation. The Foundation harnesses the power of business to create solutions for the good of America and the world—anticipating, developing, and deploying strategies to address challenges facing communities today and tomorrow.

The covenant between our government and those who serve is sacred, but it cannot alone sustain lifelong success after transition. True success requires collective action: government, philanthropy, employers, and nonprofits working together to create clear pathways to opportunity. At HOH, our mission is to lead that collaboration, ensuring every veteran and military spouse not only transitions successfully but thrives as a civic and economic asset to our nation.

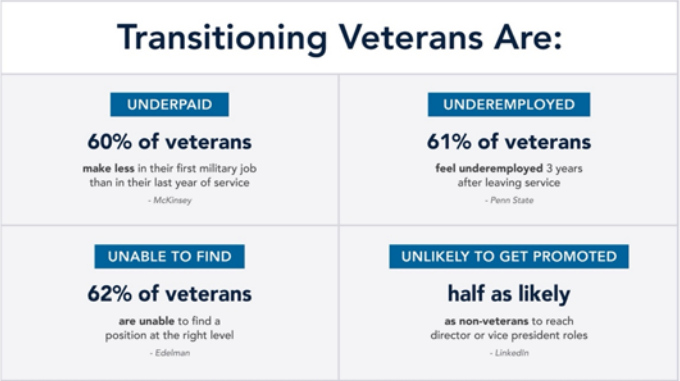
For more than a decade, HOH has delivered innovative solutions to tackle the longstanding employment challenges faced by transitioning veterans and military spouses. Working directly on military bases with a national network of employers, HOH has transformed how the military community finds jobs—and how companies recruit military talent. These efforts have made HOH the national leader in veteran and military spouse employment, now serving more than 80,000 people each year.

We believe economic opportunity is the cornerstone of a strong, sustainable all-volunteer force. Today's generation of young Americans want and need pathways into meaningful careers. Military service provides that pathway, but only if transitioning service members have the resources and skills to navigate their next steps. Just as colleges prepare graduates for careers, the military and federal agencies must ensure service members understand how to leverage their experience for civilian success. By taking care of this generation of warriors, we prepare them to be our nation's best future recruiters.

Employment Challenges Faced by Transitioning Service Members

In 2011, veteran unemployment was a national crisis, with rates for young veterans soaring to 30%. A coordinated effort by the private and public sectors dramatically reduced unemployment, but those improved numbers mask a deeper challenge: underemployment and the struggle to find roles that match veterans' skills and experience.

Despite lower unemployment rates, research shows most transitioning service members face underemployment and career misalignment. McKinsey reports 60% earn less in their first civilian job than in the military,[1] and studies by Penn State[2] and Edelman[3] reveal over 60% cannot secure roles matching their skills or desired level. LinkedIn adds that veterans remain half as likely to reach leadership positions, underscoring persistent gaps in translating military experience into valued civilian roles.[4]



[1] Blackburn, S., Kim, M., Lewis, C., Oh, H., & Parry, K. (2023, November 8). From the military to the workforce: How to leverage veterans' skills. McKinsey & Company. Retrieved Mar. 15, 2025, from https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/people-and-organizational-performance/our-insights/from-the-military-to-the-workforce-how-to-leverage-veterans-skills

[2] Vogt, D., Perkins, D. F., Copeland, L. A., Finley, E. P., Jamieson, C. S., Booth, B., Lederer, S., & Gilman, C. L. (2018). The Veterans Metrics Initiative study of US veterans' experiences during their transition from military service. Retrieved Mar. 15, 2025, from https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2017-020734

[3] Edelman (2024). 2024 Veterans' Well-being Survey. Retrieved Mar. 15, 2025, from https://www.edelman.com/sites/g/files/aatuss191/files/2024-11/2024%20Veterans%27%20Well-being%20Presentation%20FINAL.pdf

[4] LinkedIn (2023). 2023 Veteran Opportunity Report. Retrieved Mar. 15, 2025, from https://socialimpact.linkedin.com/en-us/programs/veterans/veteran-opportunity-report

Taken together, the research highlights systemic barriers: while technical skills like IT or mechanical expertise often transfer easily, soft skills such as leadership, resiliency, and teamwork are harder for employers to recognize and value, leaving many veterans underemployed and stalled in career progression.

These challenges make one thing clear: no single program or organization can solve them alone. RAND's recent analysis found 45 federal transition programs with significant overlap, yet less than 5% of funding supports employment assistance.[5] Layered on top are hundreds of nonprofit initiatives—the veritable sea of goodwill—creating a fragmented maze for service members and spouses. To truly move the needle, we must evolve from parallel efforts to collective impact.

The Veteran Employment Collective

That is why today we announced that we're proud to be a part of the newly formed Veteran Employment Collective, a bold, national coalition designed to transform how veterans and military spouses navigate their career journeys. The Collective will unite veteran- and military-spouse–serving organizations, employers, and public-private partners around one mission: ensuring every member of the military community has access to meaningful career opportunities.

This initiative reflects lessons learned over the last decade: too often, service members and spouses encounter a maze of programs with no clear path to the right resource. The Collective addresses this challenge head-on through:

- A seamless referral and data-sharing system that connects service members, veterans, and spouses to the right resources at the right time.
- A coordinated approach that removes duplication, streamlines navigation, and ensures no one falls through the cracks.
- A data-driven framework that strengthens partnerships, enables transparency, and generates reliable information to measure impact and guide improvement.
- A shared outcomes model that illuminates how each partner's unique contribution builds collective impact across the ecosystem.

This is not another program; it is the next evolution of collaboration.

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[5] Kleykamp, M., Wenger, J. B., Elizabeth, H. R., Kubasak, M., Hubble, T., & Skrabala, L. (2024, June 11). Federal Programs to Assist Military-to-Civilian Employment Transitions: limited scrutiny and substantial investment in education programs. RAND. Retrieved Mar. 15, 2025, from https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1363-12.html

In the past year alone, Hiring Our Heroes facilitated more than 44,000 referrals to partner organizations, each connecting a veteran, service member, or spouse to trusted opportunities and support. This volume sends a clear signal: structured collaboration is not just beneficial; it is essential. Expanding this referral network in a deliberate, accountable way will allow for trackable outcomes and measurable success.

To achieve this, the coalition will include the most effective, data-driven nonprofits—organizations that deliver measurable impact, fill critical gaps, and step in where government programs cannot. This vision is supported by the private sector, where companies like USAA have long demonstrated leadership through targeted philanthropy and a commitment to expanding capacity across the ecosystem. Their investments exemplify how corporate partners can drive scalable solutions without reliance on government funding, ensuring sustainability, innovation, and responsiveness to real-time community needs.

The Collective's founding partners include:

- America's Warrior Partnership (AWP)
- D'Aniello Institute for Veterans & Military Families at Syracuse University
- FourBlock
- Hire Heroes USA
- Hiring Our Heroes
- NextOp Veterans
- VetJobs & MilSpouseJobs

Together, we are building a no-wrong-door system that allows transitioning service members, veterans, and military spouses to access high-quality career support regardless of where they enter the network. The key outcomes of this initiative will be:

- Holistic transition support that spans the service lifecycle from active duty through post-transition careers.
- Expanded employer engagement, powered by shared data and unified outreach.
- Increased trust among funders and policymakers, driven by transparent performance reporting.
- Elevated community impact, as duplication gives way to coordination and measurable results.

We believe this approach will fundamentally shift how we collectively serve the military community—moving from competition to coordination, from fragmented effort to shared success.

The future design of the Veteran Employment Collective includes expansion to selected nonprofit partners that address critical wraparound needs, such as childcare, mentorship, and localized community support. These systems sustain long-term workforce participation, reduce barriers for military families, and improve quality of life for veterans and spouses.

By connecting the organizations that deliver where government cannot or will not, the Collective aims to create a truly holistic ecosystem—one that ensures every member of the military-connected community can not only transition successfully but thrive in the communities they call home.

By aligning resources and leveraging the ingenuity of America's nonprofit and corporate sectors, the Veteran Employment Collective will create a seamless, transparent, and equitable employment ecosystem, ensuring every service member, veteran, and military spouse can transition with purpose, dignity, and opportunity.

The Importance of Employment Bridges

Beyond addressing systemic fragmentation, our data shows that program-level innovation is equally critical to improving individual outcomes. Employment bridges—structured pathways that connect service members to civilian careers before separation—consistently deliver superior transition results. These bridges accelerate time to employment, improve job quality, and increase long-term career satisfaction. One of the most impactful examples is HOH's Fellows Program, a SkillBridge initiative serving both degreed and non-degreed transitioning service members.

SkillBridge is the only federal transition program that fundamentally redefines how service members prepare for civilian careers. Administered by the Department of Defense, SkillBridge enables service members to gain hands-on civilian work experience through internships and apprenticeships during their final 180 days of active duty.

For more than a decade, HOH has operated one of the nation's largest and longest-running SkillBridge initiatives—the HOH Fellows Program. This 12-week internship embeds transitioning service members directly into civilian companies, giving employers firsthand insight into how military experience translates into

workforce value. This experiential model ensures service members secure right-fit roles that fully leverage their skills and leadership.

The results speak for themselves. Over the last five years, HOH has connected more than 10,000 transitioning service member fellows with 2,500 employers nationwide. Eighty-eight percent of fellows receive a job offer within three months, with an average starting salary of $110,000—more than twice the pay of an E-6 with eight years of service and 20% higher than an O-3 with six years of service. In contrast to McKinsey's findings on post-transition salary declines, our data proves that experiential bridge programs lead to employment and compensation aligned with service members' experience.

Beyond salary, our research reveals deeper insights into career quality and satisfaction. In HOH's 2024 Strategic Insights Report, we surveyed 1,903 veterans who participated in the Fellows Program or another SkillBridge initiative, and 381 veterans who applied but did not participate. Key findings include:

- Time to employment was much faster for fellows, with 63% being employed within one month of transition versus 38% for non-participants.
- Fellows were far more likely to take a job for positive reasons (i.e., "great opportunity" or "great fit") (59% for fellows versus 41% for non-fellows).
- Conversely, non-participants were far more likely to accept a job for negative reasons (i.e., "needed a paycheck" or "no choice") (25% for non-participants versus 11% for fellows).
- Fellows were more likely to recommend service to future generations, with 61% saying they would recommend service versus 54% for non-participants.

While SkillBridge delivers exceptional outcomes before separation, many service members and spouses need flexible options that extend beyond active duty. The HOH Skilled Trades Academy meets that need, serving as an employment bridge that can be accessed before or after transition. This model pipelines military-connected talent into high-demand industries, offering stability, strong earning potential, and community-based careers.

Building America's Future: The HOH Pathway to the Skilled Trades

America is facing a critical shortage of skilled construction labor yet every year, 200,000 highly trained service members transition out of the military with unmatched discipline, leadership, and mechanical aptitude. Hiring Our Heroes (HOH) is uniquely positioned to bridge this gap with a workforce solution that benefits both industry and the military-connected community.

This summer, in partnership with Lowe's Foundation, Hiring Our Heroes launched the HOH Skilled Trades Academy, a six-week, hands-on, NCCER-aligned training program in partnership with Coastal Carolina Community College in Jacksonville, North Carolina. Designed for transitioning service members, veterans, and military spouses, the program builds immediate job readiness, provides nationally recognized credentials, connects participants with employers, and introduces them to entrepreneurial pathways within the trades. The initial pilot cohort includes eight veterans, marking the program's first step in demonstrating the model's effectiveness and scalability.

This pilot is more than a training program—it is a proof of concept for a national, replicable model that leverages HOH's SkillBridge authorization, expansive employer network, and community trust to meet regional labor needs and deliver measurable career outcomes. With the right partners, this model can launch within 90 days in any region and scale rapidly nationwide.

Why Now, Why This Program

The need could not be more urgent.

- Construction demand is surging. The United States faces a historic shortage of skilled tradespeople across construction, manufacturing, and infrastructure sectors.
- Transitioning talent is untapped. Over 200,000 service members leave active duty each year, many seeking purpose, stability, and community-based career pathways.
- Veterans consistently express a strong interest in SkillBridge-style opportunities after separation, allowing them to gain civilian work experience, industry credentials, and professional networks as they establish new careers in the communities they now call home
- Military spouses face chronic unemployment—nearly 20%. The skilled trades offer flexibility, mobility, and viable careers that can move with the family.

Training military-connected Americans for skilled trades fills critical industry gaps while strengthening America's economic foundation. Today, there are 2.5 million

more job vacancies than available workers, costing companies $5 billion annually in lost productivity.

Decreasing Friction, Increasing Opportunity

Unlike SkillBridge, the HOH Skilled Trades Academy can be accessed before or after transition, making it a flexible solution for service members, veterans, and spouses. This community-based, employer-driven, non-government-funded program improves financial wellness and stability while easing long-term pressure on the Department of Veterans Affairs to address challenges like homelessness and underemployment.

Our goal is simple: ensure that any military-connected individual who wants to work in the skilled trades can do so, with the right training, credentials, and employer connections.

This initiative exemplifies the power of partnership: Lowe's Foundation, HOH, local chambers, community colleges, and employers across the trades industry coming together to build America's future workforce—one veteran and one family at a time.

Expanding the HOH Skilled Trades Academy

America's workforce needs to extend beyond construction. The same resolve and discipline that service members bring can fill critical gaps in manufacturing, electrical/HVAC trades, and shipbuilding/maritime industries. For example, the manufacturing sector currently reports 409,000 job openings nationwide,[6] coupled with federal policy under Public Law 119-21, which commits to strengthening American manufacturing and aligning jobs with U.S. workers.[7]

In response, the next version of the HOH Skilled Trades Academy will expand to include manufacturing and electrical/HVAC tracks, aligning with federal workforce priorities and meeting urgent employer demand in high-growth sectors.

By expanding in this way, the HOH Skilled Trades Academy will:

- Provide transitioning service members, veterans, and military spouses with credentials and pathways in manufacturing and trades beyond construction.

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[6] National Association of Manufacturers (2025). Facts About Manufacturing. Retrieved October 31, 2025, from https://nam.org/mfgdata/facts-about-manufacturing-expanded

[7] 139 U.S.C. § 72 (2025). Public Law 119-21. Retrieved October 31, 2025 from https://www.congress.gov/119/plaws/publ21/PLAW-119publ21.pdf

- Leverage our existing SkillBridge authorization and employer network to meet regional labor supply needs, especially in high-growth sectors.
- Align with federal workforce and industrial policy by helping fulfill the promise of Executive Order 14005 and related manufacturing/industrial initiatives.
- Offer community-based, no-cost programs that increase financial wellness, career stability, and long-term readiness of the military-connected population.

This broadened scope underscores our belief that training and credentialing must follow labor market demand—and must be built with military-connected talent as the ready and willing workforce to fill those roles.

Poor Transition Outcomes and Military Spouse Unemployment

As we strengthen pathways for transitioning service members, we must also address a critical factor influencing veteran outcomes: military spouse employment. Research—including a 2019 report from the University of Texas' Institute for Military and Veteran Family Wellness—shows that an employed spouse significantly buffers the financial and emotional stress of transition, giving veterans the time and flexibility to pursue right-fit careers or additional training.[8] In short, spouse employment is not just a family issue; it is a readiness and retention issue for the all-volunteer force. Yet military spouses continue to face unemployment rates six times higher than their civilian peers, a challenge that demands urgent attention and innovative solutions.

The Military Spouse Career Accelerator Pilot: Promising Results, Temporary Pause

One of the most promising solutions is the Military Spouse Career Accelerator Pilot (MSCAP), facilitated by Hiring Our Heroes in collaboration with the Department of War and Deloitte. This pioneering three-year initiative connects military spouses with employers through 12-week paid fellowships, creating direct pathways to long-term employment.

Since its launch in December 2022, MSCAP has placed over 1,730 military spouses into internships, with a job offer rate exceeding 86%. More than 50% of these roles have been remote, addressing one of the greatest barriers to spouse employment: geographic mobility. These outcomes demonstrate that structured, employer-connected programs can deliver scalable solutions for a population that has faced chronic underemployment for decades.

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[8] Keeling, M., Borah, E. V., Kintzle, S., Kleykamp, M., & Robertson, H. C. (2019). Military spouses transition too! A call to action to address spouses' military to civilian transition. *Journal of Family Social Work*, *23*(1), 3–19. https://imvfw.utexas.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/2020-Military-spouses-transition-too.pdf

This summer, the Department of War announced a strategic pause on MSCAP placements beginning October 6, with plans to resume in early 2026 as the program transitions from pilot to program status as Career Accelerator. While we respect the Department's commitment to a thoughtful, data-driven transition, the timing could not be more challenging for military families. The pause coincides with uncertainty surrounding federal funding and the potential for government shutdowns and furloughs, conditions that add financial stress for spouses already experiencing unemployment rates six times higher than their civilian peers. During this time, we have continued to prioritize programming for military spouses, increasing the number of our own professional development programming, Amplify, and have proactively continued to connect military spouses to employers.

As we look to 2026 and beyond, Hiring Our Heroes continues to develop innovative solutions to connect military spouses with meaningful career opportunities, and stands ready to support DoW's launch of Career Accelerator as it moves from pilot to program. Our priority remains unchanged: to ensure that military spouses have pathways to purposeful careers that strengthen both their families and the all-volunteer force.

Looking Forward

As we reflect on the theme of this hearing, *A Grateful Nation: Maximizing Veterans' Success after Service*, gratitude must be expressed through action. Veterans are one of our nation's greatest civic assets, and their continued success depends on how effectively government, employers, philanthropy, and civil society work together to create pathways of opportunity. At Hiring Our Heroes, we see firsthand that while federal programs are foundational, it is the broader ecosystem—businesses, nonprofits, and local communities—that transforms transition into lifelong success. Our charge is to strengthen that ecosystem, ensuring that every veteran and military spouse can navigate it with clarity, trust, and purpose.

Through the Veteran Employment Collective, this group of best-in-class nonprofits is building the next evolution of collaboration—one rooted in shared data, coordinated referrals, and measurable outcomes that connect service members, veterans, and spouses to sustainable careers and stronger communities.

Through the HOH Skilled Trades Academy, we are demonstrating what transformation looks like on the ground: a scalable, hands-on model that addresses America's skilled labor shortage while creating new pathways for military-connected talent. This program proves that with the right partnerships, we can train the next

generation of builders, manufacturers, and technicians, meeting national workforce demand while strengthening local economies and family financial wellness.

And through the Military Spouse Career Accelerator Pilot, we have seen what excellence looks like in spouse employment: structured, employer-connected fellowships that deliver real results. As the program transitions from pilot to permanent, continuity must be prioritized, so this lifeline remains open, especially during times of uncertainty.

Collectively, these efforts represent a whole-of-nation approach. They show what is possible when government, employers, philanthropy, and nonprofits come together with a shared purpose: to ensure that those who serve our nation are never left navigating their futures alone.

As we look to the years ahead, Hiring Our Heroes remains committed to working alongside this Committee and our partners across sectors to drive forward transformation—one that ensures every veteran, service member, and military spouse can transition with confidence, contribute with purpose, and thrive with dignity.

Conclusion

Over the last fourteen years, Hiring Our Heroes has been proud to serve over 1 million veterans, transitioning service members, and military spouses in communities across the United States and abroad—always in partnership with the private and public sectors. And with more than 200,000 service members transitioning annually, there is always more work to be done.

Hiring Our Heroes remains wholly committed to connecting veterans and military spouses with meaningful career opportunities and honored to serve on the front line of this movement. We will continue to unite our partners in a common mission to achieve fundamental change in the veteran and military spouse employment landscape.

Chairman Moran, Ranking Member Blumenthal, and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify. I look forward to answering your questions.

Statement of Holly Hermes, Liaison for Veteran and Military Affairs

Yale University

Before the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee

Hearing on "A Grateful Nation: Maximizing Veteran's Success after Service"

November 5, 2025

Good afternoon. Thank you to Chair Moran and Ranking Member Blumenthal for having me here today.

As an Air Force veteran and actively serving Reservist, I am deeply appreciative of the opportunities provided to me by the Air Force Reserve, but I am testifying here today solely in my civilian capacity as Yale University's liaison for Veteran and Military Affairs.

I'm here to discuss veterans transitioning out of the military and into higher education, and to share Yale's commitment to veterans and their families, as well as our partnerships with veteran-serving organizations.

I will outline the timeline of a veteran transitioning into Yale and describe what that journey might look like. This overview of resources is not exhaustive, but it highlights the common services that our veterans frequently use. At Yale, we are fortunate to have access to a wealth of resources that enables us to support veterans and their families in many ways.

When military members prepare to leave the service, they are varied in terms of age, experience, and education level, with different goals and opportunities ahead of them. Some come to us to attend Yale College and earn an undergraduate degree. These are enlisted service members who often joined the military right out of high school and never imagined a Yale degree could be in their future. Other veterans have served as officers and have a bachelor's degree or advanced degree and are looking to advance their education at the graduate or professional level. Some veterans are looking for employment, trying to relocate back to friends and family in Connecticut, or following a spouse or loved one to the area. Yale has a commitment to all these groups of transitioning veterans and provides help to them in many ways.

The community

Student veterans at Yale College come from the enlisted ranks. They have served, and some continue to serve in the Guard or Reserve and are pursuing the same undergraduate bachelor's degree that any traditional Yale student earns. They may enroll as first-year

students, transfer students, or in our Eli Whitney Students Program (for non-traditional students). Most of our veterans enroll in the Eli Whitney Students Program (EWSP), as that program provides the greatest flexibility.

Eli Whitney students take the same in-person classes as other undergraduates and have access to the same majors, faculty instructors and advisors, extracurricular activities, research opportunities, and international experiences. The program's flexibility allows students to enroll in courses full or part time, and its advisors have experience guiding adult students. The EWSP is fully integrated within Yale College while providing a built-in community of peers with lived experiences that are often very different from most of Yale's undergraduate students. This support network is vital to the success of our student veterans. Students have come from a variety of career fields, but commonly, language specialists, nuclear engineering, infantry, and special operations. Notably, one of our student veterans to graduate Yale College now serves as on Yale's Jackson School of Global Affairs faculty. He served over 150 deployments as a Navy SEAL and was severely injured on his final mission. His course covers serious texts that explore various angles of human conflict and his experience as a combat veteran and humanities student is integral to that material.

In 2017, Yale College had 17 student veterans. Today, Yale College has 58 student veterans from every branch of the service, including our first Space Force veteran This almost 4-fold increase over eight years is due to Yale's partnership with organizations that support veterans preparing for, and applying to college, and Yale's deep commitment to making education accessible and affordable for veterans.

More than sixty years ago, Yale became the first private research university in the United States to implement both need-blind admissions and need-based financial aid for undergraduates. Today, Yale College continues to meet 100% of demonstrated financial need for all students - including members of our military and veteran community. As a result,100% of our undergraduate student veterans attend Yale at little to no cost.

Veterans are not required to use VA benefits before accessing Yale's financial aid. They may choose to combine university funding with VA benefits or rely solely on Yale's need-based aid, depending on their personal circumstances and long-term educational goals. Funding choices may also be adjusted on a semester-by-semester basis. Many student veterans choose to utilize Yale's institutional aid so they may preserve their VA benefits for future graduate or professional studies, or transfer them to eligible dependents. Yale proudly supports all VA education benefit programs, and all fourteen of Yale's schools participate in the Yellow Ribbon Program.

Yale University's Financial Aid office includes a dedicated veterans and military student resources coordinator, who serves as the school certifying official and provides individualized financial aid counseling for veterans using military benefits and/or institutional support.

In addition, Yale College students receiving need-based financial aid and incurring qualifying childcare expenses are eligible for dependent childcare support of up to $4,900 per academic year, available for each child under the age of six. Additional emergency funding resources are also available at both the undergraduate and graduate/professional school levels for students experiencing unforeseen financial hardships during their time at Yale.

Before Yale

Regardless of their military and academic background the following services support veterans to and through Yale. The Warrior-Scholar Project (WSP) was started by a Yale Eli Whitney student fifteen years ago and, in partnership with colleges and universities nationwide like Yale, provides intensive and immersive one-week, college-preparatory academic boot camps for enlisted veterans and transitioning service members. Yale supported 45 enlisted veterans through this program last summer. These military members may be thinking about college after graduation, or they may have been accepted already to start in the fall. Having taught and supported the WSP at Yale, I can tell you from personal experience that WSP gives enlisted veterans the confidence to know that they have the skills and drive to be successful at a school like Yale.

Once students have the desire to attend a highly competitive institution, they often turn to Service to School. Service to School is a non-profit organization that provides free college and graduate school application counseling to military veterans and service members at the undergraduate and graduate level. By partnering with Service to School through its VetLink program, military applicants to Yale College are able to provide an addendum to their application to fully explain and elaborate on military achievements, job training courses, and deployments. VetLink also connects veteran students to current admissions staff, students, and mentors to assist in navigating the transition from service member to student.

Veteran undergraduates also come to Yale through the Research Experience for Veteran Undergraduates (REVU) program, a 9-week summer program where enlisted U.S. veterans conduct STEM research and build skills to become research scientists. Students work in labs across campus in fields such as geology, medicine, and robotics. Last summer, a former submariner helped build a robot to assist breathing in children experiencing

anaphylactic shock, while a retired Special Operations medic explored a novel avian-flu detection method using discarded PCR tests. REVU is unique in that it supports veterans in a cohort-based model with sustained mentoring during and after the program.

A*t Yale*

In addition, Yale's Office of Veteran and Military Affairs serves as an umbrella program to support students, faculty, staff, and alumni, and to assist veterans in accessing services and resources both internal and external to Yale. We have permanent space, co-located with Yale's Office of Student Accessibility Services (SAS), to offer events, programs, and services that support community, education, and advocacy efforts.

Student veterans in Yale College and the graduate and professional schools have access to SAS to coordinate disability accommodations and resources to pursue equitable access to education and student life. Being co-located with SAS has led to formal and informal partnerships, student support groups, and genuine interactions which, in turn, has led to greater support for our disabled student veterans.

In addition, our student veterans have access to the Veterans Affairs (VA) facility in neighboring West Haven, and we also have a close relationship with our local VA Post-9/11 Military2VA (M2VA) Case Management Program Coordinator. The coordinator joins us at orientation to enroll newly arrived students in VA care and troubleshoot any appointment scheduling issues. She offers one-on-one meetings and group presentations multiple times during the academic year for students and employees. We are grateful for the VA's support, most recently helping a student-veteran secure a long-term mental health provider appointment in a timely fashion.

Yale's office of Mental Health and Counseling is an additional benefit that offers students a wide range of services, including individual therapy, group therapy, and medication consultations and management. Dependent on individual needs, veteran students may use these services free of charge and in conjunction with VA care.

In addition, social and community events are a cornerstone of building the veteran and military community at Yale. One of the toughest parts of leaving the service is leaving a close team of colleagues who are intent on working towards a collective mission. We are committed to bringing together the broader Yale veteran and military community to support each other and build camaraderie. Yale has an active veteran alumni group, the Yale Veterans Association; an employee group, the Yale Veterans Network; and offers three options to earn a commission through the Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) programs for the U.S. Air and Space Forces, U.S. Navy and Marine Corps, and the U.S. Army. Currently, we have over 100 students working towards commissioning into the armed

services. Supporting veteran students, faculty, and employees, along with the cadets and midshipmen training for military service, brings the community together in a way that is supportive for all.

Next week we will celebrate Veterans Day with a series of events hosted by Yale including our traditional university-wide ceremony to celebrate veterans. Highlighting the centrality of veterans at Yale, it will be held outdoors on Yale's busiest plaza. Other events to mark the occasion will include a book talk by a veteran author, a round-table discussion with a veteran alumnus, a reception at Yale Law School, an off-campus military ball, and a play about an Army combat medic's time in Iraq.

After Yale

Following graduation from Yale, our veteran students go on to do remarkable things for our nation and community. Veteran alumni go on to win prestigious awards and fellowships, including, in recent years, Tillman, Marshall, and Truman scholarship winners. They also pursue graduate and professional degrees in fields such as law, medicine, and public policy.

Yale has been teaching and preparing leaders for service in the military and civilian sectors for over 300 years and fully recognizes the important role that veterans play in our society. Personally, I am thankful for Yale's support of my own continuing military service, and I am proud to support my brothers and sisters in arms as they work towards their future education and career goals at Yale.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify and I look forward to your questions.

Questions for the Record

Senator Cassidy
Questions for the Record
Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee
Success After Service
November 5, 2025

Questions for Jason J. Galui, Veterans and Military Families Director, George W. Bush Institute

In your testimony, you described how we need to adopt a more holistic approach to military-to-civilian transition with how we define success after service and that veterans should be able to find opportunities that reflect a sense of purpose.

The loss of purpose that many veterans feel after exiting the military has often led to self-isolation and is in part responsible for higher rates of depression among veterans.

You also discussed how veteran employment can be reframed to match the skills that veterans have learned during military service, and how that can be easily matched to serve the American economy.

- How can we more effectively inform employers with how skills obtained during service match their business needs, and how can we match veterans who have the skills they need so the veterans can apply?

  Improving mutual understanding of how talent entering the labor market from military service matches employment needs would boost the U.S. economy. Many employers lack a consistent way to understand general military experience. At the same time, veterans frequently struggle to articulate how their individual military experiences translate into job families used by industry.

  As part of their transition process, veterans should ask themselves, "What do I have that the labor market needs?" This would encourage veterans to know their talent set and steer them toward figuring out how their skills, knowledge, attributes, experiences, and education matches the demands of the civilian labor force. It also creates ownership by the veteran in their transition and job search.

  A second component to boosting the U.S. economy is for employers to improve their understanding of the value that transitioning service members add value to their firms. Improving such understanding could begin with an updated standard, modernized skills framework that links military experience to civilian competencies in a format that employers already use. Embedding this translation into transition tools, job platforms, and state workforce systems would allow veterans to generate civilian-recognizable skill summaries and enable employers to identify roles that align with typical military backgrounds. The objective is not to oversimplify military experience, but to structure it so employers can interpret it with confidence.

Each year, tens of thousands of relatively young Americans enter the labor market from the U.S. Armed Forces. Each transitioning service member brings with them a unique talent set. The sooner a service member or veteran can begin the process of understanding how their individual talent set meets the needs of the civilian labor market, the more likely it would be that they will find meaningful employment after service.

Experiential models have demonstrated strong results. When veterans can "test drive" civilian roles through structured fellowships or industry placements, they gain realistic insight into job expectations, workplace norms, and career paths before committing to long-term employment. Employers similarly gain exposure to veteran talent in a low-risk, high-information environment. These experiences have been associated with stronger job matches and improved retention.

While the unemployment rate for veterans, generally, is lower than that of their nonveteran peers, underemployment of veterans is relatively high. Underemployment occurs when there is a perceived or real discrepancy between a worker's education, skills, pay, or time and a worker's desired employment.

Underemployment has negative consequences for workers and employers. Some of these negative effects are higher levels of job dissatisfaction, lower levels of productivity, decreased corporate citizenship, higher turnover rates, and lower self-esteem among workers. Given the relatively low understanding of military service and the military-to-civilian transition among civilians, veterans and their families face the potential of higher levels of underemployment which can exacerbate an already difficult transition in life.

Labor markets tend to be more efficient with less government intervention, but there are instances when the government should intervene in the labor market. Namely, when there is structural mismatch. In the case of veterans entering the labor market, the federal government can be more effective by setting the conditions that enable veterans and potential employers to find one another more efficiently.

Clearer translation of military skills and greater access to experiential learning create the conditions for better matching, higher-quality employment decisions, reduced turnover for both veterans and employers, and stronger U.S. economy.

- How can we help veterans find purpose in private sector employment after transition? What kind of industries and workplace strategies help veterans feel more connected to their work?

  Purposeful employment for veterans emerges when there is alignment between their talent set and opportunities to meaningfully contribute and make genuine connections in the civilian workplace. Veterans often navigate multiple early job changes post-transition not because of indecision, but because the roles they initially enter do not effectively

utilize their potential or provide adequate on-the-job growth opportunities. That pattern is a signal of systemic misalignment, not individual instability.

Given such systemic misalignment, one government objective would be to minimize that gap prior to veterans and employers committing to inefficient employment relationships. Structured fellowships and short-term industry placements, such as the Department of Defense SkillBridge, where veterans engage in real projects, receive feedback, and observe organizational culture, allow veterans to calibrate their interests and strengths with far greater clarity. These models also provide dedicated professional development focused on navigating civilian compensation structures, workplace communication, career progression, and industry expectations. Veterans consistently report that this preparation increases their confidence and reduces the uncertainty that can plague early transition.

Industries that provide tangible contribution, such as advanced manufacturing, construction and the skilled trades, cybersecurity, logistics, health care, and energy, often align well with veterans' desire for work that is both practical and meaningful. These pathways offer clear skills application, visible outcomes, and progression structures that resonate with those accustomed to mission-oriented environments.

- How can we empower veterans to serve their local communities to both help with finding purpose and reducing feelings of self-isolation?

  Opportunities to serve beyond the uniform, to form genuine connections, and to make meaningful contributions to one's community are necessary components to ensure sustained success after service. Discovering such opportunities is less clear in civilian life than it is during military service, which can make the military-to-civilian transition challenging for many. Ultimately, it is up to the individual veteran to rediscover their purpose, connections, and contributions, but there are roles for government to help reduce the time it takes veterans and their families to make these rediscoveries in civilian life.

  One way that the Congress could empower veterans to rediscover their purpose, contributions, and connections in their communities would be to incentivize each of the 3,244 counties and county equivalents in the United States to know their veterans and to seek them out. Congress could provide resources to the states for county-level veteran offices to welcome home veterans moving to their cities and towns.

  Through unique county-level "welcome home" programs and activities, veterans could learn about opportunities in their new communities and would have the potential to more quickly rediscover purpose, connection, and contribution than if doing so completely on their own. Making such personal contact with veterans and their families at the local level would greatly reduce feelings of isolation and disconnection from civilian communities.

I also want to thank you for the Bush Institute's work on the Check-In initiative with the Veteran Wellness Alliance that connects veterans suffering from PTSD, anxiety, depression, substance abuse, and mild traumatic brain injury to top clinical providers.

In 2022, my *Solid Start Act* was signed into law that required the VA to reach out to newly separated veterans three times their first year after service to connect them to VA programs and assist with transition.

- What can we take from these two to use as models for a system to connect recently transitioned out of service veterans to employment opportunities in their local communities?

  Solid Start and Check-In are examples of how good-faith public and private sector actors can partner to achieve the best outcomes for veterans and their families. Both efforts connect veterans directly with fellow humans who care about them, have great compassion, and understand military life. Both minimize the cost, in terms of time and energy, for veterans to learn about and gain access to available resources.

  The Veteran Wellness Alliance (VWA), which powers Check-In, is a collaborative effort across a range of nonprofit entities that have a common goal of providing the best care for mental and brain health. Leveraging the power of innovation and technology, Check-In solved the navigational and bureaucratic challenges associated with searching for and connecting with the right type of trusted care.

  A similar model of collaborative networks at more local levels could power a version of Check-In that connects veterans and their families to efficient civilian employment opportunities. Workforce development organizations already exist in regions across the country, and many have veterans' employment programs. To improve these existing efforts, the Congress could incentivize these local workforce development organizations to connect and collaborate with local chapters of veteran service organizations in ways similar to the collaborative relationships between Check-In's clinical providers and veteran peer networks.

- How can the VA play a larger role in helping veterans find meaningful employment?

  One opportunity is for the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to help reduce fragmentation across employment and education pathways by improving coordination among federal departments and agencies, state-level counterparts, and community partners. Veterans frequently encounter an overwhelming landscape of well-intentioned programs that are difficult to compare and lack a common framework. By improving the flow of information between federal partners and aligning guidance with state and local workforce systems, the VA can help ensure veterans receive consistent information about high-quality opportunities and emerging labor market demands.

Helping veterans find meaningful employment is not a direct responsibility of the VA. Whether it should be is a matter of policy debate. The VA's most constructive role in veteran employment is to strengthen the broader environment that empowers veterans to find meaningful work on their own terms – not to ensure veterans get jobs.

Veterans must interact with multiple systems during their military-to-civilian transition, including higher education, workforce development, health care, and community-based support. The VA is well-positioned to help these systems-of-systems function with greater coherence and clarity for veterans and their families.

The VA can also strengthen the employment ecosystem through data transparency. Federal oversight bodies have noted that outcome data for many education and training programs are inconsistent or difficult for veterans to access. The VA can make program performance information more visible and easier to understand. Clearer data would empower veterans to make more-informed decisions and would incentivize education and training providers to demonstrate positive results.

Finally, the VA's convening power allows it to elevate effective practices without becoming a job-placement entity. By highlighting models that produce strong outcomes, the VA can help guide veterans toward credible options while preserving their autonomy in choosing career paths.

In short, the VA's most significant contributions could lie in setting the conditions through which veterans can make well-informed decisions about their future: improve coordination and data sharing across federal and state entities, increase transparency of education and training programs, and ensure that the overall system-of-systems supports veterans' pursuit of meaningful employment.

Senator Mazie K. Hirono
Questions for the Record
Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee
"A Grateful Nation: Maximizing Veterans Success After Service"
Wednesday, November 5, 2025

Questions for Jason Galui, Lieutenant Colonel, U.S. Army (Ret.), Director, George W. Bush Institute

1. We have the Transition Assistance Program (TAP), the Office of DOD-VA Coordination, the Joint Executive Committee's Transition Assistance Program Committee, the Transition to Veterans Program, VBA's other Outreach and Transition Programs, DOL VETS' Transition Employment Assistance for Military Souses and other programs designed to help transitioning servicemembers find employment – despite all this we still hear from veterans that they lack the support needed, still hear from advocates veterans are falling through the cracks, still deal with high rates of unemployment and underemployment.

    a. Where do you think the disconnect is, particularly when it comes to veterans struggling to understand what resources are available and how to access them?

    Ironically, a major source of the disconnect is the many connections that exist for veterans to learn what is available to them. There is a vast array of resources from federal and state-level government programs, national and local nonprofit organizations, and university and corporate efforts. The existence of so many resources reveals a genuine desire to support service members' transitions to civilian life but crowds the military-to-civilian space in overwhelming ways. Veterans and their families can feel paralyzed when searching for appropriate resources to address a particular issue or concern.

    The ultimate success of the United States depends on the freedom of the American people to choose opportunities that will help them achieve their life goals and objectives. A small percentage of Americans choose to serve in the Armed Forces of the United States as part of their life's journey. Then, at some major decision point, a service member will choose to depart service. The role of government is to enable veterans to be successful in civilian life, not to guarantee that success. For success to endure, an individual must own their transition.

    The primary objective of any government is to provide security for its people while setting conditions for economic prosperity without distorting the evolving order of its society. With respect to military-to-civilian transition, the federal government – through leadership provided by the military services – should aim to maximize in our transitioning service members an individual confidence in

their preparedness to succeed in civilian life after military service. Such confidence, built across a military career, would equip veterans with the knowledge and resilience necessary to achieve their goals and objectives in their post-military life.

b. Why does it seem like we're dedicating a lot of time and resources to this issue to only limited success?

One reason it can seem like we have only limited success is because we, as a country, do not have a common definition of "success" after service.

Given the tens of thousands of service members who transition back to civilian life each year, there are likely just as many individual descriptions of success for each transition. Without understanding what it means to achieve "success after service," simply adding more resources will continue to exacerbate the already intense overwhelming feelings of the military-to-civilian transition.

Perhaps "success after service" could be articulated as some combination of the elements that constitute a healthy, thriving life such as the following social determinants of health as described by the U.S Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC):

- Health care and quality
- Education access and quality
- Neighborhood and built environment
- Social and community context
- Economic stability

Perhaps another way to nationally define "success after service" could be in terms of an individual service member's *confidence in their preparedness* to succeed in civilian life based on their own metrics of success. Measuring individual confidence levels certainly would be difficult, though the United States already relies on established confidence measures, like the Consumer Confidence Index, to guide broad decision making both in government and the private sector.

Assessing success of transition programs requires a series of measurements, both qualitative and quantitative. Such measurements must consider at least four "clients" of military-to-civilian transition: the service member and family, the military services as institutions, the operational readiness of our military services, and the greater American society.

2. Chairman Moran has previously had a witness at some of our transition hearings – Dr. Arthur De Groat of Kansas State University – who spoke about the need to treat the transition like an inevitable step for most servicemembers – which it is for many – and to begin helping them prepare for it from the second they start their service.

    a. As a veteran yourself, can you speak to how it might help to begin socializing resources with service members long before they start their separation?

    I fully agree with Dr. Arthur De Groat.

    All service members, regardless of how we individually define success after service, desire to be confident to thrive beyond the uniform.

    Developing confidence requires leadership and takes time. Immediately upon entry into service, committed military leaders begin training new service members in the skills and knowledge necessary to succeed in any situation they might find themselves while conducting their missions. Our military leaders are experts in ensuring mission readiness and instilling confidence in our service members to achieve their objectives.

    While in uniform, service members learn how to adapt to evolving environments and succeed in challenging conditions often under high levels of stress. Service members experience several transitions, sometimes simultaneously, during their active service years. They get promoted, change jobs, move to new duty locations, and build families. Across each transition, military leaders are there to coach, mentor, and guide individuals to be successful in the next chapters of their military careers.

    If we consider an individual service member's separation from military service to be their final transition in uniform, then we can evolve the role of military leaders in helping their service members prepare for this final mission while in uniform. In many ways, the military services already conduct such preparation through their intense focus on leadership.

    Leaders ensure the success of those they lead. As most succinctly defined in the 1942 U.S. Army Field Manual, "leadership is knowledge of [people]." If taking care of people and protecting the nation are two of the most important functions of military leaders, then our military leaders have an important role in the military-to-civilian transition of their service members. Leaders can effectively contribute to this final transition in uniform by extending the building of confidence to succeed in any situation to that of civilian life.

One way to achieve this contribution is to refine how the services coach, guide, and mentor service members through their military careers. Congress could direct, for example, that every service member develops an Individual Strategic Plan (ISP) that begins at the recruiting office or commissioning source. The ISP would become a formal part of one's military file and a "unit life coach" at each duty station would challenge service members to identify their goals and objectives across a relevant time horizon as defined by the service member.

Given that a military career timeline is relatively predictable and that service members have well-defined contracts or active duty service obligations, every service member knows when their next "stay in or get out" decision point will be. Therefore, unit life coaches – or unit leaders – would challenge service members to consider a time horizon for goals and objectives that includes their next decision point. Throughout one's military career, the ISP would be continually updated such that all service members would have a unique and comprehensive ISP at the conclusion of their service, whether that be three or 33 years.

Having such a deliberate and thoughtful ISP developed since accession into military service would result in transitioning service members having a strong understanding of who they are and of their talent set (e.g., their values, skills, knowledge, attributes, experiences, and education). Such understanding would help to maximize one's confidence in their preparedness for success after service.

b. How realistic is it to expect separating servicemembers to retain the information they're given in TAP classes, given they're in the midst of what is normally a big life change for them and their families? Were you able to remember most of the information you received through TAP?

Given the volume of information and the typical style of delivery of that information, especially at one of life's most critical junctures, we should expect low retention rates of that information among separating service members. They are inundated with a flood of information of available resources across the full range of life's activities, and much of the information is not relevant to them in that moment of military-to-civilian transition.

The most memorable part of my personal TAP experience was the resume-building session. It was memorable, in a negative way, because I found it unhelpful and potentially harmful to building one's confidence in being prepared for success after service. The session was delivered by a contractor who was a retired Army veteran with little to no experience in the private sector. His guidance and advice on resume writing contradicted much of what I had learned from corporate human resource leaders. The session diminished the credibility of

my TAP experience and reinforced that I would have to rely on my professional and personal set of relationships to discover meaningful post-military opportunities for myself and my family.

Given the persistent transitions and relative predictability of military life, TAP can evolve from being a "mandatory" end-of-service, one size fits all, check-the-block activity to a true career and life-enhancing service for military members and their families. TAP has the potential, if treated as a genuine transition assistance program, to provide service members and their families with a personalized journey throughout their military life.

To maximize its effectiveness and if we want to help service members "be all that they can be," then TAP must be a careerlong process. When a service member gets married or has a child, for example, they could receive an aspect of TAP – sharing with them and their new family the resources available both while they are in service and after service. That timing when delivering such information would be much more relevant to the service member. Moreover, repetitive exposure to such information, even in smaller doses, would enhance one's confidence in their preparedness to succeed after service.

3. GI Bill benefits can be used to support veterans during on-the-job training and things like skilled trade apprenticeships.

    a. How aware are veterans and eligible beneficiaries of their ability to use the GI Bill to support non-college education options?

    Available evidence suggests that veterans face a complex and fragmented landscape when exploring noncollege uses of the GI Bill, particularly for apprenticeships, technical training, and industry-recognized credential programs.

    Oversight entities such as the Government Accountability Office (GAO) have documented instances in which program information is difficult to compare, outcome data is inconsistent, and approval processes do not always reflect program quality. These structural issues make it difficult for veterans to clearly understand which noncollege options are available and which provide strong labor market value.

    Recent GAO reviews identified programs with poor completion or employment outcomes that remained approved for GI Bill use due to limited consistency in how results are monitored. This does not reflect a lack of veteran interest in alternative pathways. It reflects a system in which the signals about program quality are not always clear. When information is scattered or outdated, veterans may default to familiar degree programs simply because the alternatives are harder to evaluate.

    There are strong opportunities to improve. Strengthening outcome transparency – such as publishing comparable data on earnings, completion, and employment outcomes across GI Bill-eligible programs – would allow veterans to better assess which noncollege pathways align with their goals. Enhancing quality assurance mechanisms and ensuring that low-performing programs are addressed through established review processes would further reinforce confidence. Additionally, incorporating labor market information into career counseling conversations would help veterans understand the full range of GI Bill-eligible pathways in fields like construction, advanced manufacturing, cybersecurity, logistics, and health care.

    Rather than a deficit of awareness among veterans, the core issue is the structure of the information environment around the GI Bill. Clearer data, stronger quality signals, and better-aligned guidance would help veterans fully leverage the benefit across the many education and training options that the GI Bill already supports.

Responses to Senator Mazie K. Hirono

Questions for the Record
Mike Hutchings, CEO, Combined Arms
Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee Hearing:
"A Grateful Nation: Maximizing Veterans' Success After Service"
November 5, 2025

Question 1: *As someone who created a platform to centralize information for veterans, would it surprise you to learn that the Joint Executive Committee and DoD's Office of VA-DoD Cooperation view Military OneSource as a one-stop shop for servicemembers, families, spouses, and veterans? What do OneSource and other VA and DoD centralized resource access points do right, and where should we be focusing efforts to improve?*

Answer: It does not surprise me. Military OneSource and VA.gov are valuable federal entry points and do many things well. They provide standardized and reliable information and serve as trusted starting places for servicemembers and families.

Where I see the gap is in what happens after a veteran leaves those sites. Most of the challenges that transitioning servicemembers face, such as housing, employment, childcare, and financial strain, are addressed at the state and community level, not at the federal level. Veterans often move from a federal portal into a maze of disconnected systems that do not communicate with each other.

Another limitation is that these federal portals function primarily as directories of services, not coordinated service-delivery systems. There is no accountability, tracking, or closed-loop follow-up to determine whether a servicemember actually received the support they were referred to, whether the referral was timely, or whether it resolved the need. Without that visibility, it is difficult to measure outcomes or intervene when someone is at risk of falling through the cracks.

The greatest opportunity for improvement is integration rather than duplication. Today, systems operate in silos, which results in repetitive intakes, long wait times, and inconsistent handoffs. Veterans frequently have to tell their story multiple times to multiple providers. Better data-sharing standards and secure interoperability between federal systems and vetted community partners would allow veterans to move seamlessly from information to actual support.

Military OneSource and VA.gov can remain the digital front doors, but the connection to local, on-the-ground resources needs to be stronger and more coordinated. That would reduce delays, improve outcomes, and create a more consistent experience for servicemembers and families.

Question 2: *Chairman Moran has previously had a witness at some of our transition hearings – Dr. Arthur De Groat of Kansas State University – who spoke about the need to treat transition like an inevitable step for most servicemembers and to begin helping them prepare for it from the second they start their service. As a veteran yourself, can you speak to how it might help to begin socializing resources with servicemembers long before they start their separation?*

Answer: I completely agree with the idea that transition should be treated as a process rather than an event. Beginning to socialize resources early in a servicemember's career has significant value.

One of the challenges we see is cultural. In many units there can be a stigma around preparing for transition. Servicemembers often hesitate to engage with resources early because they worry it signals they are no longer committed to the mission. Leaders may also discourage early engagement because the unit loses personnel capacity once someone begins the transition process.

This is at odds with reality. Transition is not hypothetical. It is inevitable for every servicemember, whether they serve four years or twenty. Because every servicemember will eventually transition, preparation should be treated as a normal and expected part of military service rather than something reserved for the final months.

When resources are introduced early in a servicemember's career, it reduces stigma, normalizes planning, and gives servicemembers and their families time to build familiarity and trust with available tools before they need them. By the time TAP occurs, many servicemembers are already juggling relocation, family needs, and the emotional weight of leaving service, which limits how much information they can realistically absorb.

Early and continuous exposure creates the foundation for a smoother and more confident transition and improves long-term outcomes for veterans and their families.

Question 3: *How realistic is it to expect separating servicemembers to retain the information they're given in TAP classes, given they're in the midst of what is normally a big life change for them and their families? Were you able to remember most of the information you received through TAP?*

Answer: In my experience, it is not realistic to expect servicemembers to retain most of the information delivered during TAP. The transition period is extremely stressful, and many servicemembers are focused on relocation, family logistics, and the emotional difficulty of leaving the military. Under those conditions, information retention is limited.

The system should shift away from relying on one-time information delivery and toward continuous access and follow-up. TAP should serve as the starting point rather than the end of

the process. Servicemembers need a way to revisit information after separation, when they are better able to process and act on it.

A persistent digital connection, whether through a centralized account, app, or integrated referral system, would allow veterans to access information, connect to vetted local resources, and receive ongoing updates as their needs change. This approach would significantly improve outcomes and reduce the need for veterans to repeat their story or start over in a new system.

This is not a criticism of TAP but a recognition of the realities that transitioning servicemembers face. A single week of classes cannot carry the full weight of everything a servicemember and their family will need to navigate a successful transition. Ongoing, accessible support is essential.

Senator Mazie K. Hirono
Questions for the Record
Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee
"A Grateful Nation: Maximizing Veterans Success After Service"
Wednesday, November 5, 2025

Questions for Barbara Carson, Colonel (Ret.), U.S. Air Force Reserve, Managing Director, D'Aniello Institute for Veterans and Military Families at Syracuse University

1. **We have the Transition Assistance Program (TAP), the Office of DOD-VA Coordination, the Joint Executive Committee's Transition Assistance Program Committee, the Transition to Veterans Program, VBA's other Outreach and Transition Programs, DOL VETS' Transition Employment Assistance for Military Souses and other programs designed to help transitioning servicemembers find employment – despite all this we still hear from veterans that they lack the support needed, still hear from advocates veterans are falling through the cracks, still deal with high rates of unemployment and underemployment. You mentioned in your testimony there are 46 separate programs across 12 federal agencies supporting transitioning servicemembers.**
    a. **Where do you think the disconnect is, particularly when it comes to veterans struggling to understand what resources are available and how to access them?**

Two major factors that limit veterans' ability to take advantage of federal transition programs are a lack of preparation time and a need for assistance navigating these programs. In our collaborative research with Blue Star Families, 44% of retired and 46% of non-retired veteran respondents started planning their transition less than a year before separation while 8% of retired and 34% of non-retired veteran respondents did not or were not able to prepare. Furthermore, almost 25% of servicemembers that DoD identified as needing maximum support for transition did not attend mandatory TAP classes. Having time to plan can make a difference in transitioning servicemembers' experience as they separate from the military. For example, 79% of veteran respondents who were not able to plan for transition felt "unprepared" to navigate military to civilian transition, while 82% of veteran respondents who started planning "3+ years before separating" felt "prepared." Preparation can make a difference on transition outcomes.

Additionally, veterans need support navigating transition programs to identify opportunities that offer the right kind of support for them and their families. The type, amount, and timing of support needed varies by veteran and household, which requires a customized approach. We see from our research that common transition concerns reported by veteran respondents include, but are not limited to, employment opportunities, cost of living, children's education and activities, and spouse's employment prospects. However, not every issue is relevant for every veteran.

Veterans report finding navigation support beneficial, whether it's from discussions with peers, VA resources, their local community, or VSO/MSO engagement. Veterans who can have discussions with others they trust can navigate the resources available to them more easily. Conversely, evidence from The Veterans Metrics Initiative (TVMI), a national longitudinal study of post-9/11 veterans managed by the Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness at Pennsylvania State University suggests that a lack of appropriate support can impair veterans' transitions. The study found that after five years from separation, 19% of veterans did not feel fully transitioned. Many of them had not used transition programs besides TAP, due to confusion about what programs were available and whether they were eligible. These preliminary findings suggest that transitioning servicemembers need time to prepare for military to civilian transition, and that they need customized support in navigating transition related resources.

b. Why does it seem like we're dedicating a lot of time and resources to this issue to only limited success?

The passage of legislation such as the Johnny Isakson and David P. Roe, M.D. Veterans Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act, which created the Veteran and Spouse Transitional Assistance Grant Program (VSTAGP), and the Senator Elizabeth Dole 21st Century Veterans Healthcare and Benefits Improvement Act, which extended the Veterans Technology Education Courses (VET-TEC) program, have been helpful in expanding transition options for veterans. However, factors that limit success include funding priorities that do not reflect veterans' main concerns during transition and a lack of objective evaluations of transition programs. Per a recent RAND report, 95% of federal spending on transition programs is allocated to general education services, even though only 41% of participants use those programs. Additionally, the majority of service members consider employment a top priority during transition. RAND found a wide range of nonprofit and private sector initiatives filling these gaps between veterans' priorities and federal programs, often funded by philanthropy. Consequently, our system of transition programs is fragmented, which exacerbates navigation challenges that may prevent veterans and their families from utilizing the most appropriate program for their needs.

Another complication is that we have very little insight into the efficacy of these programs, as data about these programs is limited or difficult to obtain. Almost none of the programs have been rigorously or independently evaluated. RAND identified 27 programs that have few participants and have nearly no budget or performance data. Legislative or administrative action that mandates reporting and sharing programmatic and outcome data would allow researchers and Congress to identify and scale best practices, recommend improvements, and address remaining gaps. Better, consistent access to data would also enable informed decision making when reallocating funds to address the current misalignment between need and spending, and direct dollars to the most efficient and effective programs, both in and out of government.

2. **Chairman Moran has previously had a witness at some of our transition hearings – Dr. Arthur De Groat of Kansas State University – who spoke about the need to treat the transition like an inevitable step for most servicemembers, and to begin helping them prepare for it from the second they start their service.**
    a. **As a veteran yourself, can you speak to how it might help to begin socializing resources with servicemembers long before they start their separation?**

From my perspective as a veteran, socializing resources well before separation would help because transition is not a single event—it is the culmination of a series of changes that occur over the course of a servicemember's career. Preparing for that final transition is far more effective when it is treated as a gradual process rather than something introduced primarily at the point of departure.

From an employment standpoint, the resources I encountered during the Transition Assistance Program were not strongly connected to trusted labor market actors such as employers or industry-recognized credentialing bodies. Much of the guidance was delivered by contracted personnel focused appropriately on benefits and administrative requirements, but less able to provide insight into how the civilian labor market actually functions, what skills are valued, or how servicemembers can position themselves competitively over time. Earlier exposure, paired with periodic reinforcement, would allow individuals to make informed decisions about skill development, credential attainment, and career pathways while they are still serving.

Beginning this process earlier would also support better financial literacy and financial preparedness, as well as earlier involvement of spouses or partners, who are often directly affected by employment decisions, geographic moves, and income changes. These are areas where incremental preparation over time is far more effective than compressed instruction at separation.

Finally, servicemembers experience multiple natural transition points throughout their careers such as permanent changes of station, deployments, promotions, marriage, and the birth of a child. Each of these moments could be leveraged as an opportunity to reassess transferable skills, financial readiness, family needs, and overall preparedness for future transitions. Normalizing this kind of reflection throughout a career would reduce the shock of separation and help servicemembers approach transition with greater confidence and agency.

    b. **How realistic is it to expect separating servicemembers to retain the information they're given in TAP classes, given they're in the midst of what is normally a big life change for them and their families? Were you able to remember most of the information you received through TAP?**

Based on my own experience, it is not realistic to expect separating servicemembers to retain most of the information delivered during transition, particularly given the volume of material and

the significant personal and professional changes occurring at the same time. Retention is often driven by what feels immediately relevant in the moment, rather than by the long-term importance of the information.

What I remember most clearly from my Transition Assistance Program was learning, for the first time, how I could join the U.S. Air Force Reserve. Prior to that TAP class, I had no awareness that this was an option. That information proved pivotal: I ultimately served for more than 20 additional years in the Reserve. Had I missed or discounted that information during TAP, it would have been a significant lost opportunity.

By contrast, I recall far less from the briefing on Veterans Affairs benefits, even though I know I received it. At the time, I did not see myself as needing or being eligible for VA benefits, so that information did not register as immediately relevant. This is not a reflection of the quality of the briefing, but rather a reflection of the cognitive load servicemembers carry during transition and how people naturally prioritize information under stress.

One aspect of that experience that stood out to me was that learning about continued service opportunities came so late in my active-duty career. It felt as though, once I had decided to separate, there was less emphasis from my unit on my longer-term development, even though viable pathways still existed. That reinforces why TAP, while essential, cannot be the sole mechanism for preparing servicemembers for transition. Information delivered during a single, high-stress period is likely to be unevenly absorbed, underscoring the value of earlier, repeated engagement across a servicemember's career.

3. **GI Bill benefits can be used to support veterans during on-the-job training and things like skilled trade apprenticeships.**
    a. **How aware are veterans and eligible beneficiaries of their ability to use the GI Bill to support non-college education options?**

Of the veterans who utilize the GI Bill, 10% pursue non-college education options. Recently, veterans have expressed increasing interest in non-college education options, especially with the rise of skills-based hiring. Non-degree programs allow veterans to demonstrate their expertise in an objective manner so that they can translate the skills they learned in the military into credentials that the civilian workforce recognizes.

Veterans who pursued these options who were E-2 or E-3 outearned veterans who had been at the same rank and did not pursue the GI Bill. However, non-participants at different ranks outearned veterans who pursued these programs. Studies should be funded to identify ways to improve the use of the GI Bill for veterans interested in non-college education programs.

    b. **Do the benefits available during this time adequately supplement veterans and their families during their training?**

The GI Bill benefits do not cover the entire cost of education for all veterans. The GI Bill does provide financial support to veterans seeking non-college education options. However, many veterans still take out loans. 17% of veterans who attended programs in "other sectors," which includes non-college degrees, Department of Defense-funded institutions, and some types of two-year degree programs, took out student loan debts. Veterans who attended programs in other sectors took on an average of $12,000 in student debt. Living expenses were a major factor in many veterans' loans, but that may not hold true specifically for veterans who attended non-college education options. Veterans rely on the benefits they earn through serving our country to obtain steady employment. Those benefits need to be flexible and supportive enough so that veterans are not forced to take on additional debt to find a civilian job and forge their post-service career.

Senator Marsha Blackburn
Questions for the Record
Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee
A Grateful Nation:
Maximizing Veterans' Success after Service
November 5, 2025

Questions for Mr. Lyon / SVA

1. Mr. Lyon, your work with Student Veterans of America highlights the vital role that higher education institutions play in helping veterans thrive after service. In Tennessee, universities such as the University of Tennessee, Vanderbilt University, Middle Tennessee State University, and others serve as critical hubs for veteran education, leadership development, and community engagement.
Question for Mr. Lyon: What role can academic institutions play in building national security and innovation pipelines that leverage veterans' unique skills and experiences?

Academic institutions play a central role in building national security and innovation pipelines by translating veterans' military experience into educational credentials, leadership development, and workforce readiness.

As we shared in our November 5, 2025 testimony, higher education is often the first civilian institution veterans fully engage after service, and it becomes a critical bridge from uniformed service to continued contribution to the nation. Universities do far more than deliver degrees. They serve as convening hubs where veterans gain structure, purpose, and community while converting operational skills into academic and professional capital.

Veterans arrive on campus with leadership, teamwork, and problem-solving abilities shaped in high-stakes environments. Research cited by Student Veterans of America consistently shows that student veterans elevate academic culture, assume leadership roles, and mentor peers across disciplines, particularly in fields tied to innovation, engineering, healthcare, and public service. When institutions intentionally recognize and credit military learning, integrate veterans into research and applied learning opportunities, and connect education to workforce pipelines, they strengthen both economic competitiveness and national resilience.

In states like Tennessee, institutions such as the University of Tennessee, Vanderbilt University, and Middle Tennessee State University are well positioned to serve as engines of national security and innovation by aligning academic programs with regional workforce needs, partnering with employers in critical industries, and fostering veteran-led research,

entrepreneurship, and civic engagement. These campuses help ensure veterans remain contributors to national strength long after their military service ends.

As we emphasized during the hearing, education is not an endpoint for veterans. It is part of a broader education-to-employment continuum that, when supported by strong campus ecosystems and cross-sector partnerships, produces leaders who continue serving their communities, strengthening democratic institutions, and driving innovation across the country.

In short, when higher education institutions intentionally invest in veterans, they are not just supporting individual success, they are reinforcing the nation's long-term security, economic vitality, and innovation capacity.

Statements for the Record

Statement for the Record

SUBMITTED TO THE
SENATE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

by Kandi Tillman

including Appendix statements
by Leading Employers

for the November 5, 2025 Hearing

"A Grateful Nation: Maximizing Veterans' Success after Service"

Chairman Moran, Ranking Member Blumenthal, Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this statement for the record. As the Managing Co-Founder of 50strong, a social-impact startup launched in 2020, I have the honor of working alongside many employers as they open and share employment pathways with the military community - including Transitioning Service Members, Veterans, Student Veterans, Military Spouses and Guard & Reserve members.

50strong was built to bridge the gap between talent and opportunity by creating modern, technology-enabled tools that connect employers and military-affiliated jobseekers in real time. Our work is fully driven by private-sector investment - not taxpayer dollars or grants - which allows us to move with efficiency and accountability, focusing on measurable outcomes such as talent pipeline enablement, engagement and value attainment for both employers & jobseekers.

Through our platforms, we help employers, education partners and community organizations collaborate more effectively while empowering veterans and spouses to choose the connections and resources that best fit their goals.

Our mission is straightforward: to help veterans and their families successfully translate military skills into meaningful civilian careers by enabling the employers that seek to hire them.

I'd like to offer several key insights based on our work on the ground for the Committee's consideration.

Insight #1: The Private Sector Is Critical, Too.

The covenant that our government holds with those who serve is sacred. Federal programs through VA, DoD and DoL form the cornerstone of how our nation repays its debt to service members and their families. Today, our government invests "more than $13 billion in military-to-civilian employment transition support programs" via 45 federal programs across 12 federal agencies.[1] Yet those programs alone cannot ensure sustained success after military service; this is due to fragmentation, lack of oversight and an outsized focus on education vs employment - all of which should be addressed.

In an effort to answer this government reality, it is widely accepted that veteran-serving nonprofits are a critical antidote. Tens of thousands veteran-serving nonprofit organizations exist to support this community, many of which play a vital role to provide individualized services. Yet there remains fragmentation, individualized services are expensive and many lack access to technology that allows them to scale or measure their impact. Further, they also often rely on charitable giving and/or federal grants for sustainment.

We must also embrace private industry as a critical stakeholder:

- Nearly 70% of America's workforce is employed by private industry.[2] Private employers are not an afterthought in the transition journey; they are the destination. They provide the paychecks, purpose, and progression that anchor every successful reintegration. Despite this, employers are too often absent from national veteran discussions. It is notable that most witnesses at today's hearing represent nonprofit organizations. While these voices are essential, the absence of private-sector employers highlights a critical gap. Sustainable veteran success depends not only on care and community but also on employment and economic opportunity. Employers must be engaged as full partners, not treated as beneficiaries of public programs.
- Too often, our ecosystem defaults to case-management models built for high-risk populations. While such one-on-one support is vital for veterans in crisis, it is not the right approach for the majority who transition with strength, motivation, and valuable skills. We do not assign case managers to every college graduate or

[1] Rand, "**Federal and Nonprofit Support for Veterans Transitioning to the Civilian Workforce**", https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RBA1363-3.html
[2] U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Current Employment Statistics – Employment by Major Industry Sector,* September 2025.https://www.bls.gov/emp/tables/employment-by-major-industry-sector.htm

civilian jobseeker, yet veterans are often placed into systems that assume dependency rather than capability.

- Innovation rarely comes from within government or traditional nonprofit structures. Both play indispensable roles in service delivery, but they are not designed to move at the speed of technology or market change. By necessity, government systems emphasize accountability, oversight, and process. Nonprofits, even those with strong missions, are often constrained by limited funding, grant cycles, and restricted-use dollars that leave little room for experimentation or product development. By contrast, **the private sector is built to innovate** - to iterate quickly, scale efficiently, and measure outcomes through performance and value creation. Private companies have both the technical expertise and incentive to build sustainable, scalable solutions that can complement and extend public programs. In the veteran ecosystem, this innovation gap is clear: while thousands of nonprofits deliver direct services, very few have the resources to invest in the technology infrastructure, analytics, and user experience improvements that make large-scale coordination possible.

Indeed, the needs of transitioning service members and veterans evolve at the pace of private-sector opportunity, not government timelines.

At 50strong, we begin from this premise: veterans are strong talent. They deserve modern tools that treat them as empowered jobseekers and contributors. Our platforms enable veterans and spouses to opt in to what they need - whether connecting with a mentor, exploring employer-specific events, or discovering local job opportunities - without being assigned a case manager. This approach respects their autonomy, scales efficiently, and aligns with other strong civilian workforce segments.

We see daily that when employers are positioned as partners, not passive participants, outcomes improve dramatically. Our platform enables companies to build direct relationships with military-connected talent - through mentoring, learning, and data-driven outreach - while helping veterans bypass redundant intake systems and connect straight to opportunity.

Importantly, the strongest validation comes from employers themselves. In the attached appendices, you will find direct statements from our partners. I urge the Committee to consider these employer perspectives as evidence that when business needs align with veteran strengths, everyone wins - veterans, employers, and the American economy.

Insight #2: Education is a Pathway to Employment, not the Destination

It is important to note that the federal government invests more than $13 billion each year across across 45 programs that are overseen by 11 federal agencies - all of which are intended for military transition support.[3] However, GAO identified that "more than 97 % of federal expenditures were allocated to educational assistance across the 45 programs".[4]

Therefore, we must consider outcomes of this investment. As I shared with the House Veterans Affairs SubCommittee on Economic Opportunity earlier this year[5]:

"Military transition must account for the fact that half of all veterans[6] enroll in school after leaving the military 12 - highlighting an "extended transition". Yet, despite the very large federal investment, there is no at-scale support for translating their military skills when they enter the workforce, actual support offered via schools may be severely limited and there also is minimal reporting of outcomes.…We can only fulfill our national promise of a strong post-military future if employment is an aligned outcome and if we honor the use of these funds to support those it intends to support."

Overall, we are doing a wonderful job of getting veterans into school. But we must also then get them into the workforce. Without meaningful translation to a job on the backend, this means that veterans may use their hard-earned benefits with little benefit. This is particularly troublesome for over-marketed areas such as cybersecurity.[7]

As noted in prior hearings, veterans require more than tuition assistance or enrollment services - they need tailored career support and institutional investment in student veteran success. And given that there are now 979,183 students using GI Bill benefits across 36,794 VA-approved programs[8], we must do it at-scale and quickly and we must recognize that these students are generally long-past the window of support offered by

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[3] Rand, "Federal Programs to Assist Military-to-Civilian Employment Transitions", https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1363-12.html
[4] Rand, "Federal Programs to Assist Military-to-Civilian Employment Transitions", https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1363-12.html
[5] Written Statement of Kandi Tillman, U.S. House of Representatives, https://www.congress.gov/119/meeting/house/118028/witnesses/HHRG-119-VR10-Wstate-TillmanK-20250325.pdf
[6] Pew Research, https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2019/09/10/the-transition-to-post-military-employment/
[7] LinkedIn post by Kandi Tillman, https://www.linkedin.com/posts/kanditillman_re-cyber-jobs-for-veterans-something-activity-7384612011344584704-LJZ8
[8] Department of Veterans Affairs https://www.va.gov/education/gi-bill-comparison-tool/, under "Download data for all schools"

typical "transition" programs. For example, at 50strong, we find that more than 50% of those that join separated prior to 2024. Many of these are student veterans or recent college graduates now seeking strong(er) employment.

Importantly, there is minimal direction provided to schools on how they use VA funds once students are enrolled. We believe that any school accepting VA funds should have a responsibility in providing veteran-focused support services to ensure outcomes & employment while also acknowledging that they know what needs their students may have.

As an example, the California Community College System offers a model example. They have established Veterans Resource Center minimum standards and are seeking increased state funding to expand support services including mental health support, credit for prior learning from military service and coordinated career guidance for 70,000 military-affiliated students across their 116 colleges.[9]

Getting veterans through the classroom door is only the beginning. Ensuring they exit into meaningful, sustainable careers is the true measure of success.

For Congressional consideration:

1. **Mandate that ANY training or education program funded by congress includes employers as critical, early stakeholders in policy planning.**
2. **Ensure TAP Education tracks are inclusive of employers vs focusing on education partners that may only have an enrollment-focused intent.**
3. **Ask VA to establish an employer advisory council to support employment outcomes for PGIB beneficiaries and any new education-focused programs, including VETTEC.**
4. **Require that institutions of higher education receiving VA funds invest meaningfully in student veteran support services.**
   Veterans bring unique strengths but also unique needs. Schools that receive GI Bill funding should demonstrate measurable investment in veteran resource centers, counseling, and career preparation - ensuring that success extends beyond enrollment to actual workforce outcomes.

[9] California Community Colleges, 2026-27 Board of Governors Budget and Legislative Request, https://www.cccco.edu/-/media/CCCCO-Website/docs/general/2026-27-shared-advocacy-request-bog-approved-a11y.pdf

Insight #3: Industry-Driven Training-to-Employment Pathways are Key

Over the past five years, programs like **DoD SkillBridge**[10] have fundamentally changed the landscape of veteran employment by demonstrating the power of direct employer engagement before separation.

As I shared with the House Veterans Affairs Committee in March:

"...SkillBridge has indeed revolutionized employer participation in military transition. SkillBridge directly enables Military Talent Teams to offer training toward strong employment and to internally demonstrate to hiring teams the capability of military talent in a way that is aligned to their workforce needs, thus reducing their risk in hiring talent and/or creating pathways that may not have been possible in direct hiring efforts…Everyday we hear about strong outcomes that are directly enabled via SkillBridge, helping transitioning service members get into roles they would have never even considered if not for this program."[11]

As one strong example, one of our closest partners, **Lowe's**, has established a best-practice SkillBridge program that enables fellowship opportunities at any of their locations across the country. Their 12-week program, which begins at the start of each month, is designed to help service members bring their skills and military experience to leadership positions in the civilian sector, regardless of their education level. Last year, 90% of their fellows received a full-time job offer at the end of their fellowship.[7] *This means that a service member returning home to Oshkosh, Wisconsin or Bedford, New Hampshire or Buckeye, Arizona after serving a 4-year enlistment has a pathway to a bright future in their own community on Day 1 of their post-Active Duty service.*

I'll also highlight another strong employer **Cushman & Wakefield**. They are a global commercial real estate services B2B company and a much lesser known entity to the military. They utilize SkillBridge to train service members into virtually any role from a variety of military occupations that don't often have a direct civilian equivalent. *They've taken on more than 100 Skillbridge interns into over 30 different types of roles with a 90%+ full time offer rate.*

Source: Written Statement of Kandi Tillman, March 2025[12]

[10] DoD SkillBridge, https://skillbridge.osd.mil
[11] Written Statement of Kandi Tillman, U.S. House of Representatives, https://www.congress.gov/119/meeting/house/118028/witnesses/HHRG-119-VR10-Wstate-TillmanK-20250325.pdf
[12] Written Statement of Kandi Tillman, U.S. House of Representatives, https://www.congress.gov/119/meeting/house/118028/witnesses/HHRG-119-VR10-Wstate-TillmanK-20250325.pdf

Another 50strong win at HCA! Transitioning USN female with no healthcare background who is now on her pathway to become a nurse at HCA in a Skillbridge capacity. Starts in November and will move to a full time role in January. She is now an official student at HCA's Galen College of Nursing.

Source: Shared on LinkedIn via 50strong Partner, HCA Healthcare, Nov 2025[13]

Similarly, the **Military Spouse Career Accelerator Pilot (MSCAP)**[14] has shown how structured, employer-driven opportunities can accelerate workforce participation for military families. According to DoD, this pilot yielded "...more than 1,200 fellowship placements and an 86% employment offer rate..."[15] and is now a permanent program.

These initiatives prove that when employers are positioned as active partners - not passive recipients of talent - outcomes improve dramatically. **The lessons learned from these successes should now be applied more broadly to support veterans *after* separation, ensuring that all who served have access to clear, employer-aligned pathways to civilian employment and advancement.**

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[13] Post on LinkedIn, https://www.linkedin.com/posts/kanditillman_happy-monday-i-love-getting-texts-like-this-activity-7391118142904782848-WbrF?utm_source=share&utm_medium=member_desktop&rcm=ACoAAAB9h9UB6ZabJxsVjYpS99MaJSEzlRkfCQE

[14] DoD Spouse Education and Career Opportunities, https://myseco.militaryonesource.mil/portal/article/military-spouse-career-accelerator-pilot

[15] DoD Spouse Education and Career Opportunities, https://myseco.militaryonesource.mil/portal/article/military-spouse-career-accelerator-pilot

As an example, Senator Kelly and Senator Rounds recently introduced legislation to support military medics into private industry pathways, the "MEDIC Careers Act of 2025"[16]. I was pleased to offer support toward dialogue on any smart bipartisan solutions:

> The 'Medic Education and Deployment into Civilian Careers Act of 2025' presents a timely opportunity to review barriers that may exist in today's workforce and to provide a pilot mechanism to explore smart solutions," **said Kandi Tillman, Co-Founder of 50strong.** "By enabling military professionals to practice in roles that reflect the scope of their military healthcare training, we can strengthen nationwide healthcare access, especially in underserved and rural areas, while ensuring transitioning veterans and their families are connected to meaningful careers as civilians. I applaud Senator Kelly for introducing this legislation and I look forward to meaningful, bipartisan dialogue that will move it forward."

Source: Senator Mark Kelly press release[17]

For Congressional consideration:

1. **Establish a pilot to evaluate the outcomes of a paid training program for veterans that have recently separated and that were not able to participate in a SkillBridge opportunity prior to separation.** While SkillBridge has proven highly effective for active-duty service members, there remains a gap for those who have already separated but still need structured training pathways to gain civilian experience. A targeted pilot could extend paid, employer-sponsored training opportunities to recent veterans within their first 12 months after separation, helping bridge the final step from service to sustained employment. *The pilot should be for similar funding & duration as what was originally approved for MSCAP.*
2. **Modernize the VA Work-Study Program to include private-sector employers as potential "employers" for student veterans.**
   Currently, VA work-study opportunities are limited to roles within government or approved nonprofits and educational institutions. Expanding eligibility to include **civilian private employers** - particularly in high-demand industries - would give student veterans hands-on experience that is directly relevant to their field of study and increases employability upon graduation.
3. **Renew DoL VETS's focus on apprenticeship and earn-and-learn pathways.**
   Apprenticeships are a proven, debt-free bridge between education and employment. Expanding veteran participation across emerging sectors such as skilled trades, technology, healthcare, and advanced manufacturing can

[16] MEDIC Careers Act of 2025, https://www.congress.gov/bill/119th-congress/senate-bill/2673
[17] "Kelly, Rounds Introduce Bipartisan Bill to Help Military Medics Transition into Civilian Health Care Careers",https://www.kelly.senate.gov/newsroom/press-releases/kelly-rounds-introduce-bipartisan-bill-to-help-military-medics-transition-into-civilian-health-care-careers/

strengthen both our workforce and our economy while honoring the skills veterans already possess.

Insight #4: Empowering the Ecosystem in 2025 and Beyond

Veterans are among America's most valuable civic and economic assets. When veterans succeed after service, the benefits extend far beyond one household - they ripple through workplaces, schools, and neighborhoods, strengthening the social and economic fabric of the nation.

A successful transition is not just about a paycheck; it is about purpose, belonging, and connection. Yet too often, veterans are treated only as beneficiaries of programs rather than as contributors to their communities and the workforce. We must reframe the conversation to recognize veterans as **civic multipliers** - individuals whose continued engagement enriches American society.

We recently built and launched **50strong Mentor** to make that civic exchange easy, scalable, and inclusive. 50strong Mentor allows any civilian - from a Fortune 500 employee to a local small-business professional - to volunteer a few minutes of time to connect with a military-affiliated jobseeker. They are simple, human conversations - fifteen minutes of career guidance, encouragement, or shared experience - that often have a lasting impact.

This model has unlocked a new dimension of employee & veteran volunteerism. Employers across industries use **50strong Mentor** to:

- Activates their employees' goodwill in a meaningful way.
- Builds internal pride and cohesion around service to veterans and families.
- Creates tangible bridges between civilian professionals and military talent.
- Bridges a cultural divide as it is inclusive of veterans and non-veteran mentors.

To further strengthen this ecosystem and as a continued committed to driving social impact above all else, 50strong will soon release a **no-cost version of 50strong Mentor** designed specifically for nonprofits and higher-education partners. This initiative enables community and campus leaders to launch their own branded mentoring hubs within minutes, invite participants, automate scheduling, and access engagement analytics - all through an easy-to-use platform.

This Committee has an opportunity to accelerate progress by supporting models that strengthen - not duplicate - the work already happening across America's veteran

ecosystem. The next phase of innovation in veteran employment will not come from creating more disconnected programs, but from **empowering the connectors** - nonprofits, colleges, and employers - that are already driving results in their communities.

When Congress champions approaches that unite public accountability with private innovation, we move closer to fulfilling the full promise of transition: a connected ecosystem where government ensures access, nonprofits deliver trust, education builds capability, and employers create lasting opportunity.

That is how we strengthen the success of veterans, our workforce and our nation.

Appendix: Statement Provided by Cushman & Wakefield

as shared by
Matt Disher, Executive Director of Military & Veterans Programs

As a leading global commercial real estate services business that provides services to other businesses, we are a much lesser known entity to the military than other consumer-facing brands. Yet we hire veterans into technical positions, among other roles, often by finding smart ways to engage with them directly.

Cushman & Wakefield leverages post-military talent by valuing not only technical skills but also leadership, planning, and operational expertise. We manage 6 billion square feet of property that demands rapid, on-demand staffing so traditional hiring pipelines and manual relationships with government career solutions can be ineffective due to their inability to be reactive.

To meet this need, we've built a best-in-class program featuring a dedicated outreach team, targeted digital campaigns, SkillBridge and fellowship offerings, employee mentoring and direct intake with our MVP team. This human-first approach ensures skilled trades professionals - often absent from traditional channels - are identified, engaged, and connected quickly.

Our targeted digital outreach methods are reaching millions of veteran and military-related households and career seekers each year, gaining tens of millions of unique impressions - allowing us to complement the traditional methods of outreach like career fairs, local/regional veteran service offices that can be underequipped and hard to manage across a national footprint.

Until military service provides a full, quantifiable and adapted record of experience, employers must remain proactive in recognizing and translating veterans' broad capabilities into career opportunities which requires a dedicated and often manual approach to this very human process.

Appendix: Statement Provided by Fiserv

as shared by
Meg Hendricks, Vice President, Head of Military and Veteran Affairs
and
Adam Schmit, Vice President, Talent Acquisition

At Fiserv, we believe military talent brings unmatched discipline, adaptability, and leadership to the workplace. Our talent strategy focuses on creating nontraditional pathways into high-impact roles, particularly in Technology and Project Management. Through targeted programs, apprenticeships, and partnerships, we equip transitioning service members with the skills needed to thrive in the private sector.

By investing in veterans through training, tech apprenticeships, and direct employment, we're not only strengthening our workforce — we're helping shape the future of financial services.

One of the key challenges we face is the perception that veteran employment is only addressed as servicemembers approach their transition—typically within the last year of service or after they have already transitioned. It is imperative that we foster greater collaboration between corporations, Veteran Service Organizations, and the Department of Defense to provide guidance and options from the moment an individual enters military service.

Every servicemember will eventually transition, whether after four years or thirty. Therefore, ensuring they have access to comprehensive information throughout their service is critical.

Appendix: Statement Provided by Oracle

as shared by
Melinda Jaffar, U.S. Military Talent Lead

At Oracle, we are deeply committed to "veteran employment." One of the most significant areas we're seeing alignment is within our data centers - with Abilene, TX now actively hiring and several new locations recently announced. These roles don't require a degree. Instead, they rely on the technical and transferable skills that so many service members and military spouses already have. We are projecting to hire nearly 1000 vets in the next year just for our data centers. That is just over the next year, the demand will continue so we will need a steady pipeline that is always on.
Which leads me to, the challenge isn't a lack of ability - it's awareness. Too often, service members transitioning out of the military don't know what to look for or how to align their experience to in-demand civilian careers. So, not only do we need broad awareness, we need workforce-driven training pathways.
We've built two approaches to meet talent where they are:

1. Direct Hire: An internal onboarding program for those with IT or data center experience ready to step into a role with minimal upskilling.
2. Train-to-Hire Program: we've partnered with Washington Vets2Tec at St. Martins University for those whose backgrounds don't yet align, providing structured training and mentorship to bridge the gap.

Appendix: Statement Provided by Verizon

as shared by
Michael McCoy, Head of Military and Veteran Recruitment Programs

On behalf of Verizon, we express our gratitude for the opportunity to support the impactful and meaningful work of this Committee. Verizon proudly champions members of the Armed Forces, Veterans, and military families through dedicated hiring initiatives, strategic workforce development partnerships, and direct technology solutions provided to the Department of Defense and veteran entrepreneurs.

Currently, over 6,000 veterans, reservists, and military spouses are employed by Verizon. These individuals have been onboarded through robust military recruiting programs such as Skillbridge, our proprietary apprenticeship programs, and our everyday recruitment efforts, recognizing their exceptional skills and experience. We firmly believe that structured talent pipelines for critical talent segments create opportunities to highlight the unique expertise and experience our service members contribute to the workforce.

The establishment of upskilling and credentialing programs ensures that access to today's digital economy is attainable for service members and veterans across all generations. We are proud to have collaborated with organizations such as the Wounded Warrior Project, Hiring Our Heroes and 50strong to extend these programs to a significant number of veterans within your districts, communities, and nationwide.

Further investment in upskilling programs, apprenticeship pathways, and transition initiatives will enable Verizon to continue leveraging this tremendously talented community and foster meaningful careers. Concurrently, it will allow us to persist in developing the essential tools and technology required by our service members, the Department of Veterans Affairs, and the entire military-connected community.

Thank you for your consideration of this statement, and for your continued support of this committee's endeavors.

Appendix: Statement Provided by Lowe's Companies Inc.

as shared by
Michael Piper, Sr. Manager, Early and Emerging Talent

At Lowe's, we view the military community as one of our vital talent pipelines, strengthening our workforce and driving business performance. Nearly 26,000 of our associates are veterans, service members, or military spouses. More than 11 percent of Lowe's 2024 new hires came from the military community. Military experience brings the technical and leadership skills that our business depends on. We are focused on translating those capabilities into career pathways that meet real labor market needs and also help members of the military community build successful careers.

Our approach centers on skills-based hiring and workforce development, not credentials alone. Through on-the-job training and the Lowe's SkillBridge Fellowship, we provide structured entry points into retail management, supply chain, and IT and technical careers. In 2024, 90 percent of SkillBridge fellowships were store-based, 95 percent of participants received a full-time offer following completion, and 80 percent were enlisted service members transitioning directly into civilian careers. These pathways align talent supply with operational demand, helping Lowe's close workforce gaps while creating lasting career opportunities for the military community.

This is more than a social commitment; it is a business imperative. By investing in the military community, we are advancing a workforce defined by skill and dependability that supports Lowe's long-term growth and advances the future of the skilled trades sector through the Lowe's Foundation.

Appendix: Statement Provided by Lowe's Foundation

as shared by
Betsy Conway, Director, Lowe's Foundation

The Lowe's Foundation has committed $50 million over five years to prepare 50,000 people for skilled trades careers, a critical investment in addressing America's widening skilled labor gap. This commitment is focused on expanding access to training programs, fostering alternative career pathways, and ensuring that underserved communities have opportunities to pursue sustainable careers in trades such as electrical, plumbing, HVAC, and carpentry.

As part of this initiative, the Lowe's Foundation partnered with the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation's Hiring Our Heroes to launch the Skilled Trades Academy. The Academy provides members of the military community, including transitioning service members, veterans, and military spouses, with hands-on training, industry-recognized credentials, and direct connections to employers. Its goal is to bridge the gap between military experience and civilian career opportunities by equipping participants with both the technical skills and the career readiness needed to thrive in high-demand trades.

Through these efforts, the Lowe's Foundation is helping build a stronger, more resilient workforce while honoring the service of military families and supporting their transition into meaningful civilian careers.

November 10, 2025
Statement for the Record
prepared by
Sidney E. Goodfriend
Founder and Chairman, American Corporate Partners

U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs
November 5, 2025
"A Grateful Nation: Maximizing Veterans' Success after Service"

Chairman Moran, Ranking Member Blumenthal, and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to share how American Corporate Partners (ACP) combats underemployment, one Veteran and Spouse at a time.[1]

ACP's mentorship program empowers Veterans and Spouses to achieve their full career potential. Simply finding a job is not enough. ACP helps them find the *right* job.

ACP bridges the gap between the military and civilian employment sectors by providing year-long customized mentorships at no cost to post-9/11 transitioning Service Members, Veterans, and Military Spouses. Some are entering the civilian workforce for the first time. Others are mid-career and seeking advancement. Others seek to start new businesses. All seek *meaningful* employment.

ACP mentorships are tailored for each Protégé and Mentor. ACP staff carefully pair Protégés with experienced professionals in corporate America according to each Protégé's needs and goals. Overall, more than 26,000 business leaders from more than 1,800 companies across industries have volunteered as ACP Mentors. Many are multi-time Mentors. Only one-third are former military. The majority are civilians like myself who did not serve but desire to thank those who did.

ACP staff support and monitor each pair throughout the year. We also offer customized support for service-disabled Veterans, women Veterans, Military Spouses, and Protégés interested in starting a small business. To date, nearly 40,000 Protégés have completed ACP's Mentorship program, and we currently have more than 5,100 active Mentor-Protégé pairs.

ACP Protégés obtain better paying jobs and have far better than average retention rates. That financial stability and sense of purpose have improved their mental health and contributed to the overall well-being of their families.

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[1] ACP is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit with top ratings for transparency from Charity Navigator and Candid.

Veteran and Military Spouse Underemployment and Attrition Remain Problems.

During the hearing, the Committee examined how although hiring rates for Veterans have improved significantly over time, underemployment remains a problem for Veterans and Military Spouses. The Committee heard testimony about how underemployment and job turnover contribute to increased dependence on federal Veterans benefits programs and unnecessary financial strain on Veterans and their families.

The Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness at Penn State (Penn State) studied post-9/11 Veterans' transitions to civilian life. Penn State found that 61% of Veterans reported being underemployed at jobs that did not match their skills or knowledge.[2] A 2023 U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation survey revealed that Veterans reported two top challenges in their transition to civilian life: difficulty finding job opportunities that align with their skill sets and adapting to the civilian workplace culture.[3] Attrition is also a byproduct of an unsuccessful transition to civilian employment. A 2016 U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation survey found that on average, only 56% of Veterans stayed with the same company for at least one year.[4]

In addition to Military Spouse unemployment staying stagnant at 21%,[5] Military Spouses also report struggles with underemployment and barriers to career progression. In another U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation survey conducted in 2022, 88% of Military Spouses reported that the military lifestyle makes it difficult for them to find appropriate jobs at their experience and/or education level, and 90% reported negative impacts on their careers.[6]

Further, certain groups face even greater barriers to transitioning to meaningful civilian employment. Penn State found that nearly 20% of post-9/11 Veterans were not fully transitioned 6.5 years post-military separation, and that "female veterans, veterans of color, and those from the enlisted ranks are more likely to experience transition difficulties."[7]

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[2] Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness at Penn State, Statement for the Record, House Committee on Veterans' Affairs hearing, *Strengthening the Transition Assistance Program: Exploring Outcomes to Improve the Transition to Civilian Life* (June 24, 2025) https://docs.house.gov/meetings/VR/VR00/20250624/118404/HHRG-119-VR00-20250624-SD003.pdf (summarizing findings and recommendations from several Penn State studies on post-9/11 Veterans).

[3] https://www.hiringourheroes.org/resources/veterans-in-the-workplace-2023/

[4] https://www.hiringourheroes.org/resources/veterans-in-the-workplace-2016/. *See also* https://www.hireheroesusa.org/improving-retention-rates-among-veteran-employees/ (citing 2023 Korn Ferry finding that nearly half of all veterans leave their first civilian job within the first year).

[5] Department of Defense, *2022 Demographics Report: Profile of the Military Community*, page 137, https://download.militaryonesource.mil/12038/MOS/Reports/2022-demographics-report.pdf

[6] U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, *Unemployment and Underemployment Continue to Plague Military Spouses and Affect Financial Stability* (September 15, 2022), https://www.uschamberfoundation.org/workforce/unemployment-and-underemployment-continue-plague-military-spouses-and-affect-financial

[7] Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness at Penn State, Statement for the Record, House Committee on Veterans' Affairs hearing: *Strengthening the Transition Assistance Program: Exploring Outcomes to Improve the Transition to Civilian Life* (June 24, 2025), https://docs.house.gov/meetings/VR/VR00/20250624/118404/HHRG-119-VR00-20250624-SD003.pdf

Gaps in Federal Transition Programs Are Being Filled by Nonprofits.

The Committee also examined how nonprofit organizations supplement and address gaps in federal transition programs. We are grateful to the Committee for amplifying these private sector efforts to combat underemployment.

A 2024 RAND study found that despite federal spending of more than $13 billion a year on military transition programs, 95% of the funding supported education programs, and very few federal transition programs are dedicated to helping Service Members and Veterans translate their military skills to the civilian labor market or connect with civilian employers.[8] RAND also studied how "high-activity" nonprofits offering Veteran employment assistance, including ACP, fill in federal program gaps.[9]

One such gap in federal transition programs is mentoring, which research shows improves Veteran employment and retention. Penn State researchers found:

> "Veterans who engaged with employment programs that used a mentor coach in career planning, translated military skills to civilian employment opportunities, helped veterans develop interviewing skills, or taught entrepreneurship had a higher likelihood of gaining employment, especially previously unemployed veterans. For instance, at 9-months post-military separation, veterans who worked with a coach/mentor were 84% more likely to obtain a job."

Penn State researchers also found:

> "In terms of finding better jobs over the transition, veterans who received direct instruction on job interviewing were 63% more likely, than veterans who were not using such programs, to leave their current job for a better opportunity within 1 year of leaving the military, and these veterans were three times more likely to leave a current job for a better opportunity within 18 months of leaving military service."[10]

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[8] RAND, *Federal Programs to Assist Military-to-Civilian Employment Transitions* (June 11, 2024), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1363-12.html

[9] RAND, *Federal and Nonprofit Support for Veterans Transitioning to the Civilian Workforce* (Oct. 24, 2024), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RBA1363-3.html

[10] Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness at Penn State, Statement for the Record, House Committee on Veterans' Affairs hearing: *Strengthening the Transition Assistance Program: Exploring Outcomes to Improve the Transition to Civilian Life* (June 24, 2025), https://docs.house.gov/meetings/VR/VR00/20250624/118404/HHRG-119-VR00-20250624-SD003.pdf

ACP Fills the Mentoring Gap in Federal Transition Programs, and the Outcomes Speak to the Power of Mentorship.

ACP has a unique person-to-person philosophy when it comes to combating underemployment. Unlike other programs that provide one-off workshops or only introduce Veterans or Spouses to a catalog of mentors online, ACP is, as far as we know, the only mentoring program for transitioning Service Members, Veterans, and Military Spouses that is fully customized, fully supported, and fully monitored by staff throughout the mentorship. ACP Protégés build relationships with their Mentors over time, and the support they receive evolves as their goals and needs evolve. Further, as this relationship develops, ACP Mentors often introduce their Protégés to other business professionals in their network.

ACP ensures successful mentorships by carefully pairing Protégés and Mentors based on their expressed goals, needs, and preferences, as well as the Mentor's own skills and experiences in their industry. This highly personalized pairing considers factors like compatible personality traits, gender preferences, Veteran status, and even shared hobbies. We further customize the mentorship to meet the specific requirements of populations such as service-disabled Veterans, women Veterans, Military Spouses, and those interested in starting small businesses. Finally, for ACP Protégés, as well as any applicant who opts out of the full program, we offer informational calls with Mentors in our network. In the 17 years since our inception, our Protégé satisfaction rate has never been less than 96%.

Unlike many private sector employment assistance programs, ACP imposes no education or leadership experience requirements for Protégé applicants. Further, in 2024, 83% of ACP's Veteran applicants were from enlisted ranks, 44% had no 4-year degree, roughly half were people of color, and 44% had a self-disclosed service-related disability.

Despite the increased challenges these applicants face, and the well-documented barriers to Veteran and Military Spouse employment and advancement that persist in the job market, ACP's nearly 40,000 Protégé alumni since 2008 (including more than 2,500 Military Spouses since 2018) have consistently outperformed their peers who did not receive such support. Our outcomes reveal the power of mentorship in helping them get - and keep - the right job for the right pay.

In 2024, more than 3,000 ACP Protégés obtained meaningful employment during the course of their mentorships. The average starting salary for those Protégés was roughly $90,000.[11] In 7 years of mentorships, average starting salaries for ACP Protégés who got jobs during their mentorships did not fall under $82,000. Further, the average increase in salary for ACP Protégés from January 2024-June 2025 was more than $40,000.

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[11] ACP Protégés are achieving average starting salaries that are higher than participants in other top nonprofit programs, including those programs with education and leadership experience requirements. *See* https://www.hireheroesusa.org/annual-report/ (noting salaries ranging from $54,932 to $69,912) (https://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20251104644031/en/Hire-Heroes-USA-Releases-2025-Top-Jobs-for-Veterans-Report (retrieved November 7, 2025) (noting average starting salary of $72,172).

Finally, regarding retention, ACP data shows that during the course of 5 years of mentorships, more than 80% of ACP Protégés who obtained meaningful employment stayed at their companies for at least one year - higher than the 56% retention rate for the average Veteran.[12]

ACP's Coordinated Outreach Improves Access to Nonprofit Services for Veterans and Spouses, and ACP Expands its Outreach to Provide More Mentorships Every Year.

Throughout the hearing, the Committee examined the importance of coordinated efforts by nonprofits and government agencies to reach transitioning Service Members, Veterans, and Spouses. The hearing demonstrated that Veterans and their families confront an overwhelming array of options for transition assistance that can be very confusing. Coordinated outreach efforts are important to help them navigate the maze of resources, leading to higher and more successful utilization of such private programs and better outcomes.

ACP maintains a robust communications and outreach strategy to amplify its mentorship program, engaging large audiences across multiple platforms. In 2024, ACP gave more than 600 outreach presentations. To reach military and Veteran communities where they are, ACP coordinates with nonprofit allies including Syracuse's D'Aniello Institute for Veterans and Military Families (IVMF), USO, Combined Arms, RecruitMilitary, AllegiantVets, Hiring Our Heroes, and Hire Heroes USA, as well as federal, state, and local government agencies.

More than 200,000 Service Members separate from the military every year,[13] and ACP provides education and outreach to these transitioning Service Members across the nation and from all service branches to supplement other programs offering support outside of their chain of command. They include Service Members who are going through the Transition Assistance Program (TAP), and those undergoing orientation before beginning their Skillbridge programs. (ACP encourages Service Members to participate in Skillbridge as well as our mentorship program.) Further, ACP has assisted Service Members and their Spouses as one of nine original Department of Labor partners in the Employment Navigator and Partnership Program since 2021. Similarly, the Department of Veterans Affairs features ACP in its newsletter as a respected service provider on a quarterly basis.

ACP also hosts LinkedIn webinars twice weekly that reach more than 85,000 followers (not including reposts). These sessions frequently feature experts from our corporate partners who cover diverse topics, such as successfully transitioning into specific industries and marketing military skills. Furthermore, ACP contributes monthly content to publications like *GI Jobs* and *Search and Employ*. And our comprehensive newsletter reaches approximately

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[12] ACP Protégés also have greater retention rates than at least one other top nonprofit program. *See* https://www.hireheroesusa.org/improving-retention-rates-among-veteran-employees/ (retrieved November 7, 2025) (noting that 65.68% remain employed after one year).

[13] https://www.performance.gov/cx/life-experiences/navigating-the-transition-to-civilian-life/

120,000 inboxes, delivering vital information including upcoming events, Protégé and Mentor spotlights, and job openings from our corporate partners.

Due to ACP's outreach efforts, including those in coordination with our public and private partners, the number of Protégé applications we receive grows by thousands every year. In 2024, ACP received 20,300 applications, up from 15,414 in 2023. ACP continues to expand its outreach and build capacity to help more Veterans and Spouses obtain meaningful employment. For example, ACP recently partnered with the Commonwealth of Virginia and the Virginia Chamber of Commerce to provide 1,000 mentorships for Virginia Veterans and Spouses.

Corporate America Helps Combat Veteran and Spouse Underemployment, But Not Every Company Shares the Commitment.

During the hearing, the George W. Bush Institute's witness testified about the importance of corporate America recognizing the attributes that Veterans and their families bring to their jobs. When companies develop their talents and appropriately compensate them for their contributions, the companies' bottom lines and the overall economy benefit. This perspective is becoming more widely accepted but hardly universal.

Unfortunately, many top companies still see Veteran hiring as a burdensome obligation or a charitable gesture, not a competitive advantage. However, there is an established business case for companies to invest in hiring, retaining, and advancing Veterans and Spouses. They are a valuable resource in workforce development. We hope that this Committee, and Congress as a whole, will further explore how companies can more fully integrate Veteran and Spouse hiring and advancement into their human capital strategies.

ACP believes that its corporate partners set the gold standard for military and Veteran hiring and corporate responsibility to their communities. Our mentorship program is funded in large part by more than 100 such corporate partners. These top companies also provide roughly 65% of our volunteer Mentor force. Of ACP's more than 26,000 business professionals serving as Mentors, many are C-suite executives who have repeatedly volunteered their time for multiple mentorships. ACP also commends companies that participate in other organizations' Veteran and Spouse employment assistance programs.

ACP is helping corporate America recognize and fully leverage the unique talents Veterans and Military Spouses bring to their companies. Through events and partnerships, we facilitate the sharing of best practices in hiring, retention, and advancement, and encourage new ways of valuing military experience and credentials alongside traditional education. The success of our Protégés continues to demonstrate the tremendous impact they have in the workplace.

Conclusion

On behalf of ACP, I commend the Committee for holding this hearing to not only highlight diverse organizations working to eliminate Veteran and Spouse underemployment, but to examine which approaches truly work based on empirical evidence.

While Veteran hiring rates have improved, underemployment remains a drain on our Veterans, their families, and federal resources. The data is undeniable: targeted, long-term mentorship works. American Corporate Partners (ACP) fills a critical gap in federal transition programs by providing customized, fully-supported, year-long mentorships. This direct, professional intervention leads to superior outcomes, including high average starting salaries, and significantly higher job retention rates for our Protégés.

We urge this Committee to continue recognizing and championing high-impact nonprofit models like ACP's. We also urge this Committee to encourage all of corporate America to fully integrate Veteran and Spouse advancement into their core business strategy.

Our Veterans and Military Spouses have earned successful and meaningful careers. By supporting proven programs like ACP's mentorship program, we ensure successful transitions from military life and thriving civilian employment.

Statement for the Record

Paul Shipley
National Commander
AMVETS

For a Hearing of the
Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs

November 5, 2025

Chairman Moran, Ranking Member Blumenthal, and distinguished members of the Committee:

On behalf of AMVETS, one of the nation's largest and most inclusive congressionally chartered veterans service organizations (VSOs), we appreciate the opportunity to submit this statement for the record for today's hearing, "A Grateful Nation: Maximizing Veterans' Success after Service."

For more than 80 years, AMVETS has served as a voice for those who wore the uniform, grounded in the belief that America's obligation to its veterans is both moral and enduring. The federal government maintains a sacred covenant to care for those who have borne the battle, yet that covenant alone cannot meet every need faced by veterans and their families.

Every veteran's story is unique, and so is the path they follow after service. Those paths may begin in uniform, but the journey home depends on more than government programs alone. It requires the care, compassion, and commitment of the communities that welcome them back.

While government programs are essential, they are not sufficient to ensure lasting success after service. America's civil society, including community organizations, philanthropies, and volunteers, fills the space that bureaucracy cannot reach. After every major conflict, Americans have come together to help veterans rebuild their lives. From the founding of the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) in 1866, a pioneering fraternal organization of Union Civil War veterans that helped establish Memorial Day and laid the foundation for modern veterans' advocacy, to the creation of AMVETS in 1944 and the rise of post-9/11 veterans' organizations, America has built a proud tradition of stepping forward to serve those who served us in uniform.

A Rudderless Ship

Today's VA is the product of decades of well-intentioned legislative change, but the result is often a sprawling system burdened by complexity, inefficiency, and a lack of strategic focus. Senior VA officials, via Congress and Executive action, are frequently asked to implement new programs and services without sufficient consideration for outcomes, return on investment, or long-term coherence. Few private-sector organizations could operate effectively under such conditions without clear goals, performance metrics, or a unified strategy.

For these reasons, AMVETS has long advocated for the creation of a National Veterans Strategy. This effort, which has been central to our legislative priorities for several years, would bring much-needed clarity and direction to the VA and to the broader ecosystem of federal, state, local, and nonprofit actors who work to support veterans. By aligning efforts around shared goals and measurable outcomes, a National Veterans Strategy would promote coordination, reduce inefficiencies, and create a "no wrong door" environment where veterans can access the proper support, regardless of their point of entry into the system.

Coordinated Community Support and Navigation

A veteran's success after service often depends on timely, personalized support that meets them where they are. While federal programs provide a critical foundation, the reality is that most veterans rely on local nonprofits, civic groups, and private-sector partners to access essential services, including employment coaching, financial education, mental wellness support, and peer mentorship. These resources are often grounded in trust, shared experience, and cultural understanding that large institutions cannot always replicate.

Yet this abundance of goodwill has also created a crowded and confusing landscape. With an estimated 45,000 veteran-serving organizations operating across the country, many veterans struggle to know where to turn for support. Better alignment and coordination are urgently needed to reduce duplication, close gaps, and ensure veterans do not fall through the cracks. AMVETS supports stronger public-private collaboration, greater transparency, and the development of navigation tools that help veterans connect with trusted, practical resources in their communities.

One promising example is Combined Arms, which has built a nationally recognized model for streamlining veteran support. By uniting local service providers on a shared digital platform, Combined Arms helps communities offer coordinated, efficient, and measurable support. Their model enhances visibility, strengthens accountability, and facilitates easier access to care for veterans, eliminating confusion and delays. AMVETS believes this kind of community integration and infrastructure should be strengthened and replicated, particularly in underserved and rural areas where the need is greatest.

Mental Wellness and Suicide Prevention

Mental health and suicide prevention remain among the most urgent needs for veterans and their families, and this issue has been at the top of AMVETS' legislative priorities for years. As we discussed above, VA mental health might be the largest appropriation that has ballooned over the past two decades, while suicide has risen. VA has been held unaccountable for evidence-driven outcomes and accountability.

The Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act and the Staff Sergeant Parker Gordon Fox Suicide Prevention Grant Program both reflect Congress's understanding that community organizations are uniquely positioned to save lives. We strongly urge Congress to reauthorize and expand this life-saving program as quickly as possible.

Programs, such as the Boulder Crest Foundation's post-traumatic growth (PTG) model, have demonstrated measurable success by meeting veterans where they are with innovative, evidence-driven care. AMVETS supports reauthorizing and strengthening the Fox Grant Program to enable more communities to offer these lifesaving services.

At the same time, AMVETS believes that the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) must adopt a more structured, proactive, and veteran-centered approach to mental wellness. Every service member leaving the military should have the tools to manage stress, build relationships, and find purpose after service. Shifting the focus from treating illness to cultivating wellness would not only save lives but also help veterans rediscover meaning and fulfillment in the next chapter of their journey.

Unfortunately, VA continues to spend billions on known poor-performing, and often deadly, pharmaceutical interventions, and little if any funding on front-end prevention in the form of proactive wellness outreach and education.

Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) and Invisible Wounds

Traumatic brain injury and related invisible wounds remain some of the most complex and under-addressed challenges facing veterans today. These injuries are often misdiagnosed, misunderstood, or treated too late, with long-term consequences for the veteran and their family. Recent reporting has exposed a growing number of brain injuries among servicemembers deployed to Syria and Iraq, many of them caused not by enemy fire but by cumulative blast exposure from their own artillery and training environments. These are not isolated incidents. They reflect a broader need to modernize how we identify, treat, and prioritize brain injuries across the continuum of service.

The Department of Veterans Affairs operates only five polytrauma centers in the country, leaving large portions of the veteran population without access to advanced neurological care. As a result, private and philanthropic initiatives have stepped up to fill the gap. The Avalon Action Alliance connects veterans to a national network of cost-free treatment programs, including the Marcus Institute for Brain Health in Colorado. These centers deliver intensive, interdisciplinary care designed to treat the full spectrum of neurological, psychological, and physical injury.

Veterans receive comprehensive services at no cost, often with outcomes that far exceed those of traditional systems.

Despite the scale of the problem, congressional oversight of TBI has been limited. The last Veterans' Affairs Committee hearing dedicated solely to TBI took place nearly a decade ago. Since then, the issue has typically been grouped under broader mental health discussions, where it receives insufficient focus. AMVETS respectfully encourages the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee to convene a dedicated hearing on traumatic brain injury. Addressing these wounds requires leadership, innovation, and sustained attention. We must act with the urgency this issue deserves to ensure that no veteran suffering from a brain injury is left without a path to recovery.

Employment and Transition

Meaningful employment is often the cornerstone of a successful transition to civilian life. AMVETS, in partnership with the Call of Duty Endowment, operates career centers that provide individualized support to veterans and their spouses as they navigate the civilian job market. These efforts deliver targeted career guidance, job placement assistance, and résumé support that often exceed the scale or flexibility of federal programs.

AMVETS is also partnering with the Department of Labor's Veterans' Employment and Training Service (DOL-VETS) through the Homeless Veterans' Reintegration Program (HVRP), which operates in Utah and Nevada. This intensive, in-depth initiative serves veterans who are newly released from incarceration, experiencing homelessness, or transitioning off active duty. The program helps participants secure housing, achieve stability, and obtain meaningful employment. By combining housing support, individualized case management, and job placement assistance, HVRP helps veterans rebuild their lives with dignity and purpose.

These collaborations reflect a shared commitment to reinforcing the national message that military service builds highly transferable skills such as leadership, discipline, and adaptability. By helping veterans reenter the workforce with confidence, these programs contribute directly to long-term stability and purpose.

Recognizing that economic security begins with a stable footing, AMVETS is also launching a transitional housing initiative for veteran families in Washington, Pennsylvania. This new facility will provide not only shelter but also comprehensive wraparound services, including employment assistance, health care navigation, and family support. The goal is to help veterans and their families regain momentum after hardship and move toward sustainable independence.

Together, these initiatives reflect AMVETS' broader commitment to supporting veterans beyond discharge paperwork and benefit access. Whether through direct employment services, housing programs, or holistic reintegration efforts, AMVETS remains focused on ensuring that every veteran has the opportunity to build a stable and prosperous life after service.

Education and Financial Readiness

The programs that provide veterans with a hand up, rather than a handout, are among the most effective tools the federal government has created to empower those who served and to strengthen the nation. Initiatives such as the Post-9/11 GI Bill, the VA Home Loan Guarantee, and veteran-focused small business resources are not just benefits; they are also opportunities for growth. They are long-term investments that turn military service into leadership, economic contribution, and civic participation. These programs help veterans pursue higher education, build intergenerational wealth through homeownership, and start businesses that create jobs in communities across the nation.

The Post-9/11 GI Bill has helped more than one million veterans earn degrees and certifications, preparing them for careers in health care, education, technology, public service, and many other fields. The VA Home Loan program has enabled millions of veterans and their families to purchase homes without requiring a down payment, contributing to long-term financial security and neighborhood stability. These programs produce some of the most substantial returns on investment of any federal initiative. Veterans who are educated, employed, and financially secure contribute more to the workforce, support their families, strengthen their communities, and participate more fully in civic life.

Beyond these core federal programs, numerous community and philanthropic organizations enhance financial readiness by offering scholarships, mentorship, financial literacy training, and emergency relief. These services recognize that success after service requires more than income alone. It depends on opportunity, trusted guidance, and support for continued growth. AMVETS believes the most effective way to honor veterans is to invest in programs that empower them to lead, contribute, and thrive. When we support veterans through education, financial tools, and community resources, we are not only fulfilling a promise but also building a stronger, more resilient nation.

We need to reframe and highlight Veterans as Civic Assets

Veterans are not only recipients of support; they are among America's most significant civic assets. When empowered to thrive, they strengthen the neighborhoods, workplaces, and institutions to which they return.

Research shows that veterans volunteer and vote at higher rates than their civilian peers. They contribute more hours to charitable causes, are active in community organizations, and are more likely to pursue careers in public service. In the workplace, veterans bring leadership, discipline, and teamwork that benefit their employers and colleagues. Many become entrepreneurs who create jobs and strengthen local economies. When veterans succeed, America's workforce and communities succeed with them.

Veterans also carry a special credibility born of service and sacrifice. Their example can unite communities and build trust in public life. Supporting veterans is, therefore, not only an act of gratitude but also an investment in the nation's civic strength and economic vitality.

The VA is currently spending over $500 million annually, implying that veterans are suicidal. Veterans at this juncture are well aware that there is a suicide hotline. We believe this funding would be better used highlighting the value that veterans bring to our Nation, and the role they need to play in continued service to our Nation.

Conclusion: Veterans Are a National Asset, Not a National Crisis

The transition from military to civilian life is a complex journey that extends well beyond a change in uniform. For many, it marks a profound shift in identity, purpose, and community. While the Department of Veterans Affairs plays a critical role in this process, the government alone cannot meet every need or unlock every opportunity. True success after service requires a unified national effort that brings together federal agencies, local organizations, philanthropic partners, and the communities where veterans live and lead.

AMVETS urges Congress to focus not just on what veterans lack, but on what they offer. Veterans are not a public health crisis to be managed. They are a strategic national asset to be empowered. That begins with investing in what works, including community-driven care, evidence-based mental health support, meaningful employment, education, housing stability, and a culture of wellness that values the strengths of veterans. It also means building systems that are easier to navigate, more accountable, and guided by a clear national strategy that aligns resources with outcomes.

This country has no shortage of goodwill for its veterans. What we need now is clarity, coordination, and the courage to think differently about what veteran success truly entails. AMVETS remains committed to working with Congress, VA, and partners across the country to help every veteran thrive in the next chapter of their life. A grateful nation does more than say thank you. It ensures those who served have the tools, the trust, and the opportunities to lead again.

National Commander, Paul Shipley

National Commander Paul Shipley was elected to the organization's highest office by his peers in August 2025 at the AMVETS National Convention in Greensboro, North Carolina.

Commander Shipley is a U.S. Army Combat Veteran, having served from 2004 to 2014. He served in Iraq from 2006 to 2007, was awarded the Combat Action Badge, Army Commendation Medal, and Iraq Campaign Medal. He is a service-connected disabled Veteran.

Upon returning from Iraq, Commander Shipley attended California University of Pennsylvania, earning a BA in Sociology in 2017, an M.Ed in Counseling in 2019, and is now in his final semester of Law School at Duquesne University.

Earlier this year, Commander Shipley became the first post-9/11 Veteran to become AMVETS National Commander. He is among the youngest National Commanders in AMVETS' 80-year history.

Commander Shipley is a Past Department Commander of Pennsylvania and belongs to AMVETS Post 103 in Hopwood, PA. He lives in Uniontown, PA, with his wife and three daughters.

About AMVETS

AMVETS is the most inclusive congressionally chartered veterans service organization in the United States. Our membership is open to all active-duty service members, reservists, guardsmen, and honorably discharged veterans. As a result, AMVETS members have played a vital role in defending our nation in every conflict since World War II.

Our dedication to these men and women dates back to the post-World War II era, when countless returning service members sought access to the health, education, and employment benefits they had earned. Navigating the government bureaucracy to secure these benefits proved challenging for many, prompting experienced veterans to form local groups to assist their peers. As the veteran population surged into the millions, it became evident that a national organization was needed—one distinct from groups that had been established to serve veterans of previous wars. The emerging generation of veterans sought an organization of their own.

With this vision in mind, 18 delegates from nine veterans' clubs convened in Kansas City, Missouri, on December 10, 1944, to establish The American Veterans of World War II. Less than three years later, on July 23, 1947, President Harry S. Truman signed Public Law 216, officially recognizing AMVETS as the first congressionally chartered organization for post-World War II veterans.

Over the years, our congressional charter has been updated to welcome veterans from subsequent conflicts. AMVETS has also evolved to better meet the needs of newer generations of veterans and their families. To further this mission, we maintain partnerships with other congressionally chartered veterans' organizations as part of the "Big Six" coalition. Additionally, we collaborate with newer groups such as Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America and The Independence Fund. Our commitment to veterans' well-being is further demonstrated through our partnership with the VA's Office of Suicide Prevention and Mental Health, working to combat the tragic epidemic of veteran suicide.

As AMVETS looks toward the future, we remain steadfast in our dedication to serving those who have defended our nation. We urge the 119th Congress to join us in this commitment by making policy decisions and casting votes that protect and support our veterans.

Pew Research Center

Statement for the Record

Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs

Legislative Hearing

November 5, 2025

Chairman Moran, Ranking Member Blumenthal, distinguished Members of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, thank you for the opportunity to submit research findings from Pew Research Center's survey of U.S. military veterans.

Pew Research Center is a nonpartisan, nonadvocacy research organization that informs the public about issues, attitudes and trends shaping the world. Our mission is to generate a foundation of facts that enriches the public dialogue and supports sound decision-making. We conduct public opinion polling, demographic research, content analysis and other data-driven social science research. We do not take policy positions or make policy recommendations.

About Pew Research Center's survey of U.S. military veterans

In 2019, Pew Research Center conducted a nationally representative survey among 1,284 U.S. military veterans. The survey has a margin of error of plus or minus 3.9 percentage points. For an in-depth description of how the survey was conducted, see p. 34 of the appendix.

For this study, veterans were defined as men and women who did not serve on active duty in the U.S. military at the time of the survey but did so in the past. This includes anyone who reported previous full-time service in the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines or Coast Guard.

Individuals were also considered to be veterans if they were mobilized or deployed while serving in the reserves for any of the five military branches. Reservists who participated in training but were not otherwise called to full-time duty were not included in the sample. Those with past service in the Army National Guard or Air National Guard were considered veterans if they were mobilized to full-time military service by their branch of service or the federal government.

National Guardsmen who were only activated by their state's governor (for example in response to natural disasters or other state emergencies) were not included in the sample.

Key findings

What it means to be a military veteran in the United States has been shaped by a new generation of service members. As of 2019, about one-in-five veterans had served on active duty after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. Their collective experiences – from deployment to combat to the transition back to civilian life – are markedly different from those who served in previous eras.

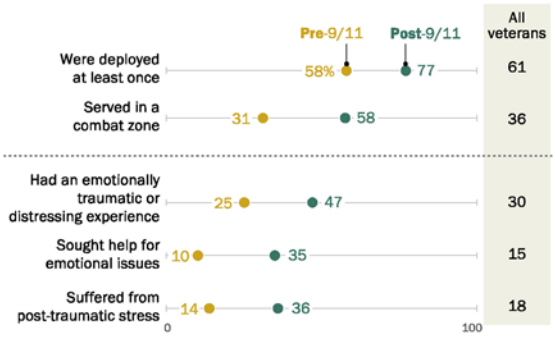
Roughly three-quarters of post-9/11 veterans were deployed at least once, compared with 58% of those who served before them. And post-9/11 veterans are about twice as likely as their pre-9/11 counterparts to have served in a combat zone.

Because they are more likely to have been deployed and to have seen combat, post-9/11 veterans are also more likely to bear the scars of battle, whether physical or not.

Roughly half of post-9/11 veterans say they had emotionally traumatic or distressing experiences related to their military service, and about a third say they sought professional help to deal with those experiences. In addition, 36% say that – regardless of whether they have sought help – they think they have suffered from post-traumatic stress (PTS), according to a new Pew Research Center survey of U.S. military veterans.[1]

Post-9/11 veterans more likely to have been deployed, seen combat, experienced emotional trauma

% of veterans from each era saying they ...



Source: Survey of U.S. veterans conducted May 14-June 3, 2019.
"The American Veteran Experience and the Post-9/11 Generation"

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Transition to civilian life

Veterans give the military high marks for preparing them to serve. Roughly nine-in-ten say the training they received when they first entered the military prepared them very or somewhat well for military life.

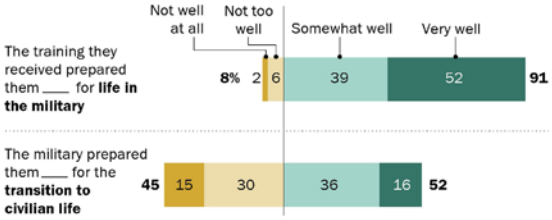
[1] The survey asked respondents if they thought they had ever suffered from post-traumatic stress as a result of their experiences in the military, regardless of whether they had sought help. The question did not use the term "post-traumatic stress disorder."

However, they are less affirmative about the job the military did preparing them for the transition to civilian life. About half of all veterans say the military prepared them very or somewhat well; a similar share says the military didn't prepare them too well or at all.

While veterans across eras offer similar evaluations of the job the military did preparing them for civilian life, post-9/11 veterans are much more likely than those who served before them to say their readjustment to civilian life was difficult. About half of post-9/11 veterans say it was somewhat or very difficult for them to readjust to civilian life after their military service; only about one-in-five pre-9/11 veterans say the same. Combat veterans are especially likely to say they struggled with the transition, and this is particularly true of those who had emotionally traumatic experiences.

About half of veterans say the military prepared them well for their transition to civilian life

% of veterans saying ...



Note: Share of respondents who didn't offer an answer not shown.
Source: Survey of U.S. veterans conducted May 14-June 3, 2019.
"The American Veteran Experience and the Post-9/11 Generation"

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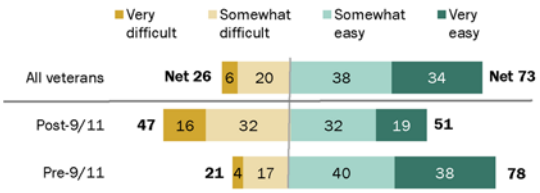
Post-9/11 veterans more likely than pre-9/11 veterans to say readjusting to civilian life was difficult

% of veterans saying their readjustment to civilian life after military service was ...



Note: Figures may not add to subtotals due to rounding. Share of respondents who didn't offer an answer not shown.
Source: Survey of U.S. veterans conducted May 14-June 3, 2019.
"The American Veteran Experience and the Post-9/11 Generation"

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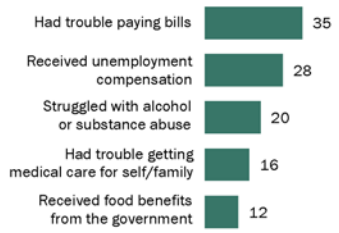
The challenges some veterans face during the transition can be financial, emotional and professional. About a third of veterans say they had trouble paying their bills in their first few years after leaving the military, and roughly three-in-ten say they received unemployment compensation. One-in-five say they struggled with alcohol or substance abuse. Veterans who had emotionally traumatic experiences related to their military service are more likely than those who did not to report experiencing these things.

Having trouble paying bills or accessing health care as well as receiving food support is more common among post-9/11 veterans than among those who served before 9/11. The share from each era who say they received unemployment is identical.

One-in-five veterans say they struggled with alcohol or substance abuse in the first few years after leaving the military. Similar shares of post-9/11 (24%) and pre-9/11 (19%) veterans say they dealt with this issue.

About a third of veterans say they had trouble paying bills after leaving military

% of veterans saying, in the first few years after they left the military, they ...



Source: Survey of U.S. veterans conducted May 14-June 3, 2019. "The American Veteran Experience and the Post-9/11 Generation"

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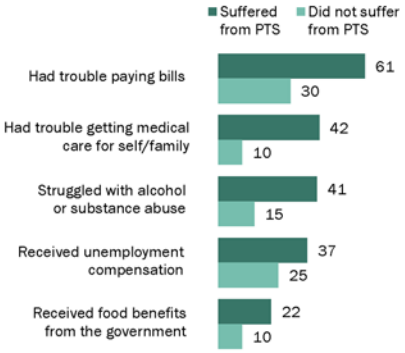
As is the case with some of the emotional challenges veterans face after leaving the military, experiences while on active duty are linked with financial difficulties during the transition. Veterans who say they had traumatic or distressing experiences while in the military and those who say they have suffered from PTS are more likely than those who did not have these types of experiences to say they faced financial troubles or struggled with substance abuse after transitioning to civilian life. For example, 61% of veterans who have suffered from PTS say they had trouble paying bills in the first few years after they left the military. By comparison, 30% of veterans who have not had PTS say they had this type of trouble. Similarly, while 42% of veterans who have dealt with PTS say they had trouble getting medical care for themselves or their family when they got out of the military, only 10% of veterans who have not had PTS say the same.

Veterans who say they experienced post-traumatic stress much more likely to have faced financial challenges during transition

Among veterans who say they suffered from/did not suffer from PTS, % saying, in the first few years after they left the military, they ...



Source: Survey of U.S. veterans conducted May 14-June 3, 2019.
"The American Veteran Experience and the Post-9/11 Generation"

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The transition to post-military employment

For many veterans, finding a job after leaving the military is an important part of the transition to civilian life.

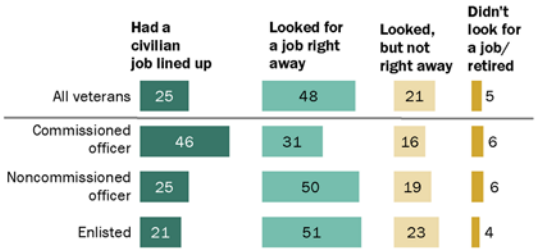
In 2019, one-in-four veterans said they had a civilian job lined up after they left the military. About half (48%) said they didn't have a job lined up but looked for one right away, 21% looked for a job but not right away, and 5% did not look for a job at all or retired from working.

Veterans who served as commissioned officers while on active duty are about twice as likely as those who were noncommissioned officers (NCOs) or enlisted personnel to say they had a civilian job lined up when they left the military (46% of commissioned officers vs. 25% of NCOs and 21% of enlisted). About half of NCOs (50%) and enlisted personnel (51%) say they looked for a civilian job directly after leaving the military.

The timing of the transition to employment for veterans does not differ significantly based on the types of experiences they had while on active duty. Veterans who say they had emotionally traumatic or distressing experiences related to their military service are just as likely as those who did not have these types of experiences to say they had a job lined up when they left the military (24% and 26%, respectively). And among those who didn't already have a job lined up, similar shares say they looked for a job right away after leaving the military (64% and 66%).

Officers about twice as likely as enlisted and NCOs to have had a job lined up when they left the military

% of veterans saying that, after they left the military, they ...



Note: Share of respondents who didn't offer an answer not shown.
Source: Survey of U.S. veterans conducted May 14-June 3, 2019.
"The American Veteran Experience and the Post-9/11 Generation"

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A closer look at post-9/11 veterans who did not have a job lined up directly after the completion of their military service shows that, regardless of when they started looking, 57% say it took them less than six months to find a job. An additional 21% say they had a job within a year of the start of their search. Some 16% say it took them more than a year to find a job, and 6% say they were not able to find one.

Overall, about half of veterans say they enrolled in school after they left the military, either full-time (26%) or part-time (21%), and post-9/11 veterans are more likely to have enrolled in school full-time after leaving the military than veterans who previously served (36% vs. 24%).

Female veterans are more likely than their male counterparts to say they enrolled in school after leaving the military (60% vs. 46%). And veterans who served as NCOs are more likely than either

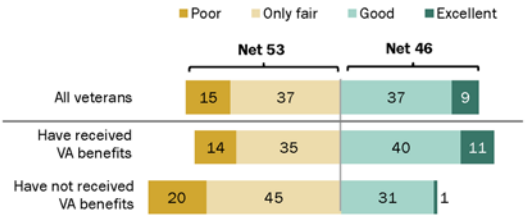
commissioned officers or enlisted personnel to say they enrolled in school (55% of NCOs vs. 40% of commissioned officers and 44% of enlisted).

Views of the VA

In 2019, most veterans (73%) said they had received benefits from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) – whether it be educational or medical benefits, job training, a home loan or a pension. This includes 81% of post-9/11 veterans and 71% of those who served before 9/11.

Veterans are divided over the VA's job performance

% of veterans saying the Dept. of Veterans Affairs is doing a ____ job meeting the needs of military veterans



Note: Figures may not add to subtotals due to rounding. Share of respondents who didn't offer an answer not shown.
Source: Survey of U.S. veterans conducted May 14-June 3, 2019.
"The American Veteran Experience and the Post-9/11 Generation"

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Veterans who served in combat are more likely than those who did not to say they have received VA benefits (82% vs. 69%). In addition, veterans who say they had emotionally traumatic experiences related to their military service and those who say they've suffered from PTS are more likely than veterans who have not had these types of experiences to say they've received VA benefits. Some 86% of veterans who say they've had PTS say they have received VA benefits.

When it comes to their assessments of the job the VA is doing, 9% of veterans say the department is doing an excellent job meeting the needs of military veterans; an additional 37% say the VA is doing a good job. About half say it's doing only a fair (37%) or poor (15%) job.

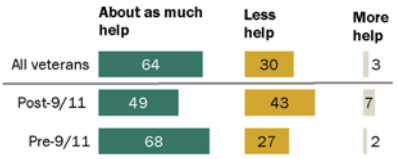
Combat veterans are somewhat more likely than those who did not experience combat to say the VA is doing an excellent or good job meeting the needs of today's veterans (53% vs. 43%). In addition, veterans who say they have received benefits from the VA are significantly more likely to rate the department positively. About half (51%) of veterans who have received VA benefits say the department is doing an excellent or good job. Among those who have not received these benefits, 32% say the same.

Thinking more generally about the help they've received from the government, veterans overall are largely satisfied: 64% say the government has given them about as much help as it should have, 30% say the government has given them less help than it should have and 3% say they've gotten too much help from the government.

There is a significant gap between pre- and post-9/11 veterans on this measure. While 68% of pre-9/11 veterans say they've gotten about as much help as they should from the government, only about half (49%) of post-9/11 veterans say the same. Some 43% of post-9/11 veterans say they've gotten less help from the government than they should have.

About four-in-ten post-9/11 veterans say the government hasn't given them enough help

% of veterans saying the government has given them, as a veteran, ____ as/than it should have



Note: Share of respondents who didn't offer an answer not shown.
Source: Survey of U.S. veterans conducted May 14-June 3, 2019.
"The American Veteran Experience and the Post-9/11 Generation"

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Conclusion

Providing nonpartisan, data-driven social science research to support sound decision-making is central to Pew Research Center's mission. We again thank the Committee for the opportunity to share these survey findings on the experiences of U.S. military veterans. Please see appendix for a full analysis of the survey's findings.

Appendix

Pew Research Center

FOR RELEASE September 10, 2019

The American Veteran Experience and the Post-9/11 Generation

For many veterans, combat experiences strengthened them personally but also made the transition to civilian life difficult

BY *Kim Parker, Ruth Igielnik, Amanda Barroso and Anthony Cilluffo*

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RECOMMENDED CITATION
Pew Research Center, September 2019, "The American Veteran Experience and the Post-9/11 Generation"

About Pew Research Center

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The American Veteran Experience and the Post-9/11 Generation

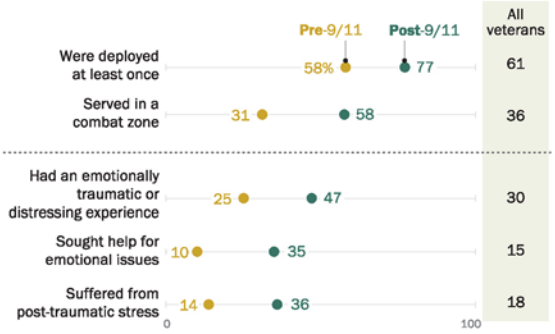
For many combat veterans, their experiences strengthened them personally but also made the transition to civilian life difficult

What it means to be a military veteran in the United States is being shaped by a new generation of service members. About one-in-five veterans today served on active duty after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. Their collective experiences – from deployment to combat to the transition back to civilian life – are markedly different from those who served in previous eras.

Roughly three-quarters of post-9/11 veterans were deployed at least once, compared with 58% of those who served before them. And post-9/11 veterans are about twice as likely as their pre-9/11 counterparts to have served in a combat zone.

Post-9/11 veterans more likely to have been deployed, seen combat, experienced emotional trauma

% of veterans from each era saying they ...



Source: Survey of U.S. veterans conducted May 14-June 3, 2019.
"The American Veteran Experience and the Post-9/11 Generation"

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Because they are more likely to have been deployed and to have seen combat, post-9/11 veterans are also more likely to bear the scars of battle, whether physical or not. Roughly half say they had emotionally traumatic or distressing experiences related to their military service, and about a third say they sought professional help to deal with those experiences. In addition, 36% say that – regardless of whether they have sought help – they think they have suffered from post-traumatic stress (PTS), according to a new Pew Research Center survey of U.S. military veterans.[1]

[1] The survey asked respondents if they thought they had ever suffered from post-traumatic stress as a result of their experiences in the military, regardless of whether they had sought help. The question did not use the term "post-traumatic stress disorder."

In thinking about their service, a majority of all veterans express pride. Still, those who served in the post-9/11 era are somewhat less likely than their predecessors to say they frequently felt proud after leaving the military (58% vs. 70%).

For many veterans, the imprint of war is felt beyond their tour of duty and carries over into the transition from military to civilian life. This is true regardless of era of service. When asked about their experiences in the first few years after leaving the military, combat veterans are less likely than those who didn't serve in combat to say they frequently felt optimistic about their future, and they are more likely to say they didn't get the respect they deserved, struggled with the lack of structure in civilian life, and felt disconnected from family or friends.

At the same time, those who served in combat report positive impacts from the experience. Majorities say their experiences in combat made them feel closer to those who served alongside them, showed them that they were stronger than they thought they were and changed their priorities about what was important in their life.

How we defined veterans

For this study, veterans were defined as men and women who do not currently serve on active duty in the U.S. military but did so in the past. This includes anyone who reported previous full-time service in the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines or Coast Guard.

Individuals were also considered to be veterans if they were mobilized or deployed while serving in the reserves for any of the five military branches. Reservists who participated in training but were not otherwise called to full-time duty were not included in the sample. Those with past service in the Army National Guard or Air National Guard were considered veterans if they were mobilized to full-time military service by their branch of service or the federal government.

National Guardsmen who were only activated by their state's governor (for example in response to natural disasters or other state emergencies) were not included in the sample.

Most veterans say their training prepared them for military life fewer say the military prepared them for what came next

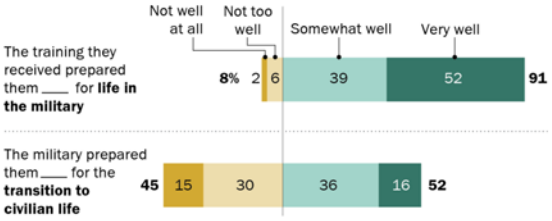
Veterans give the military high marks for preparing them to serve. Roughly nine-in-ten say the training they received when they first entered the military prepared them very or somewhat well for military life. Post-9/11 and pre-9/11 veterans offer similarly positive assessments of their training and readiness.

However, they are less affirmative about the job the military did preparing them for the transition to civilian life. About half of all veterans say the military prepared them very or somewhat well; a similar share says the military didn't prepare them too well or at all.

While veterans across eras offer similar evaluations of the job the military did preparing them for civilian life, post-9/11 veterans are much more likely than those who served before them to say their readjustment to civilian life was difficult. About half of post-9/11 veterans say it was somewhat or very difficult for them to readjust to civilian life after their military service; only about one-in-five pre-9/11 veterans say the same. Combat veterans are especially likely to say they struggled with the transition, and this is particularly true of those who had emotionally traumatic experiences.

About half of veterans say the military prepared them well for their transition to civilian life

% of veterans saying ...



Note: Share of respondents who didn't offer an answer not shown.
Source: Survey of U.S. veterans conducted May 14-June 3, 2019.
"The American Veteran Experience and the Post-9/11 Generation"

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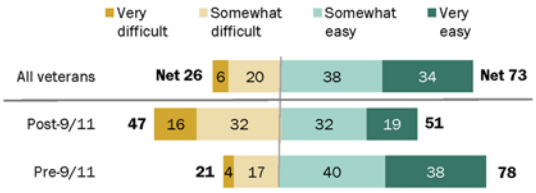
Post-9/11 veterans more likely than pre-9/11 veterans to say readjusting to civilian life was difficult

% of veterans saying their readjustment to civilian life after military service was ...



Note: Figures may not add to subtotals due to rounding. Share of respondents who didn't offer an answer not shown.
Source: Survey of U.S. veterans conducted May 14-June 3, 2019.
"The American Veteran Experience and the Post-9/11 Generation"

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The challenges some veterans face during the transition can be financial, emotional and professional. About a third of veterans say they had trouble paying their bills in their first few years after leaving the military, and roughly three-in-ten say they received unemployment compensation. One-in-five say they struggled with alcohol or substance abuse. Veterans who had emotionally traumatic experiences related to their military service are more likely than those who did not to report experiencing these things.

When it comes to employment specifically, a majority of veterans say their military service was useful in giving them the skills and training they needed for a job outside the military. Veterans who served as commissioned officers in the military are significantly more likely than those who served as noncommissioned officers or enlisted personnel to say their military training was good preparation for a civilian job.

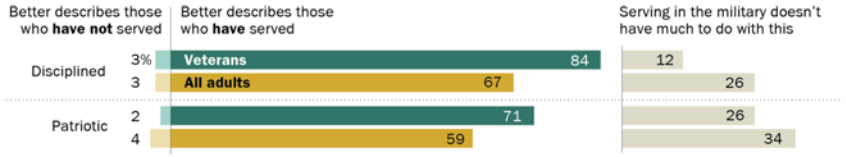
For most post-9/11 veterans, having served in the military was an advantage when it came to finding their first post-military job – 35% say this helped a lot and 26% say it helped a little. Only about one-in-ten say having served in the military hurt their ability to get a job.

Veterans, public say most Americans look up to people who served in the military; majorities associate discipline and patriotism with veterans

Veterans view themselves as distinct from other Americans in some ways but not in others. Majorities among veterans (61%) and the general public (64%) say most Americans look up to people who have served in the military. Only about one-in-ten veterans (9%) and an even smaller share of all adults say most Americans look down on people who have served. Three-in-ten from each group say most Americans neither look up to nor down on veterans.

Veterans and the public associate being disciplined and patriotic with those who have served in the military

% of veterans/all adults saying each word or phrase ...



Note: Share of respondents who didn't offer an answer not shown.
Source: Surveys of U.S. veterans conducted May 14-June 3, 2019, and U.S. adults conducted May 14-24, 2019.
"The American Veteran Experience and the Post-9/11 Generation"

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Majorities of the public across gender, age groups and political parties say veterans are generally looked up to by most Americans. Among veterans, this sentiment is echoed across eras of service.

Veterans overwhelmingly see themselves as more disciplined than those who have not served in the military. Some 84% of all veterans say this characteristic better describes those who have

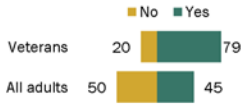
served in the military than those who have not. Most Americans (67%) agree with this assessment. About one-in-four among the public (26%) say being disciplined doesn't have much to do with whether one served in the military or not.

Similarly, a large majority of veterans (71%) say the term patriotic better describes those who served in the military than those who did not; 59% of the pubic shares this view. About a third of Americans say patriotism isn't related to whether one is a veteran or not.

Veterans and the public are less likely to associate certain negative traits with those who have served in the military. Some 13% of veterans and 25% of the public say being emotionally unstable better describes those who have served in the military than those who have not. Most in each group say this doesn't have much to do with having been in the military. The pattern is similar when it comes to being prone to violence.

Most veterans endorse joining the military

% of veterans/all adults saying they would advise a young person close to them to join the military



Note: Share of respondents who didn't offer an answer not shown.
Source: Surveys of U.S. veterans conducted May 14-June 3, 2019, and U.S. adults conducted May 14-24, 2019.
"The American Veteran Experience and the Post-9/11 Generation"

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A large majority of veterans endorse the military as a career choice. Roughly eight-in-ten say they would advise a young person close to them to join the military. This includes large majorities of post-9/11 veterans, combat veterans and those who say they had emotionally traumatic experiences in the military. The public is more evenly divided about this: 45% of all American adults say they would advise a young person close to them to join the military, 50% say they would not. In addition, veterans and the public have differing views on the current administration and its leadership of the military.

These findings are based on two surveys: one of 1,284 U.S. military veterans (including 797 veterans who *only* served prior to September 11, 2001 and 487 "post-9/11 veterans" who served any time after 9/11), conducted online May 14-June 3, 2019, and a parallel survey of 1,087 U.S. adults, conducted May 14-24, 2019.

Other key findings:

Deployment and combat

- Among veterans who were deployed at least once, post-9/11 veterans are much more likely than pre-9/11 veterans to report certain positive and negative consequences from deployment.

Two-thirds of post-9/11 veterans say being deployed had a positive impact on their financial situation (compared with 30% of pre-9/11 veterans). At the same time, 42% of post-9/11 veterans – but only 17% of pre-9/11 veterans – say being deployed had a negative impact on their mental health.

- About a third of veterans (35%) say they knew and served with someone who was seriously injured in combat while performing their duties; 30% knew and served with someone who was killed in combat. Among combat veterans, 57% say they personally witnessed someone from their unit or an ally unit being seriously wounded or killed.
- Veterans who say they have suffered from PTS are much more likely than those who have not to report certain negative experiences in the first few years after they left the military. Roughly six-in-ten (61%) say they had trouble paying their bills, about four-in-ten (42%) say they had trouble getting medical care for themselves or their families, and a similar share (41%) say they struggled with alcohol or substance abuse.

Government assistance

- A majority of veterans (64%) say the government has given them, as veterans, about as much help as it should have; 30% say the government has given them too little help. Post-9/11 veterans are more likely than those from previous eras to say the government has given them less help than it should have (43% vs. 27%).
- Most veterans (73%) say they have received benefits from the Department of Veterans Affairs. When asked to assess the job the VA is doing meeting the needs of veterans, fewer than half (46%) of all veterans say the VA is doing an excellent or good job in this regard.

Post-military employment

- One-in-four veterans say they had a job lined up when they left the military. Roughly half (48%) say they looked for a job right away, 21% say they looked for a job, but not right away, and 5% say they didn't look for a job after leaving the military. Among those who looked for a job, 57% had one in less than six months.
- About half of veterans say they enrolled in school after leaving the military. Post-9/11 veterans are more likely than others to say they enrolled full-time – 36% vs. 24% of those who served in previous eras.
- A significant share of post-9/11 veterans (42%) who worked in a civilian job after leaving the military say they believe, based on their experience skills and training, they were overqualified for their first post-military job; 56% say they stayed in their first job for more than a year.

1. Deployment, combat and their consequences

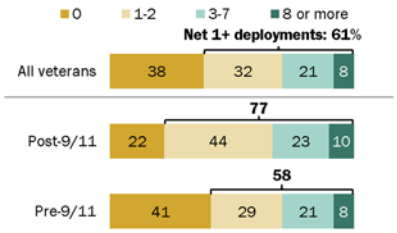
About six-in-ten veterans (61%) say they were deployed away from their permanent duty station at least once while they were on active duty, with roughly three-in-ten (29%) saying they were deployed three or more times. Roughly four-in-ten veterans (38%) were not deployed at all during their time in the military.

Post-9/11 veterans are much more likely to have been deployed than those who served in earlier eras. Roughly three-quarters of post-9/11 veterans (77%) were deployed at least once, compared with 58% of veterans who served only before 9/11.

Veterans who served as noncommissioned officers (NCOs) (74%) are more likely than those who were commissioned officers (58%) or enlisted servicemembers (54%) to have been deployed at least once. And, among those who were deployed, NCOs are more likely than enlisted personnel to have had multiple deployments: 60% saw three or more deployments, compared with 36% among those who were enlisted.

Post-9/11 veterans are more likely than predecessors to have been deployed

% of veterans saying they were deployed away from their permanent duty station __ times



Note: Share of respondents who didn't offer an answer not shown.
Source: Survey of U.S. veterans conducted May 14-June 3, 2019.
"The American Veteran Experience and the Post-9/11 Generation"

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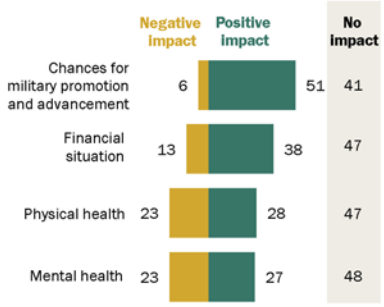
About one-in-four veterans who were deployed say this negatively impacted their physical, mental health

% of veterans who were ever deployed who say their deployment(s) had a ___ on their ...



Note: Share of respondents who didn't offer an answer not shown.
Source: Survey of U.S. veterans conducted May 14-June 3, 2019.
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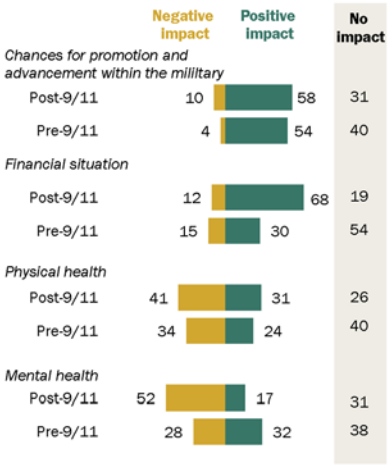
Many veterans report that their deployments were beneficial to their careers but had a mixed impact on their physical and mental health. Roughly half (51%) say their deployments had a positive impact on their chances for promotion and advancement within the military, and 38% say the impact on their financial situation was positive. Sizable shares say their deployments had no impact on these aspects of their life (41% for promotion and advancement, 47% for financial situation), and relatively few say deployment had a negative impact.

Among veterans who were deployed, 23% say their deployments had a negative impact on their physical health, and an identical share say being deployed impacted their mental health negatively. About three-in-ten say their deployments had a positive impact on their physical (28%) and mental (27%) health, while about half say they had no impact.

Veterans with combat experience are more likely to say there were financial benefits to being deployed: 44% of veterans with combat experience say their deployments had a positive impact on their financial situation, compared with 34% of veterans without combat experience. At the same time, combat veterans are more likely to say their deployments had a negative impact on their physical health: 37% say this, compared with 14% of veterans without combat experience. A similar pattern applies to their mental health.

About half of post-9/11 combat veterans say their deployment had a negative impact on their mental health

% of veterans with combat experience who say their deployment(s) had a ___ on their ...



Note: Combat experience is based on having served in a combat zone and had at least one key combat engagement. Share of respondents who didn't offer an answer not shown.
Source: Survey of U.S. veterans conducted May 14-June 3, 2019. "The American Veteran Experience and the Post-9/11 Generation"

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Post-9/11 veterans are more likely than pre-9/11 veterans to say their deployments had a positive impact on their financial situation, and this is the case even after accounting for the fact that post-9/11 veterans are more likely to have combat experience. Fully 68% of post-9/11 veterans with

combat experience say their deployments helped them financially, compared with 30% of pre-9/11 combat veterans. But they are also more likely to say their deployments negatively impacted their mental health: About half of post-9/11 combat veterans (52%) say this, compared with 28% of pre-9/11 combat veterans.

There are differences by gender. Among all veterans, women are more likely than male veterans to say their deployments had a negative impact on their mental health (39% vs. 22%).

When it comes to promotion and advancement within the military, officers are more likely than enlisted members to say they saw a positive impact from their deployments. About six-in-ten commissioned officers (61%) and noncommissioned officers (57%) say their deployments positively impacted their chances of advancement in the military, compared with 46% of enlisted servicemembers.

Defining combat experience

In exploring the attitudes and experiences of America's veterans, it was important to define what it means to have combat experience. In this report, to be considered a veteran with combat experience a respondent needed to have ever served in a combat or war zone, and answered yes to at least one of the following items:

- Did you ever go on combat patrols or missions?
- Were you ever exposed to hostile fire or did you ever come under attack?
- Did you ever fire your weapon at the enemy?
- Did you ever personally witness someone from your unit or an ally unit being seriously wounded or killed?

These questions are drawn from a longer list of items developed by the National Center for PTSD, a part of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. The Deployment Risk and Resilience Inventory-2 is a suite of scales that can be used to assess deployment-related risk and resilience factors among veterans. The four questions above are modified versions of items from the Combat Experiences Scale, which is used to measure a number of combat-related experiences that veterans encounter.

About six-in-ten combat veterans say they witnessed someone in their unit or an ally unit being injured or killed

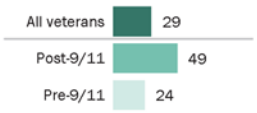
About three-in-ten veterans (29%) had combat experience at some point in their military career. The share is markedly higher among veterans who served after 9/11. Roughly half of post-9/11 veterans (49%) have had combat experience, compared with 24% of veterans who served only before 9/11.

About half of all veterans (51%) say someone they knew and served with was seriously injured while performing their military duties. This includes 35% who say they knew someone who was injured in combat and 16% who say the injury was not combat-related. Four-in-ten veterans say someone they knew and served with was killed while performing their duties (30% say this was combat-related, 10% say it was not).

Veterans who have had combat experience are much more likely than those without it to know someone who was killed or injured. Roughly three-quarters of combat veterans (74%) say they know someone who was seriously injured while in the military, compared with 41% of veterans without combat experience.

Post-9/11 veterans are about twice as likely to have combat experience than earlier veterans

% of veterans who served in a combat zone and had at least one combat experience



Note: Combat experience is based on having served in a combat zone and had at least one key combat engagement.
Source: Survey of U.S. veterans conducted May 14-June 3, 2019.
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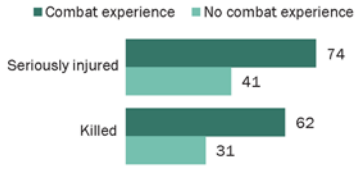
In addition, combat veterans are about twice as likely as those without combat experience to say they knew and served with someone who was killed while performing their duties (62% vs. 31%).

There are differences by rank in knowing someone who was injured or killed while performing their duties. Commissioned officers (54%) and noncommissioned officers (41%) are much more likely than enlisted servicemembers (28%) to say they know someone who was seriously injured in combat while performing their duties. Similarly, 43% of commissioned officers and 38% of noncommissioned officers say they knew someone who was killed in combat, compared with 22% of enlisted persons.

About six-in-ten combat veterans know someone who was killed while performing their duties

% of veterans from each group who say they know and served with someone who was ___ while performing their duties



Note: Combat experience is based on having served in a combat zone and had at least one key combat engagement.
Source: Survey of U.S. veterans conducted May 14-June 3, 2019. "The American Veteran Experience and the Post-9/11 Generation"

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Many veterans saw these things first hand. Fully 57% of combat veterans say they personally witnessed someone from their unit or an ally unit being seriously wounded or killed. Veterans across rank and era of service are about equally likely to have had this experience.

One-in-five veterans say they, themselves, were seriously injured while performing their military duties: 5% say they were injured in combat and an additional 15% say their injury was not combat-related. Among veterans who have had combat experience, 16% say they were seriously injured in combat.

About half of post-9/11 combat veterans say they think they have suffered from PTS

Given the wide reach of these experiences, it's not surprising that many veterans report that there was some emotional trauma associated with their military service. Three-in-ten veterans overall say they had emotionally traumatic or distressing experiences related to their military service. Some 15% say they have sought help for emotional issues resulting from their military experience. And 18% say, regardless of whether they sought help, they believe they have suffered from post-traumatic stress (PTS) as a result of their experiences in the military.

Across all three measures, there are significant gaps between veterans who served before 9/11 and those who served after. About half of post-9/11 veterans (47%) say they had emotionally traumatic or distressing experiences, compared with one-quarter of pre-9/11 veterans. Similarly, about one-third of post-9/11 veterans (35%) say they sought help for emotional issues, compared with just

one-in-ten pre-9/11 veterans. Post-9/11 veterans are also more likely than pre-9/11 veterans to say they have suffered from PTS (36% vs 14%).

Not surprisingly, veterans with combat experience are more likely to have had traumatic experiences. About half of all combat veterans (52%) say they had emotionally traumatic experiences related to their military service. Post-9/11 combat veterans are especially likely to say this (62%). About three-in-ten combat veterans (31%) say they sought help for emotional issues resulting from their service, compared with 8% of veterans without combat experience. Again, veterans who served in combat after 9/11 are particularly likely to have sought help – 48% say they sought help from a doctor or counselor for emotional issues resulting from their service.

Combat veterans are also especially likely to report having PTS. Fully 44% of combat veterans say they believe they have suffered from PTS as a result of their military experience, compared with 8% of non-combat veterans. Among combat veterans, 55% of those who served after 9/11 say they have suffered from PTS, compared with 38% of those who served only before 9/11.

About one-in-three post 9/11 veterans say they think they have suffered from post-traumatic stress

% of veterans from each era who say they ...

Source: Survey of U.S. veterans conducted May 14-June 3, 2019.
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Traumatic experiences and PTS are closely correlated: Roughly half (51%) of veterans who say they had emotionally traumatic or distressing experiences while in the military also say they have suffered from PTS. Only 4% of those who didn't have traumatic experiences say they have had PTS.

Relatedly, 31% of all veterans who know and served with someone who was killed while performing their duties say they have suffered from PTS, compared with 10% of those who don't know someone who was killed. That number jumps to 50% among post-9/11 veterans who know someone who was killed.

About seven-in-ten combat veterans say their experiences made them feel closer to those who fought beside them

For many veterans, the emotional burdens of combat have given them greater insight into themselves and taught them important lessons. Fully 56% of combat veterans say their experiences in combat changed their priorities about what is important in their lives. Some 16% say these experiences didn't change their priorities and 27% say they didn't make much of a difference. Similar shares of post-9/11 (58%) and pre-9/11 (55%) veterans say their combat experiences changed their priorities. Veterans who had emotionally traumatic experiences related to their military service are especially likely to report that their priorities changed: 69% say combat changed what was important in their life.

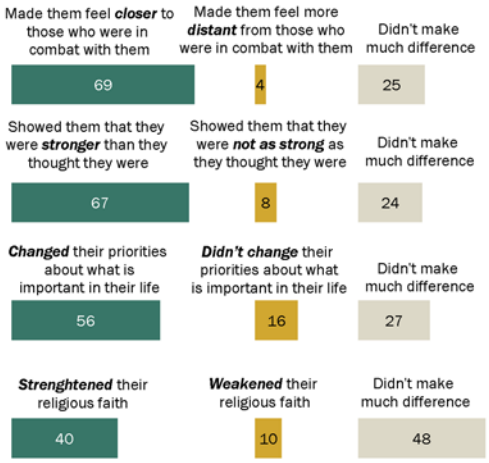
About seven-in-ten combat veterans (69%) say their combat experiences made them feel closer to those who fought alongside them. Just 4% say these experiences made them feel more distant from those they fought with, and one-quarter say they didn't make a difference. Veterans who served after 9/11 are more likely to say their combat experiences made them feel closer to those who they served with: 77% of post-9/11 combat veterans say this, compared with 65% of pre-9/11 combat veterans. Again, the nature of their combat experiences is linked to impact, as veterans who say they had emotionally traumatic experiences are among the most likely to say their combat experiences made them feel closer to those they served alongside (81% say this).

A majority of combat veterans also say their experiences in combat showed them that they were stronger than they thought, while only 8% of combat veterans say these experiences showed them they were not as strong as they thought. About one-quarter (24%) say their experiences didn't make much of a difference in this regard.

About half of combat veterans (48%) say their combat experiences didn't make much of a difference when it came to their religious faith. Still, four-in-ten say their combat experiences strengthened their religious faith and one-in-ten say they weakened their religious faith.

Two-thirds of combat veterans say their combat experiences showed them they were stronger than they thought

% of veterans with combat experience who say their experiences in combat ...



Note: Combat experience is based on having served in a combat zone and had at least one key combat engagement. Share of respondents who didn't offer an answer not shown.
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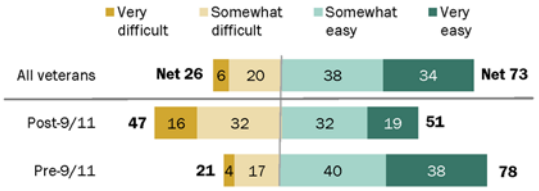
2. Readjusting to civilian life

The transition from military to civilian life can be challenging for some veterans. While most say readjusting to civilian life was very or somewhat easy, roughly one-in-four say it was at least somewhat difficult.

Post-9/11 veterans more likely than pre-9/11 veterans to say readjusting to civilian life was difficult

% of veterans saying their readjustment to civilian life after military service was ...



Note: Figures may not add to subtotals due to rounding. Share of respondents who didn't offer an answer not shown.
Source: Survey of U.S. veterans conducted May 14-June 3, 2019.
"The American Veteran Experience and the Post-9/11 Generation"

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In their assessments of the ease or difficulty of the transition to civilian life, there is a significant gap between veterans who served before 9/11 and those who served more recently. About half of post-9/11 veterans say it was somewhat (32%) or very (16%) difficult for them to readjust to civilian life after their military service. By comparison, only about one-in-five veterans whose service ended before 9/11 say their transition was somewhat (17%) or very (4%) difficult. A large majority of pre-9/11 veterans (78%) say it was easy for them to make the transition.

Veterans who served in combat are significantly more likely than those who did not to say their readjustment was difficult: 46% of those with some combat experience, compared with 18% of those without combat experience, describe their readjustment to civilian life as difficult.

Veterans who say they had emotionally traumatic or distressing experiences related to military service and those who say they have suffered from post-traumatic stress (PTS) as a result of their experiences in the military are among the most likely to say their transition to civilian life was difficult. Roughly half of those who had traumatic experiences (53%) and an even higher share of those who say they have suffered from PTS (66%) say their readjustment was at least somewhat difficult. Among those with PTS, three-in-ten say it was very difficult.

While most veterans say the military prepared them for active duty, only about half say they were well prepared for the transition to civilian life. Some 16% say the military prepared them very well

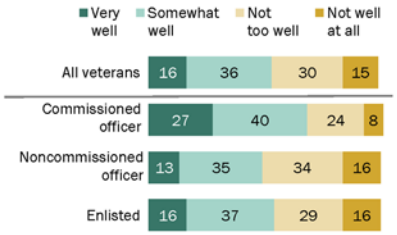
for the transition and 36% say it prepared them somewhat well. At the same time, more than four-in-ten say the military did not prepare them too well (30%) or at all (15%).

These ratings do not differ significantly by era of service: Pre- and post-9/11 veterans are equally likely to say the military prepared them well for the transition. Nor do these assessments differ according to combat experience. Those who served in combat are just as likely as those who did not to say they were well prepared for the transition.

However, veterans who report having had emotionally traumatic experiences while in the military are significantly less likely than those who didn't have these types of experiences to say they felt well prepared for the transition (39% vs. 59%).

Officers more likely than NCOs, enlisted personnel to say the military prepared them well for transition to civilian life

% of veterans saying the military prepared them ____ for the transition to civilian life



Note: Share of respondents who didn't offer an answer not shown.
Source: Survey of U.S. veterans conducted May 14-June 3, 2019.
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In addition, there are differences by rank. Veterans who served as commissioned officers are more likely to say the military prepared them well for the transition to civilian life than are those who served as NCOs or as enlisted personnel (67% vs. 48% and 54%, respectively).

Post-9/11 veterans faced more challenges than their predecessors in transitioning to civilian life

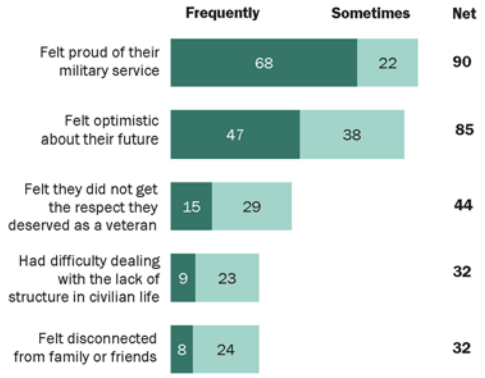
The survey asked about some emotional highs and lows veterans may have experienced in the first few years after they left the military. In general, veterans are more likely to say that they felt optimistic and proud than disconnected or disrespected. But there is a significant gap between veterans who served before 9/11 and those who served after, with veterans from the more recent era more likely to report having negative experiences.

Roughly two-thirds of all veterans (68%) say, in the first few years after leaving the military, they frequently felt proud of their military service. An additional 22% say they sometimes felt proud, and 9% say they seldom or never felt this way. Pre-9/11 veterans are more likely to say they frequently felt proud of their service than are post-9/11 veterans (70% vs. 58%).

About half of veterans (47%) say they frequently felt optimistic about their future after leaving the military, 38% say they sometimes felt optimistic and 15% say they seldom or never felt this way. Here again the findings differ by era of service: 50% of pre-9/11 veterans say they frequently felt optimistic, compared with only a third of post-9/11 veterans. And roughly a quarter of post-9/11 veterans (23%) say they seldom or never felt optimistic about their future in the first few years after leaving the military.

About seven-in-ten veterans say they frequently felt proud of their service after leaving the military

% of veterans saying, in the first few years after they left the military, they frequently/sometimes ...



Source: Survey of U.S. veterans conducted May 14-June 3, 2019.
"The American Veteran Experience and the Post-9/11 Generation"

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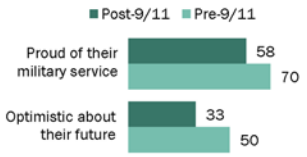
Feelings of optimism differ significantly depending on the types of experiences veterans had while on active duty. Veterans who say they had emotionally traumatic or distressing experiences are

less likely to say they felt optimistic about their future after leaving the military than are those who didn't have these types of experiences – 35% of those who had traumatic experiences say they frequently felt optimistic compared with 53% of those who did not.

In addition, officers are more likely than NCOs or enlisted personnel to say they frequently felt optimistic after leaving the military – 70% vs. 51% and 40%, respectively.

Post-9/11 veterans less likely to feel proud, optimistic

% of veterans saying, in the first few years after they left the military, they frequently felt ...



Source: Survey of U.S. veterans conducted May 14-June 3, 2019. "The American Veteran Experience and the Post-9/11 Generation"

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Relatively few veterans (15%) say they frequently felt they didn't get the respect they deserved after leaving the military; 29% say they sometimes felt this way. A majority say they seldom (23%) or never (32%) felt this way.

These feelings don't differ significantly by era of service, but they do differ according to experiences veterans had while on active duty. Veterans with combat experience are about twice as likely as those without to say they frequently felt they didn't get the respect they deserved (23% vs. 12%). Similarly, veterans who had emotionally traumatic experiences and those who have suffered from PTS are much more likely than those who haven't to say they frequently felt disrespected. Three-in-ten veterans who say they've experienced PTS say they frequently felt they didn't get the respect they deserved after leaving the military; only 12% of those who didn't have PTS say the same.

About one-in-ten veterans overall (9%) say they frequently had difficulty dealing with the lack of structure in civilian life after leaving the military, and an additional 23% say they sometimes felt this way. About two-thirds say they seldom (24%) or never (43%) had difficulty with this. Post-9/11 veterans are more likely than those who served in earlier eras to say they frequently had difficulty dealing with the lack of structure in civilian life (23% vs. 6%).

Here, again, those who had traumatic experiences while in the military and those who have suffered from PTS are more likely than those who didn't to have faced this challenge. About three-in-ten veterans who say they have suffered from PTS (29%) say they frequently had difficulty dealing with the lack of structure in civilian life, compared with 5% of those who haven't had PTS.

The patterns are similar when it comes to feeling disconnected from family or friends. Overall, relatively few veterans (8%) say they frequently felt disconnected from others after leaving the military, while 24% say they sometimes felt this way. About two-thirds say they seldom (21%) or never (47%) felt this way. Post-9/11 veterans, combat veterans, those who had emotionally traumatic experiences and those who have suffered from PTS are among the most likely to report having felt this way. For example, among veterans who say they had traumatic experiences related to their military service, 22% say they frequently felt this type of social isolation after leaving the military.

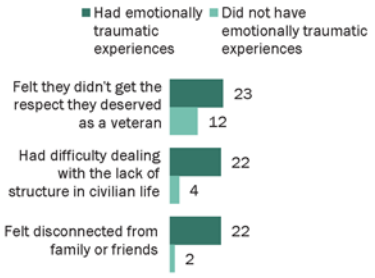
One-in-five veterans say they struggled with substance abuse after leaving the military

In addition to the emotional strains that may accompany transitioning from the military to civilian life, some veterans have faced financial and health challenges. About a third of all veterans (35%) say they had trouble paying their bills in the first few years after leaving the military. Roughly three-in-ten (28%) say they received unemployment benefits, 16% say they had trouble getting access to medical care when they or their family needed it, and 12% say they received food benefits (such as WIC or SNAP) from the government.

Having trouble paying bills or accessing health care as well as receiving food support is more common among post-9/11 veterans than among those who served before 9/11. The share from

Veterans who experienced emotional trauma related to military service are more likely to have faced certain emotional challenges during transition

Among veterans who had traumatic experiences/did not have traumatic experiences, % saying, in the first few years after they left the military, they frequently ...



Source: Survey of U.S. veterans conducted May 14-June 3, 2019.
"The American Veteran Experience and the Post-9/11 Generation"

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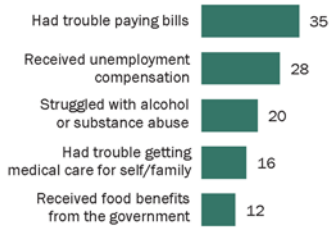
About a third of veterans say they had trouble paying bills after leaving military

% of veterans saying, in the first few years after they left the military, they ...



Source: Survey of U.S. veterans conducted May 14-June 3, 2019.
"The American Veteran Experience and the Post-9/11 Generation"

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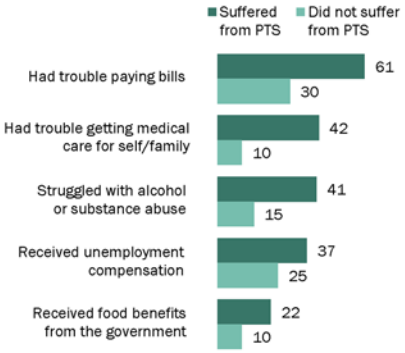
each era who say they received unemployment is identical.

One-in-five veterans say they struggled with alcohol or substance abuse in the first few years after leaving the military. Similar shares of post-9/11 (24%) and pre-9/11 (19%) veterans say they dealt with this issue.

Veterans who say they experienced post-traumatic stress much more likely to have faced financial challenges during transition

Among veterans who say they suffered from/did not suffer from PTS, % saying, in the first few years after they left the military, they ...



Source: Survey of U.S. veterans conducted May 14-June 3, 2019. "The American Veteran Experience and the Post-9/11 Generation"

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As is the case with some of the emotional challenges veterans face after leaving the military, experiences while on active duty are linked with financial difficulties during the transition. Veterans who say they had traumatic or distressing experiences while in the military and those who say they have suffered from PTS are more likely than those who did not have these types of experiences to say they faced financial troubles or struggled with substance abuse after transitioning to civilian life. For example, 61% of veterans who have suffered from PTS say they had trouble paying bills in the first few years after they left the military. By comparison, 30% of veterans who have not had PTS say they had this type of trouble. Similarly, while 42% of veterans who have dealt with PTS say they had trouble getting medical care for themselves or their family when they got out of the military, only 10% of veterans who have not had PTS say the same.

There are demographic differences as well. White veterans are much less likely than nonwhite veterans to report that, after leaving the military, they had trouble paying bills or accessing health care, or that they received unemployment or government food assistance.[2] About half of nonwhite veterans (49%) say they had trouble paying bills in the first few years after leaving the military, compared with 32% of white veterans. And nonwhite veterans are more likely than white veterans to say they had trouble getting medical care for themselves or their family (29% vs. 12%).

[2] Due to sample size limitations, veterans from racial and ethnic minority groups cannot be reported on separately.

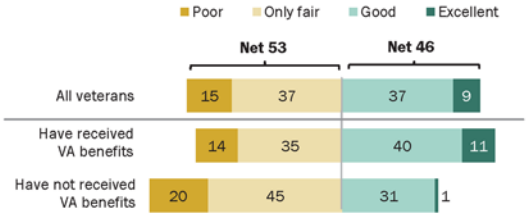
Male veterans are about twice as likely as female veterans to say they struggled with alcohol or substance abuse after leaving the military (21% vs. 10%). Female veterans are more likely to have received food assistance than their male counterparts – 24% of women vs. 11% of men say they received benefits such as WIC or SNAP from the government in the first few years after leaving the military.

Veterans give the VA mixed ratings

Most veterans (73%) say they have received benefits from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) – whether it be educational or medical benefits, job training, a home loan or a pension. This includes 81% of post-9/11 veterans and 71% of those who served before 9/11.

Veterans are divided over the VA's job performance

% of veterans saying the Dept. of Veterans Affairs is doing a ____ job meeting the needs of military veterans



Note: Figures may not add to subtotals due to rounding. Share of respondents who didn't offer an answer not shown.
Source: Survey of U.S. veterans conducted May 14-June 3, 2019.
"The American Veteran Experience and the Post-9/11 Generation"

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Veterans who served in combat are more likely than those who did not to say they have received VA benefits (82% vs. 69%). In addition, veterans who say they had emotionally traumatic experiences related to their military service and those who say they've suffered from PTS are more likely than veterans who have not had these types of experiences to say they've received VA benefits. Some 86% of veterans who say they've had PTS say they have received VA benefits.

When it comes to their assessments of the job the VA is doing, 9% of veterans say the department is doing an excellent job meeting the needs of military veterans; an additional 37% say the VA is doing a good job. About half say it's doing only a fair (37%) or poor (15%) job.

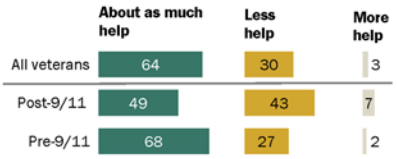
Combat veterans are somewhat more likely than those who did not experience combat to say the VA is doing an excellent or good job meeting the needs of today's veterans (53% vs. 43%). In addition, veterans who say they have received benefits from the VA are significantly more likely to rate the department positively. About half (51%) of veterans who have received VA benefits say the

department is doing an excellent or good job. Among those who have not received these benefits, 32% say the same.

Thinking more generally about the help they've received from the government, veterans overall are largely satisfied: 64% say the government has given them about as much help as it should have, 30% say the government has given them less help than it should have and 3% say they've gotten too much help from the government.

About four-in-ten post-9/11 veterans say the government hasn't given them enough help

% of veterans saying the government has given them, as a veteran, ____ as/than it should have



Note: Share of respondents who didn't offer an answer not shown.
Source: Survey of U.S. veterans conducted May 14-June 3, 2019.
"The American Veteran Experience and the Post-9/11 Generation"

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There is a significant gap between pre- and post-9/11 veterans on this measure. While 68% of pre-9/11 veterans say they've gotten about as much help as they should from the government, only about half (49%) of post-9/11 veterans say the same. Some 43% of post-9/11 veterans say they've gotten less help from the government than they should have.

White veterans are more likely than nonwhite veterans to say the government has given them the right amount of help (67% vs. 55%). Four-in-ten nonwhite veterans – compared with 23% of white veterans – say the government hasn't given them as much help as it should have.

Veterans who had emotionally traumatic experiences related to their military service, as well as those who have suffered from PTS, are significantly more likely than other veterans to say the government hasn't done enough for them. Among those who had traumatic experiences, 43% say the government hasn't done enough for them; 25% of those who haven't had these types of experiences say the same. Veterans who have suffered from PTS are about twice as likely as those who have not to say the government hasn't done enough to help them (54% vs. 25%).

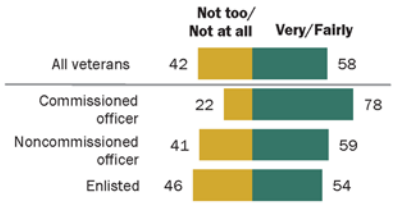
3. The transition to post-military employment

For many veterans, finding a job after leaving the military is an important part of the transition to civilian life. A majority of veterans say their military service was useful in giving them the skills and training they needed for a job outside the military – 29% say it was very useful and another 29% say it was fairly useful.

Veterans who served as commissioned officers are much more likely than either noncommissioned offers (NCOs) or enlisted personnel to say that their military service was very or fairly useful in giving them the skills needed for a job outside the military (78% of commissioned officers say this compared with 59% of NCOs and 54% of enlisted personnel).

Commissioned officers are largely positive on the usefulness of job skills gained in the military

% of veterans saying their military service was ___ useful in giving them the skills and training they needed for a job outside the military



Note: Based on those who had a job or looked for a job after they left the military. Share of respondents who didn't offer an answer not shown.
Source: Survey of U.S. veterans conducted May 14-June 3, 2019. "The American Veteran Experience and the Post-9/11 Generation"

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While there are not significant differences between veterans who served in combat and those who didn't in terms of how they assess the usefulness of their military service, there are differences by number of deployments. Veterans who were deployed three or more times are more likely to say their military service was very or fairly useful in giving them the skills and training needed for a civilian job compared with veterans who were deployed two or fewer times (71% vs. 53%). There is little difference between those veterans who have never been deployed (54%) and those who have been deployed one or two times (51%).

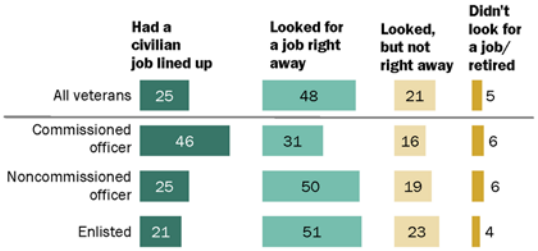
Most veterans either had a job lined up or looked for a job right away after leaving the military

One-in-four veterans say they had a civilian job lined up after they left the military. About half (48%) say they didn't have a job lined up but looked for one right away, 21% looked for a job but not right away, and 5% did not look for a job at all or retired from working.

Veterans who served as commissioned officers while on active duty are about twice as likely as those who were NCOs or enlisted personnel to say they had a civilian job lined up when they left the military (46% of commissioned officers vs. 25% of NCOs and 21% of enlisted). About half of NCOs (50%) and enlisted personnel (51%) say they looked for a civilian job directly after leaving the military.

Officers about twice as likely as enlisted and NCOs to have had a job lined up when they left the military

% of veterans saying that, after they left the military, they ...



Note: Share of respondents who didn't offer an answer not shown.
Source: Survey of U.S. veterans conducted May 14-June 3, 2019.
"The American Veteran Experience and the Post-9/11 Generation"

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The timing of the transition to employment for veterans does not differ significantly based on the types of experiences they had while on active duty. Veterans who say they had emotionally traumatic or distressing experiences related to their military service are just as likely as those who did not have these types of experiences to say they had a job lined up when they left the military (24% and 26%, respectively). And among those who didn't already have a job lined up, similar shares say they looked for a job right away after leaving the military (64% and 66%).

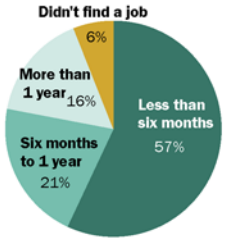
A closer look at post-9/11 veterans who did not have a job lined up directly after the completion of their military service shows that, regardless of when they started looking, 57% say it took them less than six months to find a job. An additional 21% say they had a job within a year of the start of their search. Some 16% say it took them more than a year to find a job, and 6% say they were not able to find one.

Overall, about half of veterans say they enrolled in school after they left the military, either full-time (26%) or part-time (21%), and post-9/11 veterans are more likely to have enrolled in school full-time after leaving the military than veterans who previously served (36% vs. 24%).

Female veterans are more likely than their male counterparts to say they enrolled in school after leaving the military (60% vs. 46%). And veterans who served as NCOs are more likely than either commissioned officers or enlisted personnel to say they enrolled in school (55% of NCOs vs. 40% of commissioned officers and 44% of enlisted).

About half of post-9/11 veterans found a job less than six months after starting their search

Among those who looked for a job after leaving the military, % of post-9/11 veterans saying they found one in ...



Note: Share of respondents who didn't offer an answer not shown.
Source: Survey of U.S. veterans conducted May 14-June 3, 2019.
"The American Veteran Experience and the Post-9/11 Generation"

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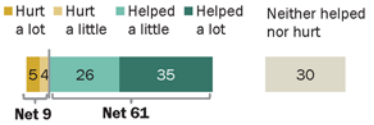
Most post-9/11 veterans say their military experience helped them get their first job after leaving the military

Among post-9/11 veterans who found a job after leaving the military, a majority (61%) say their military service helped their ability to get their first job following their time in service, including 35% of veterans who say it helped a lot. Only about one-in-ten of these veterans say their military service hurt their ability to find a job, while 30% say their military service neither helped nor hurt.

While most post-9/11 veterans say their military service was an advantage when it came to getting their post-military job, many say that job was not a perfect fit. About four-in-ten (42%) say they felt overqualified for their first job after leaving the military based on their skills, experience and training; 46% say their qualifications were about right, and 12% felt underqualified.

About six-in-ten post-9/11 veterans say serving in the military helped them get their first job after leaving the military

% of post-9/11 veterans who say that serving in the military ____ their ability to get their first job after they left the military



Note: Based on post-9/11 veterans who had or found a job after leaving the military. Share of respondents who didn't offer an answer not shown.
Source: Survey of U.S. veterans conducted May 14-June 3, 2019. "The American Veteran Experience and the Post-9/11 Generation"

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Fully 56% of these post-9/11 veterans say they stayed in their first post-military job for more than one year; 44% stayed in their first job for a year or less, including 20% who say they stayed for less than six months.

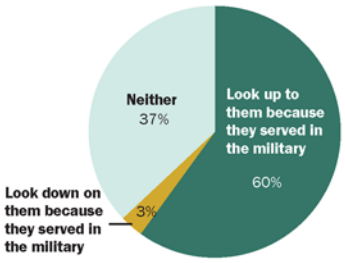
Combat veterans more likely than others to say their coworkers know they served in the military

In their work life after the military, veterans report that their veteran status comes into play to varying degrees. Among all those who are currently employed, 28% of veterans say the people they interact with at work mostly don't know about their previous military service. This is more likely to be the case for pre-9/11 veterans than for those who served after 9/11: 32% and 18%, respectively, say people they work with mostly don't know they served in the military.

Veterans who were never deployed are more likely than those who were to say that, for the most part, the people they work with do not know they served in the military (41% vs. 21%). Similarly, those who did not serve in combat are more likely than those who did to say people at work don't know they are veterans (33% vs. 17%).

Many veterans say people at work look up to them because of their military service

Among employed veterans who say the people they interact with at work know they are a veteran, % saying those people generally ...



Note: Share of respondents who didn't offer an answer not shown.
Source: Survey of U.S. veterans conducted May 14-June 3, 2019. "The American Veteran Experience and the Post-9/11 Generation"

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For those veterans whose veteran status *is* well known at work, this is largely a positive thing. Six-in-ten employed veterans whose coworkers are aware of their military service say people they interact with at work generally look up to them because of their military experience, only 3% say people look down on them because they served in the military, and 37% say people neither look up to nor down on them.

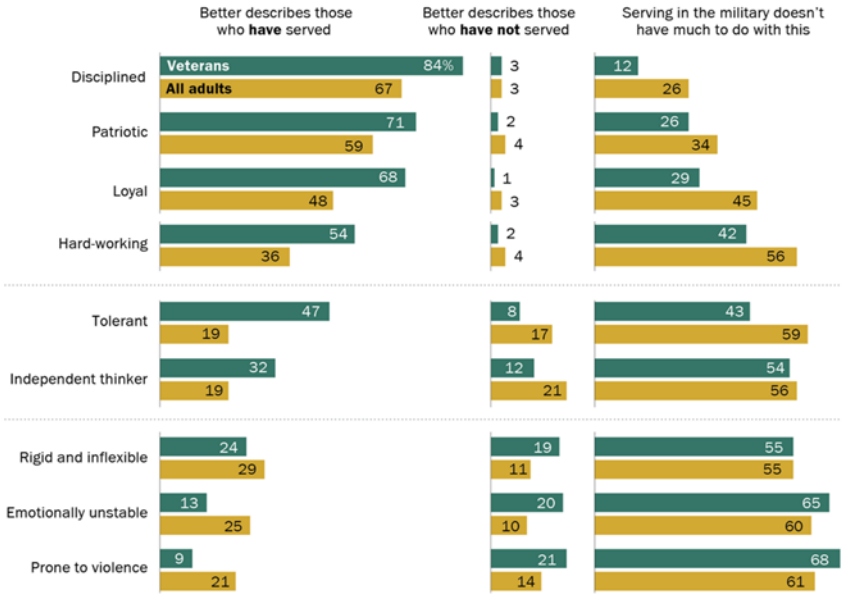
These responses are similar across eras. Among veterans who served prior to 9/11, 61% of those who say people they interact with at work know they are veterans say those people look up to them because they served in the military. Among post-9/11 veterans, that share is 58%.

4. How veterans and the public see each other and themselves

Large shares among veterans and the U.S. public say people who have served in the military are more disciplined, patriotic and loyal than those who have not served. And about a third or more in

Majorities among veterans and the public say being disciplined and patriotic better describe those who have served in the military than those who have not

% of veterans/all adults saying each word or phrase ...



Note: Share of respondents who didn't offer an answer not shown.
Source: Surveys of U.S. veterans conducted May 14-June 3, 2019, and U.S. adults conducted May 14-24, 2019.
"The American Veteran Experience and the Post-9/11 Generation"

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both groups say veterans are more hard-working. Still, when it comes to things like being tolerant and open to all groups, the public is less likely to see this as a trait associated with military service than veterans are themselves.

Fully 84% of veterans and 67% of all adults say the term "disciplined" better describes people who have served in the military. Roughly one-quarter of all adults (26%) and 12% of veterans say that serving in the military does not have much to do with this trait. Just 3% of both groups say being disciplined better describes people who have not served in the military.

Similarly, about seven-in-ten veterans (71%) and 59% of adults say "patriotic" better describes people who have served in the military. About one-quarter of veterans (26%) and 34% of adults say being patriotic has little to do with military service. Here again, small shares say this trait better describes people who have not served in the military (2% of veterans and 4% of the public).

While a majority of veterans (54%) say the term "hard-working" better describes those who have served in the military, a majority of the public (56%) says this characteristic is not necessarily related to military background. About a third (36%) of all adults say this trait better describes those who served in the military. Small shares of veterans (2%) and the public (4%) say hard-working better describes those who have not been in the military.

The pattern is similar when it comes to loyalty. About seven-in-ten veterans (68%) say being "loyal" better describes those who have served in the military than those who haven't. Among the public, 48% say this trait better describes military veterans, but roughly the same share (45%) says serving in the military doesn't have much to do with being loyal. Again, very few veterans (1%) or members of the public (3%) say loyalty better describes those who have not served in the military.

Veterans and the public are especially divided in thinking about tolerance and openness. While 47% of veterans say being "tolerant and open to all groups of people" better describes those who have served in the military than those who have not, just 19% of all adults say the same – a 28 percentage point gap. Roughly six-in-ten adults (59%) say being in the military has nothing to do with tolerance, as do 43% of veterans. Among all adults, 17% say being tolerant better describes those who have not been in the military; 8% of veterans say the same.

There are several traits and characteristics that majorities of both veterans and the public say have little to do with having served in the military. One such trait is being an "independent thinker." Some 54% of veterans and 56% of all adults say serving in the military doesn't have much to do with this. Among those who do see a military-civilian difference on this trait, veterans are more

likely to say this better describes those who have served in the military, while the public is more evenly divided.

Similarly, when it comes to being "rigid and inflexible," more than half of veterans and the public (55% each) say being in the military has nothing to do with this. About one-quarter of veterans (24%) say being rigid and inflexible better describes those who have served in the military; a similar share of all Americans say the same (29%). Still, roughly two-in-ten veterans (19%) say being inflexible better describes those who have not been in the military, compared with 11% of all Americans.

Most veterans and members of the public say that being "emotionally unstable" and being "prone to violence" are traits that are not related to having been in the military. In both cases, the public is more likely to associate these traits with those who have served in the military than veterans are. One-in-four adults say being emotionally unstable better describes those who have served in the military than those who haven't, and 21% say the same about being prone to violence. Smaller shares of the public say these traits better describe those who haven't served. Just the opposite is true of veterans – they are more likely to see these traits as associated with those who have not served in the military.

Acknowledgments

Pew Research Center received invaluable advice in developing the questionnaire from Meredith Kleykamp, Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Maryland.

This report is a collaborative effort based on the input and analysis of the following individuals. Find related reports online at pewresearch.org/socialtrends

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In addition, the project benefited greatly from the guidance of the Pew Research Center methodology team: Courtney Kennedy, Andrew Mercer, Nick Bertoni, Nick Hatley and Arnold Lau.

Methodology

Overview

This study included both a general population sample of U.S. adults and a sample of U.S. military veterans. The sample of U.S. adults (n=1,087) was fielded using the KnowledgePanel, which is a probability-based online survey panel maintained by Ipsos. The target population for the general population sample was non-institutionalized adults ages 18 and older and living in the United States, including Alaska and Hawaii.

In order to achieve a reliable sample size of veterans, two online probability-based panels were used: KnowledgePanel and Pew Research Center's American Trends Panel (ATP). The subsample from the ATP was selected by sampling all active panelists who reported being a veteran in the annual profile survey. All active panelists from Ipsos' KnowledgePanel who reported being a veteran were sampled. KnowledgePanel veterans were screened and allowed to fully complete the survey if they confirmed they were a veteran who served after Sept. 11, 2001 (post-9/11). In total, 1,284 veterans responded to the survey.

The general population survey was conducted May 14 to May 24, 2019, and the veteran survey was conducted May 14 to June 3, 2019. Interviewing was conducted in both English and Spanish.

About the Ipsos KnowledgePanel

KnowledgePanel members are recruited through probability sampling methods and include those with internet access and those who did not have internet access at the time of their recruitment (KnowledgePanel provides internet access for those who do not have it, and if needed, a device to access the internet when they join the panel). A combination of random-digit dialing (RDD) and address-based sampling (ABS) methodologies have been used to recruit panel members (in 2009 KnowledgePanel switched its sampling methodology for recruiting members from RDD to ABS). KnowledgePanel continually recruits new panel members throughout the year to offset panel attrition as people leave the panel.

About the American Trends Panel

The American Trends Panel (ATP), created by Pew Research Center, is a nationally representative panel of randomly selected U.S. adults. Panelists participate via self-administered web surveys. Panelists who do not have internet access at home are provided with a tablet and wireless internet connection. The panel is being managed by Ipsos.

The ATP was created in 2014, with the first cohort of panelists invited to join the panel at the end of a large, national, landline and cellphone random-digit-dial survey that was conducted in both English and Spanish. Two additional recruitments were conducted using the same method in 2015 and 2017, respectively. Across these three surveys, a total of 19,718 adults were invited to join the ATP, of which 9,942 agreed to participate.

American Trends Panel recruitment surveys

Recruitment dates	Mode	Invited	Joined	Active panelists remaining
Jan. 23 to March 16, 2014	Landline/ cell RDD	9,809	5,338	2,504
Aug. 27 to Oct. 4, 2015	Landline/ cell RDD	6,004	2,976	1,465
April 25 to June 4, 2017	Landline/ cell RDD	3,905	1,628	801
Aug. 8 to Oct. 31, 2018	ABS/web	9,396	8,778	8,692
	Total	**29,114**	**18,720**	**13,462**

Note: Approximately once per year, panelists who have not participated in multiple consecutive waves or who did not complete an annual profiling survey are removed from the panel. Panelists also become inactive if they ask to be removed from the panel.

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In August 2018, the ATP switched from telephone to address-based recruitment. Invitations were sent to a random, address-based sample (ABS) of households selected from the U.S. Postal Service's Delivery Sequence File. In each household, the adult with the next birthday was asked to go online to complete a survey, at the end of which they were invited to join the panel. For a random half-sample of invitations, households without internet access were instructed to return a postcard. These households were contacted by telephone and sent a tablet if they agreed to participate. A total of 9,396 were invited to join the panel, and 8,778 agreed to join the panel and completed an initial profile survey. Of the 18,720 individuals who have ever joined the ATP, 13,462 remained active panelists and continued to receive survey invitations at the time this survey was conducted.

The U.S. Postal Service's Delivery Sequence File has been estimated to cover as much as 98% of the population, although some studies suggest that the coverage could be in the low 90% range.[3]

Response rate

Out of 7,570 who were sampled, 3,758 were eligible to take the survey, out of which a total of 2,371 panelists responded, for a response rate of 63.1%. This included 971 ATP members and 1,400 respondents sampled from Ipsos' KnowledgePanel. This does not include seven respondents who were removed from the data due to extremely high rates of refusal or straightlining and two who were removed after they were deemed ineligible based on an open-ended response given when asked which branch of the military they served in. The cumulative response rate accounting for

[3] AAPOR Task Force on Address-based Sampling. 2016. "AAPOR Report: Address-based Sampling."

nonresponse to the recruitment surveys and attrition is 1.6%. The break-off rate among panelists who logged onto the survey and completed at least one item is 1%. The margin of sampling error for the sample of 1,284 veteran respondents is plus or minus 3.9 percentage points. The margin of sampling error for the sample of 1,087 general population respondents is plus or minus 3.1 percentage points.

Weighting

The final survey dataset contains two sample weight variables: one for the total general population adult sample and one for the total combined ATP+KP veteran sample. Each weight was created with a base weight reflecting the probability of selection followed by calibration to known demographics of the target population.

Veterans weight

For the veterans weight, Ipsos scaled the KP and ATP base weights proportional to effective sample size. Then they downweighted the combined ATP and KP post-9/11 veterans to be 19.42% of the combined sample (based on ACS benchmark). Finally, the weight was raked to benchmark veteran population demographic targets computed from the 2017 American Community Survey.

Raking dimensions and source for population estimates for veterans weight

Raking dimension^	Source
Era Served (2)	2017 American Community Survey 1-Year PUMS
Gender (2) x Era Served (2)	2017 American Community Survey 1-Year PUMS
Age (4,5) x Era Served (2)*	2017 American Community Survey 1-Year PUMS
Education (3) x Era Served (2)	2017 American Community Survey 1-Year PUMS
Race/Ethnicity (4) x Era Served (2)	2017 American Community Survey 1-Year PUMS
Region (4) x Era Served (2)	2017 American Community Survey 1-Year PUMS

^ The numbers of categories (prior to any collapsing from small cell size) are shown in parentheses.
*Age split differed by Era Served

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Weights were scaled to sum to the unweighted sample size of qualified veterans. Weights were then trimmed separately among post and pre-9/11 veterans.

General population adult weight

For the general population weight, Ipsos started with the KnowledgePanel base weights and then raked to national demographic targets for the age 18+ population on the following variables computed from the Current Population Survey and the American Community Survey:

Raking dimensions and source for population estimates for general population adult weight

Raking dimension^	Source
Gender (2) x Age (4)	2018 March CPS
Race/Ethnicity (5)	2018 March CPS
Region (4) x MSA (2)	2018 March CPS
Education (4)	2018 March CPS
Income (6)	2018 March CPS
Language Proficiency (4)	2017 American Community Survey

^ The numbers of categories (prior to any collapsing from small cell size) are shown in parentheses.

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Weights were scaled to sum to the unweighted sample size of the general population adult respondents.

Precision of estimates

In addition to sampling error, one should bear in mind that question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of opinion polls.

The following table shows the unweighted sample sizes and the error attributable to sampling that would be expected at the 95% level of confidence for different groups in the survey:

Group	Unweighted sample size	Plus or minus ...
Veteran sample	1,284	3.9 percentage points
Gen Pop sample	1,087	3.1 percentage points

Sample sizes and sampling errors for other subgroups are available upon request.

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Statement for the Record

CARRIE M. FARMER, CODIRECTOR OF THE RAND EPSTEIN FAMILY VETERANS POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE

Lessons from RAND Research on How Nonprofit Organizations Help Veterans Thrive After Service

CT-A4507-1
Statement for the Record submitted to U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs on November 5, 2025

For more information on this publication, visit **www.rand.org/t/CTA4507-1**.

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CT-A4507-1

Lessons from RAND Research on How Nonprofit Organizations Help Veterans Thrive After Service

Statement for the Record by Carrie M. Farmer, Ph.D.[1]
RAND[2]

Submitted to the Committee on Veterans' Affairs
United States Senate

November 5, 2025

Chairman Moran, Ranking Member Blumenthal, and distinguished Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide a statement for the record addressing the vital issue of how our nation supports service members to ensure a successful transition to civilian life. Research conducted within the RAND Epstein Family Veterans Policy Research Institute between 2022 and 2025 shows that nonprofit organizations play a critical role in this process. Veterans may face diverse and interconnected challenges, ranging from housing affordability to food insecurity to health care access.[3] In this statement, at the request of the committee, I will focus on three areas in which RAND has recently conducted and published research about the role of nonprofit organizations: helping veterans secure high-quality employment, building and strengthening social connections in their communities, and preventing suicide. Strengthening coordination between government agencies, employers, and community-based organizations and measuring and evaluating outcomes of these efforts will be

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[1] The opinions and conclusions expressed in this statement are the author's alone and should not be interpreted as representing those of RAND or any of the sponsors of its research. Heather M. Salazar significantly contributed to the writing of this statement.

[2] RAND is a research organization that develops solutions to public policy challenges to help make communities throughout the world safer, healthier, and more prosperous. RAND is nonprofit, nonpartisan, and committed to the public interest. RAND's mission is enabled through its core values of quality and objectivity and its commitment to integrity and ethical behavior. RAND subjects its research publications to a robust and exacting quality-assurance process; avoids financial and other conflicts of interest through staff training, project screening, and a policy of mandatory disclosure; and pursues transparency through the open publication of research findings and recommendations, disclosure of the source of funding of published research, and policies to ensure intellectual independence. This testimony is not a research publication, but witnesses affiliated with RAND routinely draw on relevant research conducted in the organization.

[3] RAND's body of research on these topics is available at RAND Corporation, "RAND Epstein Family Veterans Policy Research Institute," webpage, undated, https://www.rand.org/education-employment-infrastructure/centers/veterans-policy-research.html.

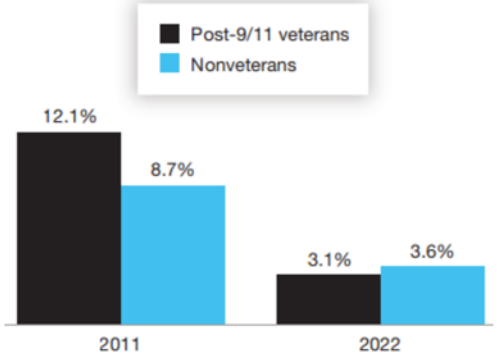
essential to ensure that every veteran has a smooth transition to civilian life and thrives after military service.

In this statement, I will focus on three themes from RAND research and how nonprofit organizations contribute to the success of veterans after their military service. I will address (1) the support nonprofit organizations provide to assist transitioning service members in finding employment, (2) the opportunities nonprofit organizations provide for veterans to connect with others, and (3) the programs and resources provided by nonprofit organizations to help prevent veteran suicide. My statement will conclude by identifying areas to improve coordination and effectiveness.

Employment Support

As of August 2025, veteran unemployment was lower than nonveteran unemployment, (3.1 percent versus 4.2 percent).[4] This comparison is a dramatic departure from that of 2011 when the unemployment rate among veterans was substantially *higher* than nonveterans (see Figure 1). Nonprofit organizations have been critical in reducing veteran unemployment by helping transitioning veterans find jobs after the military and supporting other veterans in job transitions.

Figure 1. Changing Rates of Unemployment: Veterans and Nonveterans



SOURCES: Adapted from Carrie M. Farmer, Kayla M. Williams, and Meredith Kleykamp, eds., *The Role, Effectiveness, and Sustainability of Nonprofit Organizations That Provide Employment Support for Veterans*, RAND Corporation, RR-A1363-10, 2024, Figure S.1, p. v. Features data from U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Employment Situation of Veterans—2011," news release, USDL-12-0493, March 20, 2012; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Employment Situation of Veterans—2022," news release, USDL23-0537, March 21, 2023.

[4] U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics, "Veteran Unemployment Rates," webpage, last updated September 5, 2025, https://www.dol.gov/agencies/vets/latest-numbers.

In our 2024 report, *The Role, Effectiveness, and Sustainability of Nonprofit Organizations That Provide Employment Support for Veterans,*[5] we examined the landscape of nonprofit organizations focused on veteran employment. We found that veteran-serving nonprofit organizations complement and supplement federal programs and initiatives to address veteran employment.

Our analysis identified a number of ways nonprofit organizations help veterans secure meaningful employment:

- **Offering one-on-one career counseling and skills translation** to help veterans connect their military experiences and skills to civilian job market terminology and criteria.[6] While federal programs tend to offer a one-size-fits-all approach to employment, nonprofit organizations have taken a tailored approach to work with veterans, shifting from broader venues, such as job fairs, to more personalized assistance for veterans.
- **Providing job placement and apprenticeships,** including via partnerships with employers who value military experience.
- **Supporting veterans to achieve credentials and licensure** required for certain jobs.
- **Delivering short-term financial assistance** (e.g., housing stipends, emergency grants) to reduce stress during times of critical need.

Many employment-focused nonprofit organizations provide services to all veterans, although some organizations specifically focus on serving at-risk veteran populations who are struggling to navigate into the civilian job market. While the overall unemployment rate among veterans is low, some groups of veterans have higher rates of unemployment and benefit from this type of targeted support. For example, younger veterans (ages 18–24) have an unemployment rate of 5.1 percent and veterans with disabilities have an unemployment rate of 5.7 percent.[7] In addition, veterans with *other than honorable* (OTH) or so-called bad paper discharges often face particularly high barriers to care, employment, and benefits because they are ineligible for many U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) services and programs. Nonprofit and community-based organizations serve as critical lifelines for these veterans through specialized one-on-one counseling—not just for employment but also for peer mentoring and mental health support, as I discuss in the following sections.[8]

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[5] Farmer, Williams, and Kleykamp, 2024, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1363-10.html.

[6] For a new analysis on translating military skills to the civilian job market, Aaron Strong and Jeffrey B. Wenger, *Translating Military Skills into Energy and Infrastructure Careers: Occupational Matches, Credentials, and State Planning Guidance*, RAND Corporation, RR-A4152-1, 2025, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA4152-1.html.

[7] Syracuse University D'Aniello Institute for Veterans & Military Families, "The Employment Situation of Veterans—August 2025," September 5, 2025, https://ivmf.syracuse.edu/article/the-employment-situation-of-veterans-august-2025/; and U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics, "Veteran Unemployment Rates," webpage, undated, https://www.dol.gov/agencies/vets/latest-numbers.

[8] Angela K. Clague, Heather M. Salazar, Stephanie Brooks Holliday, Mary Lowe Mayhugh, Jim Craig, and Rajeev Ramchand, *The Veterans Left Behind: Eligibility for Department of Veterans Affairs Benefits and Other Than Honorable Discharges*, RAND Corporation, PE-A1363-13, September 2024, https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PEA1363-13.html.

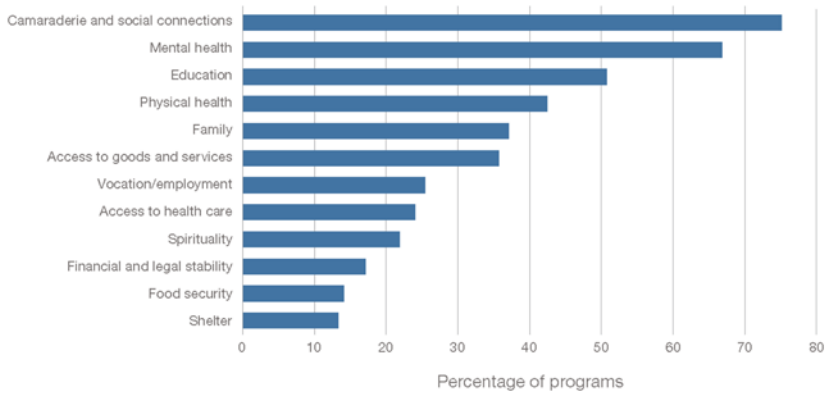
Social Connections and Belonging

Veteran-serving organizations play a vital role in supporting veterans' integration as they transition from the tight-knit military community to civilian life. However, little is known about how these programs strengthen social connections, reduce isolation, or measure their success in achieving those aims. RAND's 2023 report *What Are Organizations Doing to Strengthen Veterans' Social Connections?* drew on a national survey, interviews, and a new program typology to examine what programs are available to help build social connectedness, how they measure success, and where organizations need additional help to evaluate and improve their efforts.

In this study, RAND researchers sought to examine how different programs work to strengthen social connectedness and reduce isolation among U.S. military veterans. The team assessed the characteristics of 82 organizations across the country that responded to a survey.[9] These organizations ranged in size and geographic location, with 44 percent of them having an annual budget of $250,000 or less. On average, these organizations had been serving veterans for 21 years. Collectively, these organizations operate 292 veteran wellness programs, in many cases offering programs intended to support different aspects of veteran health and well-being in addition to helping veterans build social connections. As shown in Figure 2, while the vast majority of programs (75 percent) were focused on activities to build camaraderie and social connections among veterans, these nonprofit organizations also addressed other aspects of veteran wellness, including mental health, education needs, and physical health.

[9] For a full list of participating organizations, see Laura Werber, Jessica Phillips, and Lauren Skrabala, *What Are Organizations Doing to Strengthen Veterans' Social Connections?* RAND Corporation, RR-A1363-4, 2023, pp. 20–21.

Figure 2. Share of Programs Offering Support for Various Aspects of Veteran Wellness



SOURCE: Reproduced from Werber, Phillips, and Skrabala, 2023, Figure 2, p. 6. Data are from the 2022 RAND Veteran Social Connectedness Survey.
NOTE: *N* = 292 programs across 82 veteran-serving organizations. Respondents could select more than one domain.

Nonprofit organizations facilitated social connectedness in three distinct ways: (1) providing a context for social connections, (2) brokering connections on behalf of veterans, and (3) restoring veterans' capacity to connect with others through one-on-one interactions and other strategies, such as working with animals. One director of a program that pairs veterans with animals described this capacity-building approach as follows:

> What we found is that people want to be around their horse, and they want to keep coming back because that was really great to be working with the horses. . . . [People] feel like they can unfold and open up in their own time and talk through the horses as well. . . . [I]t takes a while for people to feel comfortable with each other and, especially, with people coming into civilian life. So really having that pressure off of them, [not] having to really have these connections right away with each other. If they're just not there, and it's making them really out of their comfort zone, we have the horses to help them feel comfortable and regulate it, and we work up to working as a group.[10]

To understand how organizations work to achieve those goals, RAND researchers developed a program typology. Figure 3 shows this typology and how it applies to the survey sample. Across the 14 types of programs included in the typology, the most common one was physical and outdoor recreation programs featuring active engagement with other veterans in such

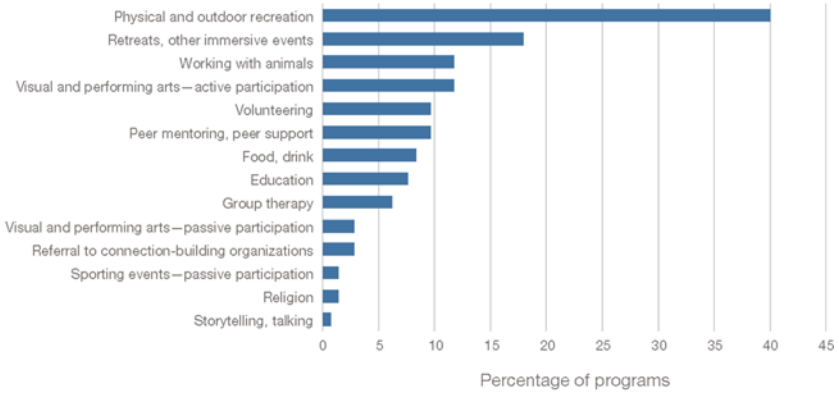
[10] Werber, Phillips, and Skrabala, 2023, p. 9.

activities as hiking, water sports, or hunting.[11] These activities provide an informal, collegial environment to help veterans experience camaraderie and a sense of belonging. One organization explained its role in steering veterans toward a new sense of purpose:

> I want our veterans to see there are 200-plus organizations out there that you can engage in, and you can find that thing that you're passionate about and get involved and volunteer and serve a higher cause once again. . . . We just provide that opportunity for it to happen.[12]

Other leading programs offered by surveyed organizations included retreats, working with animals, and participating in the arts (Figure 3). About 10 percent of programs were designed to offer peer support and mentoring, which emphasize a shared experience, creating one-on-one or group peer connections. In these programs, veterans build trust and social confidence as they engage with others who have faced similar transitions. Likewise, programs that engage veterans in community service or volunteering provide meaningful opportunities to serve, while fostering teamwork, empathy, and reintegration into the broader community, bridging the military-civilian divide.

Figure 3. Prevalence of Various Types of Social Connectedness Programs Offered by Surveyed Nonprofit Organizations



SOURCE: Reproduced from Werber, Phillips, and Skrabala, 2023, Figure 3, p. 8. Data are from the 2022 RAND Veteran Social Connectedness Survey.

[11] Werber, Phillips, Skrabala, 2023, pp. 8–9.

[12] Werber, Phillips, Skrabala, 2023, pp. 8–9.

Supporting Mental Health and Suicide Prevention

Veterans have an increased risk of suicide in the first year following separation from the military, making the accessibility of mental health care during and after transition particularly important.[13] RAND's 2025 report *Preventing Veteran Suicide* shows that nonprofit and community-based organizations play a vital role in preventing veteran suicide, making them a key partner in implementing the national suicide prevention strategy.[14]

Currently, nonprofit organizations are engaged in various types of efforts to prevent veteran suicide. Some of these include, but are not limited to, crisis lines, training programs, media campaigns, family outreach and support, and grant programs. In the 2025 report, RAND researchers conducted a landscape analysis of veteran suicide prevention programs. The team examined 307 programs, of which 156 are currently offered and 228 are proposed,[15] and looked to see who offered them, who accessed them and how, the types of activities offered, and what future programs may look like. Across current and proposed programs, suicide prevention activities were categorized into 26 categories that span a wide landscape, from community partnerships and social connection programs to means safety training and psychological treatment, and so on.[16] The RAND Suicide Prevention Activity Matrix (Figure 4) organizes these activities according to the primary population of focus in the socioecological model (veterans, their community, or society). It also categorizes what the activity aims to accomplish: *primordial* approaches, which address social or environmental conditions; *well-being* activities that promote general well-being and can prevent the development of mental health conditions or raise awareness of resources; *mental health* activities that reduce symptoms, prevent suicidal thought development, or help manage those thoughts; and *crisis response* interventions that prevent those with suicidal thoughts from attempting to take their own lives.[17]

The most common types of suicide prevention activities offered by nonprofit organizations are those that focus on building social connections, as discussed in the previous section, and those that offer case management or noncrisis psychological counseling. Suicide prevention programs that build social connection often offer veteran-to-veteran peer networks that reduce isolation—a major risk factor for suicide. These programs can complement formal clinical care

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[13] Rajeev Ramchand and Tahina Montoya, *Suicide Among Veterans*, RAND Corporation PE-A1363-1, May 2025, https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PEA1363-1-v2.html.

[14] Rajeev Ramchand, Ben Senator, Jordan P. Davis, Wendy Hawkins, Lisa H. Jaycox, Julia Lejeune, Whitney S. Livingston, Alicia Revitsky Locker, Benjamin Trachik, and Alison Athey, *Preventing Veteran Suicide: A Landscape Analysis of Existing Programs, Their Evidence, and What the Next Generation of Programs May Look Like*, RAND Corporation, RR-A3635-1, 2025, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA3635-1.html.

[15] Of the 307 programs, 156 currently offer at least one veteran suicide prevention activity, and 226 proposed one or more activities to Mission Daybreak or Face the Fight; many programs proposed to expand or create new activities, which is why the number of current and proposed programs is 307 and not 382 (i.e., 156 + 226) (Ramchand et al., 2025, p. 19).

[16] *Means safety training* programs are ones in which individuals are taught how to put "time and space between a person at rick of suicide and the means to take one's own life (e.g., firearm storage, prescription drug disposal, bridge barrier)" (Ramchand et al., 2025, pp. 16, 19).

[17] Ramchand et al., 2025, pp. 8–10.

by creating a strong sense of belonging and understanding through shared activities, peer support, and community engagement—factors known to protect against suicide.[18] While their specific impact on suicide prevention has not been extensively studied, well-supported evidence links social connectedness with lower posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms, depression, and suicidal ideation.[19] These initiatives often operate within broader wellness or recreation efforts—such as retreats, arts, volunteering, and peer networks—and increasingly use such approaches as *social prescribing*, or referring individuals to nonmedical social settings and supports, to reduce isolation.[20]

Nonprofit organizations are in a unique position to help veterans who may be at risk for suicide either during or after their transition to civilian life. Many at-risk veterans do not seek or qualify for VA services, but they may have connections within the community, providing nonprofit organizations the opportunity to engage these veterans early and effectively. In addition, because nonprofit organizations are smaller and more agile than the federal government, they can adapt quickly to individual and community needs. They can tailor their programs to specific populations (such as rural veterans, women veterans, or those from minority backgrounds) in ways that large federal systems sometimes find difficult. And as previously mentioned, nonprofit organizations often act as a bridge between veterans and VA and other services to help veterans with employment, housing, or financial support—all factors that are closely linked to mental health issues and suicide risk.

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[18] Ramchand et al., 2025, pp. 37–38.

[19] Ramchand et al., 2025, p. 38.

[20] Ramchand et al., 2025, pp. 37–39, 51–52.

Figure 4. RAND Suicide Prevention Activity Matrix

	VETERAN	COMMUNITY	SOCIETY
Crisis response	• Crisis psychological clinical services • Pharmacotherapy (e.g., ketamine) • Means safety • Suicide postvention[a] • Post-hospitalization outreach • Peer-led mental health programs	• Gatekeeper training • Clinician training • Means safety • Clinical practice guidelines	• Means safety
Mental health/ Crisis response	• Suicide risk assessment • Real-time mental health monitoring systems • Means safety	• Suicide risk assessment • Clinician training • Clinical practice guidelines • Gatekeeper training • Real-time mental health monitoring systems	
Mental health	• Social connection programs • Multifunctional digital health platforms • Peer-led mental health programs • Noncrisis psychological treatment • Suicide risk assessment (to monitor changes in suicidality over time) • Pharmacotherapy • Medical devices • Suicide postvention • Religious or spiritual programming	• Clinician training • Suicide postvention • Clinical practice guidelines • Suicide risk assessment (to monitor changes in suicidality over time)	
Mental health supports	• Case management or care coordination • Multifunctional digital health platforms • Real-time mental health monitoring systems • Peer-led mental health programs • Expressive arts • Animal-assisted programs • Wellness retreats • Gaming • Physical activity, recreation, or exercise • Religious or spiritual programming • Support with social determinants of health	• Activities that support community members so that they can deliver mental health activities (e.g., tools that make tracking and monitoring mental health symptoms easier)	
Well-being	• Social connection programs • Expressive arts • Passive entertainment • Wellness retreats • Media campaigns • Gaming • Physical activity, recreation, or exercise • Religious or spiritual programming • Support with social determinants of health	• Peer-led mental health programs (e.g., support group) • Media campaigns	
Primordial prevention	N/A	N/A	• Community-based suicide prevention initiatives • Means safety • Support with social determinants of health

SOURCE: Reproduced from Ramchand et al., 2025, Figure 1.4, pp. 14–15.

Challenges Nonprofit Organizations Face and Ways to Support Them

Despite the myriad ways in which nonprofit organizations can provide vital support to veterans seeking employment, social connection, and mental well-being, these organizations also face challenges and need additional support. Across the types of organizations studied, two common themes are (1) concerns about sustainability and (2) the need to evaluate how well these organizations meet the needs of the veterans they serve while addressing barriers around a lack or data, resources, and capacity to adequately measure outcomes.

Sustainability

Nonprofit organizations are generally funded through philanthropy, both from private sources (e.g., corporations, foundations) and through individual giving. Many veteran-serving organizations are concerned about changing priorities in philanthropy, noting that in times of relative peace, attention to the needs of veterans tends to wane. Our analysis of employment-focused nonprofits found that, while generally, revenue trends have been strong, traditionally large organizations are experiencing declining budgets.[21]

Strengthening the relationship between veteran-serving nonprofit organizations and the federal government through public-private partnerships is one way to support the sustainability of these organizations. For example, some organizations focused on suicide prevention receive funding through VA's Staff Sergeant Parker Gordon Fox Suicide Prevention Grant Program to assist them in building trusted peer support networks and in tailoring services to local and cultural needs.[22] However, many employment-focused nonprofit organization leaders told us that their programs accept referrals from federal partners but do not receive funding from the federal government to provide services. More-formal arrangements could allow the government to encourage, support, and sustain efforts in priority areas to improve veteran well-being. To be successful, the government should compensate nonprofit organizations for services they provide (e.g., job placements) but also collect performance information to ensure that program objectives are met.

Evaluation

Program evaluation can benefit organizations by providing useful information about which program activities are resulting in improved outcomes for the populations they serve. However, collecting data can be a key challenge for some nonprofit organizations. Surveys can be challenging to implement, especially when there are concerns about overburdening respondents, contributing to survey fatigue, and low response rates. Smaller organizations may not serve a large-enough population to offer an adequate sample size for evaluation. Relatedly, some organizations are unsure of how to best measure outcomes and demonstrate program

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[21] Farmer, Williams, and Kleykamp, 2024.

[22] U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, "Staff Sergeant Parker Gordon Fox Suicide Prevention Grants: About the Program," webpage, last updated August 6, 2025, https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/ssgfox-grants/.

effectiveness.[23] This challenge is exacerbated by insufficient resources: Organizations reported having a small staff or being understaffed and the expense associated with hiring new staff is cost prohibitive.[24]

Because it is imperative that all funders (public, private, and nonprofit) are able to identify which programs are delivering the best outcomes for veterans, grantmakers should incentivize and support adequate data collection, evaluation, and transparent reporting. These activities should involve collaborative efforts between the public and nonprofit sectors by implementing similar evaluations and data collection strategies. The Staff Seargent Parker Gordon Fox Suicide Prevention Grant program is an example of this approach: Grantees are required to collect and report on a set of common outcomes and performance metrics.

Conclusion

RAND's work across these studies emphasizes that successful transition requires coordinated support across domains—mental health, employment, and social belonging. Nonprofit organizations uniquely contribute to these by

- being **flexible and community-rooted,** able to tailor services to individual veterans, taking into account local conditions
- acting as **bridges** between government benefits, private employers, and veteran communities. Nonprofit organizations are most effective when they complement, rather than duplicate, government programs and focus on veterans who may be disconnected to other efforts.
- providing opportunities for veterans to **engage with their local communities**, building social connections post-service and reducing isolation.

Public-sector partners should collaborate with nonprofit organizations that offer unique advantages (as discussed in this statement) through formal public-private partnerships. Such partnerships will support sustainability for these organizations and incentivize better evaluations to facilitate continual improvement of effective programming.

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[23] RAND's free Getting To Outcomes (GTO) evidence-based online tool can support organizations in evaluating or selecting programs or practices (GTO, homepage, undated, https://www.rand.org/education-employment-infrastructure/centers/veterans-policy-research/research/projects/egto.html).

[24] Werber, Phillips, Skrabala, 2023, pp. 16–17.

WESTERN GOVERNORS' ASSOCIATION

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VICE CHAIR

JACK WALDORF
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

November 5, 2025

The Honorable Jerry Moran
Chairman
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
United States Senate
412 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Richard Blumenthal
Ranking Member
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
United States Senate
412 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Moran and Ranking Member Blumenthal:

In light of the Committee's November 5, 2025, hearing, A Grateful Nation: Maximizing Veterans' Success after Service, attached please find Western Governors' Association (WGA) Policy Resolution 2023-08, Veterans.

In the resolution, Western Governors highlight recommendations to address the challenges veterans face after military service, including access to health care, behavioral health services, transportation, and housing. Western Governors also call for stronger congressional oversight to ensure that service members receive comprehensive information on veterans' benefits before transitioning to civilian life.

I request that you include this document in the permanent record of the hearing, as it articulates Western Governors' collective and bipartisan policy on this important issue.

Thank you for your consideration of this request. Please contact me if you have any questions or require further information.

Sincerely,

Jack Waldorf
Executive Director

Attachment

1700 Broadway, Suite 500, Denver, CO 80290 | (303) 623-9378 | WESTGOV.ORG

Policy Resolution 2023-08
Veterans

A. BACKGROUND

American military personnel often return home to a hero's welcome after completing their service, but they face a series of complex challenges. Veterans, whether they volunteered or were drafted, commonly confront a range of issues such as food insecurity, homelessness, unemployment, physical and psychological wounds, and bureaucratic barriers when seeking support services. Western Governors recognize the need to support veterans and address the challenges they face. With one-third of the known veteran population residing in western states, Governors recommend federal regulatory and statutory changes to foster an environment that facilitates access to support services for veterans and encourages further investment in initiatives tailored to assist them.

B. GOVERNORS' POLICY STATEMENT

1. Western Governors urge the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to prioritize the integration of peer support services and behavioral health services for Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) into mental health care models. Additionally, Western Governors urge the VA to address staffing models to support the increasing health concerns for memory care (Dementia, Alzheimer's) and other neurological disorders. VA should also provide continuous training and support for peer specialists and focus on developing and retaining the behavioral health care workforce. Western Governors have highlighted substantive health care workforce recommendations in our health care policy resolution. Ongoing evaluations should be conducted to ensure effective implementation of these practices, which should be disseminated across all VA health care settings to ensure broad access to peer support services for all veterans.

2. Western Governors acknowledge the importance of the VA Governor's Challenge and urge VA to continue its provision of support for programs aimed at effectively addressing the issue of veterans' suicide.

3. Recognizing the need to improve health program services for women veterans, Western Governors urge VA to take urgent action to address gaps in the VA health care system. Improving the promotion of, access to, and the quality of health care for women veterans is essential and requires timely and effective measures to be implemented across VA. Western Governors recommend that VA initiate research programs to study health issues specific to women veterans.

4. Western Governors recognize the significance of expanding access to health care services for veterans, especially those residing in remote areas. VA should take action to increase the accessibility of:

    a. VA Community Care for veterans residing in areas that do not have access to VA health care facilities. It is imperative that VA consult with Governors to ensure

that veterans living in rural areas are not disadvantaged in accessing health care;

b. Vet Centers for veterans living in rural areas, to ensure that they have access to necessary health services and support;

c. Health care professionals in rural areas, to provide flexibility for veterans and allow them to access the health care provider of their choosing; and

d. Telemedicine services, which are a vital tool that can help bridge the gap in accessing health care services.

5. Western Governors recommend that VA seek consultation and input from tribal leaders and communities to inform the development and administration of its programs and services for American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian veterans.

6. To ensure that veterans have timely access to high-quality health care, Western Governors recommend that Congress prioritize providing VA with the necessary resources, authority, and ability to recruit, hire, train, and retain health care professionals. This includes physicians, nurses, mental and behavioral health providers, long-term care professionals, and administrative staff. In addition, Western Governors believe VA should streamline the hiring process, offer competitive salaries and benefits, and provide ongoing training and professional development opportunities for health care professionals.

7. Western Governors believe VA should collaborate with states and territories to improve and expand the Highly Rural Transportation Grants program. This includes identifying counties that require assistance, simplifying the application and implementation process, and consulting early with Governors for valuable input on their state's needs. Additionally, VA should reevaluate and expand the current eligibility criteria to ensure that more veterans can benefit from the program.

8. Western Governors urge VA to conduct a comprehensive evaluation of the Veteran Transportation Services (VTS) exam and implement necessary revisions to reduce its complexity, facilitating the process for individuals to obtain a license to transport veterans to VA health care facilities and authorized non-VA health care appointments.

9. Western Governors call on VA to improve community care for veterans by enforcing timely referrals and appointments, particularly for programs like VA Community Care. VA should also streamline reimbursement processes to third-party health care providers in line with industry standards and ensure prompt access to services and increased provider participation.

10. To ensure that our nation's veterans receive the benefits and services they are entitled to in a timely and efficient manner, Western Governors urge VA to continue to improve and streamline the claims process, especially with the new Sergeant First Class (SFC) Heath Robinson Honoring our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics (PACT) Act (Pub. L. 117-168) claims.

11. Western Governors recommend that VA implement a policy allowing veterans to select their own care providers, including those who are not affiliated with VA health care

facilities. By doing so, veterans would have greater flexibility and choice when seeking health care services.

12. Western Governors recognize the necessity of conducting a comprehensive review of VA regulations regarding payments for State Veterans Homes and urge VA to consult with states to identify the unique needs of each state. Additionally, Western Governors recommend expanding coverage to include all specialty care services, and prioritize funding for specialized cognitive care.

13. Western Governors recommend that VA authorize and prioritize the expansion of VA programs to provide comprehensive financial support for third-party assisted living and nursing facilities, which offer varying levels of care for long-term care services to our nation's veterans.

14. Western Governors urge Congress to pass legislation that requires VA and the Department of Defense (DOD) to modernize their electronic health record-keeping systems and mandate VA to upgrade its overall technology infrastructure. These upgrades are necessary to streamline access to critical health information, enhance coordination between the two departments, and improve the claims process for veterans, which is a priority for the Governors.

15. Western Governors recommend that the federal government provide funding for state and congressionally chartered Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs) to offset the costs of training and to enhance the workforce capacity of VSOs. This would help to improve the level of support and care provided to veterans and their families by such VSOs, ensuring that they have access to the resources and services they need to thrive.

16. Western Governors emphasize the need for VA to provide Veteran Services Officers with access to vital information, enabling them to better assist veterans in navigating VA's programs and services. This will ensure that veterans receive the support and resources necessary to thrive.

17. Western Governors recommend that VA expand its dental services to all veterans enrolled in the VA health care system, regardless of their service-connected dental issues or other narrow criteria.

18. Western Governors urge Congress to authorize and appropriate funds for VA to provide grants to state, territorial, and tribal governments. The purpose of these grants is to increase outreach and assistance to veterans and their families by raising awareness of benefits and aiding them in applying for VA benefits. Priority should be given to areas with high rates of veteran suicide and a shortage of Veteran Services Officers.

19. Western Governors support the idea that service members should be given the opportunity to receive credit or professional credentials for the training they undergo in the military, which can then be transferred to the private sector or educational institutions. This initiative will help veterans transition into civilian careers by providing them with the necessary credentials and recognition for the skills developed through their military service.

20. Western Governors urge Congress to provide diligent oversight over VA and DOD to ensure that transitioning service members receive comprehensive information on VA benefits at least twelve months prior to their transition to civilian life. This includes ensuring that service members are aware of the full range of programs and support services available to them.

21. Western Governors recommend that VA conduct a comprehensive study on their efforts to reduce homelessness and identify those programs that have provided the highest return on investment.

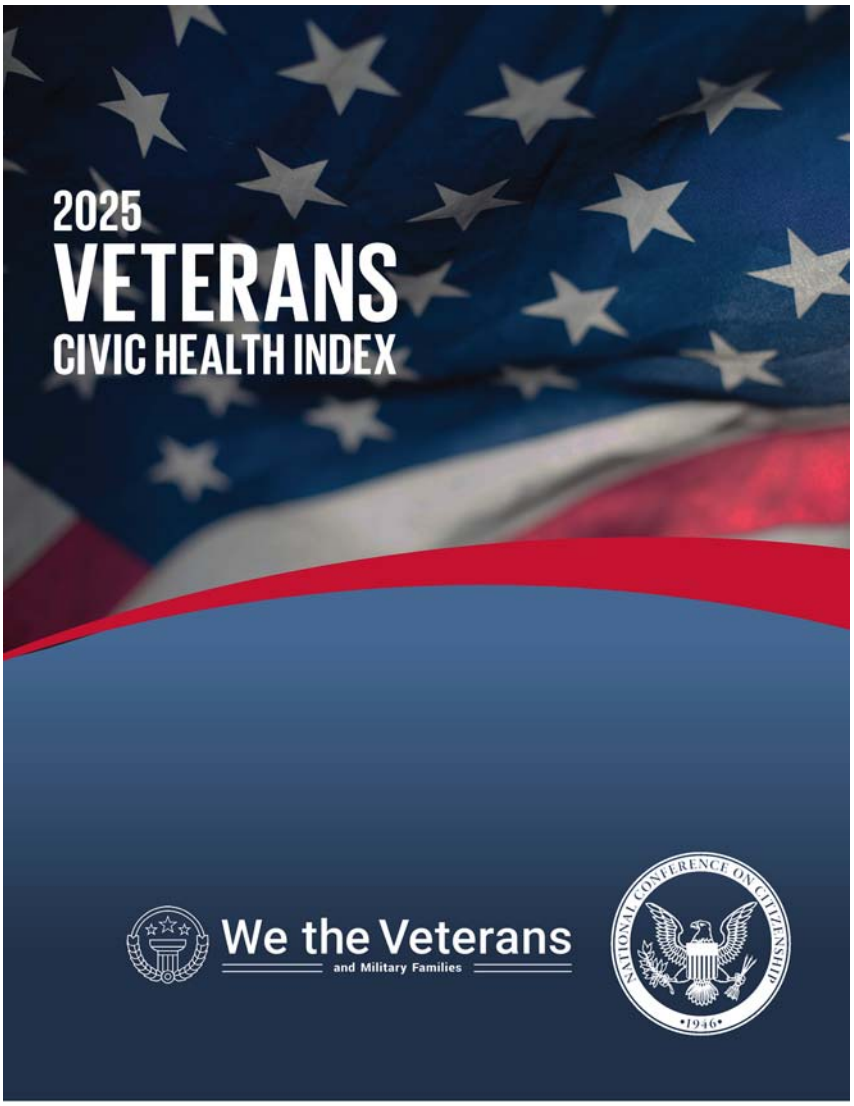
C. GOVERNORS' MANAGEMENT DIRECTIVE

1. The Governors direct WGA staff to work with congressional committees of jurisdiction, the Executive Branch, and other entities, where appropriate, to achieve the objectives of this resolution.

2. Furthermore, the Governors direct WGA staff to consult with the Staff Advisory Council regarding its efforts to realize the objectives of this resolution and to keep the Governors apprised of its progress in this regard.

This resolution will expire in June 2026. Western Governors enact new policy resolutions and amend existing resolutions on a semiannual basis. Please consult http://www.westgov.org/resolutions for the most current copy of a resolution and a list of all current WGA policy resolutions.

Submissions for the Record


2025
VETERANS
CIVIC HEALTH INDEX
We the Veterans
and Military Families
NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON CITIZENSHIP
1946

ABOUT THE PARTNERS

WE THE VETERANS AND MILITARY FAMILIES

We the Veterans and Military Families is a national nonpartisan nonprofit founded by veterans and military family members to empower their community to strengthen America and local communities as civic leaders and patriotic participants. We invest in the veteran and military family community by building programs that encourage patriotic participation, foster a culture of continued service, and strengthen American institutions. Through initiatives like *Vet the Vote* – a flagship campaign mobilizing veterans and military families to serve as election workers – we activate a trusted community to support safe and secure elections. We also convene leaders and organizations to collaborate on issues affecting America and our community. By channeling the ethos of service into civic leadership, we provide veterans and military families with meaningful opportunities to continue serving their country at home. www.wetheveterans.us

NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON CITIZENSHIP

The National Conference on Citizenship (NCoC) is dedicated to strengthening civic life in America. We pursue our mission through a nationwide network of partners involved in a cutting-edge civic health initiative, our cross-sector conferences and engagement with a broad spectrum of individuals and organizations interested in utilizing civic engagement principles and practices to enhance their work. Connecting people for the purpose of strengthening civic life is our goal. At the core of our joint efforts is the belief that every person has the ability to help their communities and country thrive. ncoc.org

ABOUT THE FUNDERS

THE HEINZ ENDOWMENTS

The Heinz Endowments disburses approximately $90M in grants annually in their aim to build an exemplary, sustainable Pittsburgh region where everyone prospers and belongs. The foundation's seven primary focus areas include work in the Civic Participation and Veterans sectors. Initially funding traditional veteran programs, the Endowments has in recent years pivoted to a data-driven approach that emphasizes navigation of post-9/11 military-to-civilian workforce transition services, translation of military skills to civilian opportunities, leadership development, uplifting positive perception of veterans and data-informed policy change. The Endowments' Civic Participation portfolio advances community engagement, democratic resilience, and public leadership, including integrating veterans into broader civic life so their significant skills and experience benefit all in the region.

LEIDOS

Leidos is an innovation company rapidly addressing the world's most vexing challenges in national security and health. With 47,000 employees, Leidos is an industry and technology leader serving government and commercial customers with smarter, more efficient digital and mission innovations. The company has a strong legacy of employee engagement and investment in the communities where it operates including support for veterans and military families. Approximately 20% of Leidos employees are veterans and the company is committed to supporting veteran employees and partnering with veteran serving groups.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This report would not be possible without the support of The Heinz Endowments, Leidos, and the National Conference on Citizenship.

FOREWORD

At no other time in recent memory has America stood to gain more from the civic participation of its veterans. In a time that often feels divided and lacking a shared direction, lessons learned from military service – duty, honor, comradery – provide guidance for mending and strengthening the fabric of our nation.

For decades, American society has honored veterans for their service in uniform and sacrifices in combat, creating a revered class of warfighters. But at times, this warrior caste has become separated from society at large. A number of factors – including over-valorization of this subpopulation and, paradoxically, a narrow focus on veterans' disabilities, detriments, and failures – have exacerbated the divide between veterans and those not connected to military service. The truth is that the role veterans should play in society extends far beyond their service in uniform. Veterans, and America's similarly revered military families, cannot merely be symbols of courage and valor; they must be leaders, teambuilders, and problem solvers who become catalysts for change in their communities.

The 2025 Veteran Civic Health Index – the fifth publication of the report – is more than an analysis of veteran engagement: it's a call to action for veterans and civilians alike. This report highlights the many ways veterans contribute to civic life, shedding light on their leadership from government, to nonprofits, and neighborhoods. It challenges the prevailing narrative that veterans ought to be recipients of gratitude as an homage to their service, urging us all to instead recognize and empower them as active, post-military-service participants in shoring up the foundations of America's strength and shaping its future.

The most recent edition of this report was published in 2021 by The Mission Continues and Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America. That report made a specific examination of the civic health of post-9/11 veterans – those who had served in the two decades prior, and especially those who had served in combat in Iraq and Afghanistan. In the four-plus years since the United States' war in Afghanistan officially ended, the veteran community has entered a new era. Those who entered service after 2021 will likely not be counted amongst post-9/11 veterans, but rather will be part of a new, yet-to-be-named generation. Likewise, those who have served in the U.S. military at nearly any point in the 21st century are now discovering how veterans fit into society after these wars have come to a close.

As the nation celebrates the 250th anniversaries of the establishment of the United States Army, Navy, and Marine Corps, Americans are reflecting on a quarter millennium of uniformed service. This milestone is not only about honoring the past; it's an opportunity to re-examine how we perceive all those who have worn the uniform, their role in modern society, and the contributions they make to the American experiment.

We the Veterans and Military Families is proud to present the *2025 Veteran Civic Health Index, Redefining Patriotism: The Civic Lives of Those Who Serve.*

DEFINING PATRIOTISM
THE CIVIC LIFE OF THOSE WHO SERVE
5

INTRODUCTION

Unless otherwise cited, all findings presented in this report are based on the National Conference on Citizenship's analysis of the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey, 2023 Volunteering and Civic Life Supplement, and the 2022 and 2024 Voting and Registration Supplement.

Goals of the 2025 Veterans Civic Health Index

- **Reaffirm the valuable civic roles that veterans play in American communities**
- **Explore evidence that veterans embody the definitions of servant leaders and patriots, and expound on what that means for the country**
- **Encourage American institutions to understand and leverage veteran engagement as a tool to advance projects, programs, and policies in the national and local interest, as well as rebuilding trust in the institutions themselves**
- **Discuss the contributions of the military-connected community to the civic health of the nation**
- **Examine veterans' roles in the voting process and the preservation of free and fair elections**
- **Share the examples of veteran-facing organizations that have succeeded in empowering veterans as leaders and civic assets**
- **Provide recommendations that will increase the civic engagement, health, and social welfare of all Americans – veterans and non-veterans alike**
- **Define patriotism by action and civic service for America**

Previous Examinations of Veteran Civic Health

This report represents the third major examination—across five published reports—of veteran civic health conducted by the National Conference on Citizenship in partnership with various veteran-facing nonprofit organizations, corporate funders, and charitable foundations. The first VCHI was completed in 2015, and the same data was used to provide follow-on reports in 2016 and 2017. As a trio, these reports set the baseline for veteran civic health, empirically established veterans as true civic assets, and began to explore various sub-populations within the veteran community to better understand the nuances of veteran civic health. The second full examination was published in 2021 to provide an update to the civic health measures defined in the first reports. Timed a year after the 2020 census and coincidental to the U.S. withdrawal of major fighting forces in Afghanistan, this report took the opportunity to focus on post-9/11 veterans. In 2025, this report will examine refreshed data on veterans, while, for the first time, exploring the impact that military and veteran family members have in the overall assessment of civic health.

DEFINING CIVIC HEALTH

What is Civic Health?

Civic health is a measure of how communities are organized to define and address public problems. It is a community's capacity to work together, defined by the degree and frequency by which people trust each other, convene, respond to neighbors, and interact with government. Communities with strong indicators of civic health have higher employment rates, stronger schools, better physical health, and more responsive governments. Moreover, civic health is the pulse of a nation's vitality – a measure of how deeply citizens engage with one another, their communities, and the institutions that shape their lives.

Civic health goes well beyond Constitutional rights and obligations of citizenship to encompass the interpersonal and community-wide relationships we all build. It is the conversations we have and the actions we take to improve our society. Civic health can be observed in everyday acts like volunteering, helping a neighbor, joining a community group, discussing public issues, or voting in elections. Strong civic health means a community is rich in social trust, mutual support, and active participation, all of which underpin a healthy government by and for the people.[1]

For veterans, civic health carries a weight deeply ingrained in their experience of service and sacrifice. Veterans are not merely participants in the American experiment – they are often its most dedicated stewards. After all, these men and women have sworn oaths to defend American ideals enshrined in the Constitution, and most will continue to uphold those ideals as active citizens once they return to civilian life.

Civic Health & Veterans

The civic health of veterans is an indicator of the civic health of our nation. By measuring the civic engagement of those who have made the choice to serve our country in uniform, this report examines how veterans engage with our communities. Civically engaged veterans not only serve as role models for all Americans but also demonstrate the vital roles veterans can play after their time in uniform, reminding us that service does not end with military duty.

By and large, veterans demonstrate exceptional levels of civic engagement and – by nearly all measures – outpace their non-veteran counterparts. The first VCHI in 2015 revealed that veterans vote, volunteer, talk to their neighbors, help others, and belong to civic groups at higher rates than non-veterans.[2] Recent data confirm that most of these outsized civic contributions still abound today, as further demonstrated in this report.

The numbers only begin to tell the story. When we talk about civic health, we are talking about more than just metrics or individual actions – we are talking about the myriad ways people come together to strengthen their communities. For veterans, acts of patriotic participation are often a natural continuation of their commitment to something greater than themselves. They carry into civilian life the same values of leadership, teambuilding, and problem solving that defined their time in uniform, now applied in town halls, school boards, polling places, neighborhood projects, and nonprofit initiatives. In other words, veterans exemplify what it means to be involved in the civic life of our communities by developing and deploying the skills, values, and motivations that drive meaningful impact.[3]

Furthermore, civic health matters for veterans because of the benefits it can provide to the individual and community. Reintegration into civilian life can be challenging. Studies from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) have shown that up to 70% of veterans experience some difficulty adjusting after military service.[4] Volunteerism and civic involvement can ease the transition, connecting veterans to their neighbors, improving mental health, and even reducing feelings of isolation or suicidal ideation.[5] "Service after service" – whether volunteering, community leadership, or advocacy – often provides veterans with purpose, belonging, and a renewed sense of mission. There is also a robust ecosystem of veteran and military family service and engagement organizations, and many veterans focus their efforts here, further supporting the community.

In short, strong veteran civic health is a win-win. Communities benefit from veterans' skills, leadership, and commitment while veterans benefit from social connection, civic pride, and sense of purpose.

Civic Health & the Military-Connected Community

Any discussion of veteran civic health would be incomplete without acknowledging the family members who have served alongside them. Veterans do not exist in a civic vacuum, rather, their spouses, children, parents, and caregivers are integral parts of the veteran community and our broader civic landscape.

The best capture of this subpopulation is created through use of the term "military-connected." The military-connected population includes military families – the spouses and children of currently serving military members – as well as the spouses, children, and other close family members of veterans whose military service has come to an end. By one estimate, over 106 million adult Americans[6] have a direct family connection to military service, including nearly 18 million living veterans and tens of millions of spouses and children.[7] These family members share in the sacrifices of service, and they too contribute to civic life in significant ways.

Military spouses frequently become community leaders, volunteers, and advocates – whether organizing support networks while their loved ones are deployed, serving on local boards, or joining community volunteer efforts. In addition, the positive effect of veteran civic engagement can be multigenerational, as many children of military families grow up with a strong example of service and develop a keen sense of civic duty themselves.

By including the military-connected community in our understanding of veteran civic health, we recognize that they too are leaders and civic assets, often working quietly behind the scenes to strengthen our military and leading from the front in our communities.

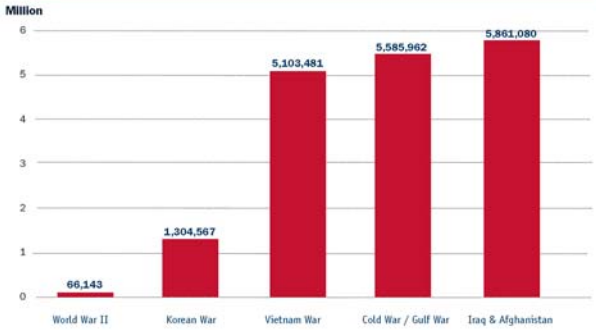
TODAY'S VETERAN

For decades in the second half of the 20th century, a pervasive image of a veteran in America was a grandfather who had fought in World War II. The massive scale of military service in the 1940s made an indelible mark on the veteran population for 75 years. For example, in the early 1970s, three quarters of the members of Congress were military veterans – and most veterans were white men.[8] The conflicts in Korea and Vietnam also added (though not on the same scale) to the veteran rolls and decidedly altered its character.

From the mid-1970s through the turn of the century, there were decently well-defined cohorts of the veteran population: the large World War II generation, who were moving into retirement; the smaller Korea generation, sometimes called the "Forgotten Generation;" the more vocal Vietnam generation; and the slowly developing Cold War era veterans, who – besides the short-lived conflict in the first Gulf War – did not have a major combat era to define them. Both the varied prominence and differentiated size of these generations – as well as powerful cultural factors at play across these eras – caused an abundance of societal attention on "The Greatest Generation." Through their service in Europe and the Pacific during World War II and their ensuing massive transition back to the home front, this generation not only ushered in the "Baby Boom," but also set the modern standard for who veterans were in America.

In addition, the use of conscription to provide military manpower in conflicts prior to 1973 coupled with changing policies regarding race in the military, meant that those who served in uniform increasingly represented a relatively broad sampling of the American male population.[9] The draft also categorically ensured that military service and sacrifice was shared (to some degree) with not just the conscripts, but with their friends, family, and neighbors as well, contrasted with the all-volunteer force which tends to be relatively more self-contained. In the second half of the 20th century, almost every American knew someone who served in the military, even if that service was a generation or two removed and decades prior.

VETERAN POPULATION BY GENERATION (WORLD WAR II - PRESENT)



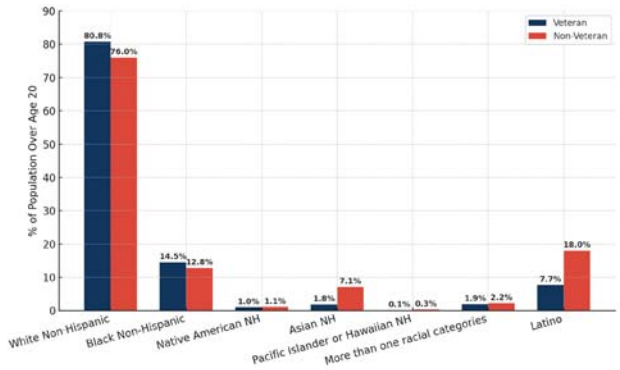
By 2025, a quarter century after the emergence of the post-9/11 generation, the country now has a different and more quickly evolving understanding of veterans. Today's veteran population is diverse, dynamic, and far more complex than many realize. Veterans represent an expanding range of experiences, backgrounds, and perspectives. Modern veterans include increasing numbers of younger adults, women, and people of varied racial and ethnic backgrounds. This demographic evolution reshapes the veteran experience and challenges us to broaden our understanding of what it means to be a veteran in America, at this point in history.

There are now just under 18 million living American military veterans,[10] as well as just over two million men and women currently in active, National Guard, or reserve military service.[11] The vast majority of the World War II and Korea veterans have passed, Vietnam-era veterans are well into retirement, and Cold War Era veterans are not far behind them. Thus, it has become quite clear that the heart of the current veteran community is the post-9/11 generation – those who volunteered in some of the nation's longest and most complex military engagements. These veterans, largely in their 30s, 40s, and 50s, now make up the largest cohort of veterans. They carry the lessons of two decades of conflict in Iraq, Afghanistan, and other global conflict zones, some having endured multiple deployments across multiple theaters. Crucially, they have navigated challenging transitions from military to civilian life – shifting from the rigid structure of service back to the open-ended responsibilities of civilian society.

Despite the obstacles some may face, post-9/11 veterans have proven to be some of the most resilient and dedicated citizens in our country. These veterans bring home with them a deep sense of purpose and a commitment to service that extends beyond their military service. Many of them find ways to channel their sense of duty into civic engagement: running for local office, spearheading grassroots community projects, starting businesses and nonprofits, and mentoring youth. In doing so, this newest generation of veterans is continuing to define what it means to be a patriot and servant leader in America.

One of the most notable changes in the veteran population is the growing presence of women veterans. Women have always served in America's defense – as far back as the American Revolution – but they now make up a larger proportion of veterans than ever before. As of 2024, women accounted for nearly 12% of all U.S. veterans,[12] a number that continues to grow. Today, women also represent approximately one in five U.S. military service members,[13] and they fill a wide array of roles, including combat billets and top leadership posts. Naturally, women veterans are also stepping into leadership roles within veteran communities and in society at large. Their rising visibility and impact are helping to break down remaining barriers and stereotypes, ensuring that the face of the American veteran is no longer seen as exclusively male.

VETERAN & NON-VETERAN POPULATION BY DEMOGRAPHICS



The veteran population is also becoming younger, on average, as well as more racially and ethnically diverse. In the post-9/11 generation of veterans, these changes are more pronounced, reflecting the broader demographic shifts of the nation. This brings a variety of cultural perspectives and ideas into the veteran community. The 2021 Veteran Civic Health Index introduced a data-supported hypothesis that an increasingly diverse veteran population volunteers at higher rates, which correlates to higher civic health overall.[14] With certainty, a veteran community that looks more like America can better build bridges and support different communities.

While a cohort of younger 21st century veterans has recently taken center stage, the pre-9/11 veteran generations are still making immense contributions. Veterans of Vietnam, the Cold War, and the Gulf War remain an integral part of the overall veteran population. They carry a wealth of knowledge, historical perspective, and civic experience that in many ways set the standard for the post-9/11 generations. Not to mention, there is a general trend amongst all Americans to exhibit increased civic participation – particularly voting and volunteering – later in life, if only for the abundance of time. Older veterans draw on decades of lived experience. They have witnessed enormous social and political change over the course of their lives, and their insights into civic life are invaluable. At the same time, the challenges older veterans face, such as health issues and social isolation, often differ from those of younger veterans. In the end, a diversity of age and experience is another marker of the overall civic health of veterans[15], as older veterans serve as the wise guardians of civic memory and tradition, passing down lessons of service to the next generation.

Over the years, considerable attention has been given to veteran employment, with numerous initiatives – including those championed by multiple White House administrations – urging businesses to hire veterans. While it is true that some veterans face employment challenges, the data consistently show that veterans, as a group, fare better in the labor market than their civilian peers. In fact, the veteran unemployment rate is typically lower than the national average. For example, in 2023, the unemployment rate for all veterans was 2.8%, compared to 3.6% for non-veterans.[16] Veterans are also more likely to work in management and professional occupations and tend to earn higher median incomes than non-veterans.[17] Implicitly then, veterans are good for a company's bottom line, just as they are beneficial to our communities' civic health.

VETERAN & NON-VETERAN EMPLOYMENT COMPARISON

	Veterans	Non-Veterans
UNEMPLOYMENT RATE	2.8%	3.6%
MEDIAN INCOME	$52,122	$40,368

Source: Bureau of Labor Statitstics

Taken together, today's veterans are not just people with a shared past; they are active participants in shaping the future. The leadership, resilience, and ongoing commitment to their community of modern veterans is an essential ingredient in the civic health of the nation. Their contributions are not always visible or adequately recognized, but they are profoundly valuable. In local communities across America, veterans – trained as leaders – are often the ones who step forward to organize disaster relief efforts, coach youth sports, drive community improvement efforts, and bridge divides in public dialogue. They are leaders in the public square and steadfast guardians of American ideals.

250TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE MILITARY

As a prelude to America's independence, the United States Army was officially founded on June 14, 1775, and the Navy and Marine Corps were established later that same year on October 13th and November 10th, respectively. As we consider the dynamic portrait of today's veterans, we are also reminded of the long arc of history that connects them to generations past. This year's celebration of the 250th anniversary of the U.S. military's founding invites us to look back on a legacy of service, sacrifice, and leadership that has been handed down through the ages.

The United States military's story – from the Continental Army, through the trials of a civil war and the immensity of two world wars, to the all-volunteer force of the present – is deeply entwined with the story of the nation itself. Through every era, veterans have returned home after service to build the peace and lead in their communities, often applying the hard-won lessons of war to strengthen America's civic fabric and democratic norms.

As we honor that legacy on this semiquincentennial, we also look forward. Today's veterans are writing the next chapter of that story. They are defining what patriotism and citizenship mean in the 21st century, not only by remembering the ideals of the past, but also by actively working to realize valued ideals in the present. In doing so, the veteran community of today is moving our country forward, leading by example, and making an indelible mark on the future of American society.

After 250 years, veterans are continuing the work of building a more perfect union.

AMERICA'S TRUST IN VETERANS

Year after year, surveys confirm that veterans and active-duty service members rank among the most trusted cohorts in American society.[18,19] This public confidence is not merely symbolic, rather it holds the potential to strengthen the civic fabric of our country.

Trust in institutions like Congress, media, public education, and government agencies has seen a steady decline over the last two decades. According to Gallup's 2023 trust index, confidence in most major U.S. institutions remain below historical averages.[20] Meanwhile, the military consistently ranks near the top of the list, and veterans can benefit from that elevated status by association. But while Americans often express appreciation for veterans, that trust is rarely expressly translated into a deeper partnership that could engage veterans in solving civic challenges.

This creates a paradox: veterans are viewed as highly trustworthy, but their influence is underutilized in civic arenas. They are thanked but not always heard. They are respected but not expressly empowered. The nation must shift that dynamic.

When a civic institution partners with veterans, they are not only engaging a constituency but also tapping into a source of credibility that can positively influence others. Veterans, drawing from a well-founded perception of integrity and discipline, often serve as trusted connectors between the public and the institutions that shape American life. Research suggests that when people encounter someone they trust speaking positively about a civic institution or public initiative, they are more likely to give that institution the benefit of the doubt.[21]

This trust advantage can be contagious. When veterans model community engagement – for example, by voting, volunteering, or speaking out on local issues – they inspire others to do the same. This often triggers a virtuous cycle of trust. Veterans lend their credibility to institutions, institutions become more trustworthy in the public eye, and the broader public becomes more engaged in civic life.

This cycle benefits everyone by drawing more Americans into meaningful civic participation. The opportunity also exists through veterans to begin to repair the frayed relationship between the public and the institutions designed to serve them.

PATRIOTISM THROUGH A VETERANS LENS

There is no denying that, for the past decade or more, politics and media in the United States have been hyper-partisan and divisive. The occasional bipartisan bill or work done "across the aisle" has become much more an exception than a rule. Not only does this division exist among lawmakers, but also among voters, which means that it exists among friends and neighbors. And while our society may not be quite as polarized as the pundits make it seem, the nation continues to divide in consequential ways along ideological lines.[22]

In this era, the concept of love of country quickly becomes a tinder box for ideological ire. Who loves America more: democrats, republicans, or independents? Whose policies and politics earn them the moral high ground when it comes to being a patriotic citizen? And what are the true definitions and measures of patriotic participation and love of country?

Perhaps the answer can be found in veterans, who have literally fought while carrying the colors of the nation to protect its ideals. Notably, more than half of veterans identify as politically independent, negating attempts by either major party to claim that veterans align more with them.[23] The truth is that veterans – even those with strong political affiliations – tend to align first with the country and a government by and for the people, before they align with a political party or ideological agenda.[24]

Veterans express their love of the country in various ways, not the least of which is their high scores on civic health indicators. One example that touches on both voting and volunteering is the high rate of veterans who sign up to be election poll workers. Those who partake in this special type of civic service often do so to protect the very institutions of American ideals they fought for.

Perhaps most notably, veterans seek and serve in elected public office at higher rates than non-veterans. Veterans will likely not in the foreseeable future make up three-quarters of Congress, as they did a half-century ago, but veterans' presence in the U.S. Congress today is roughly three times their presence in the adult population.[25] And veterans can be found serving or working at virtually every level of government to demonstrate their love of country and community.

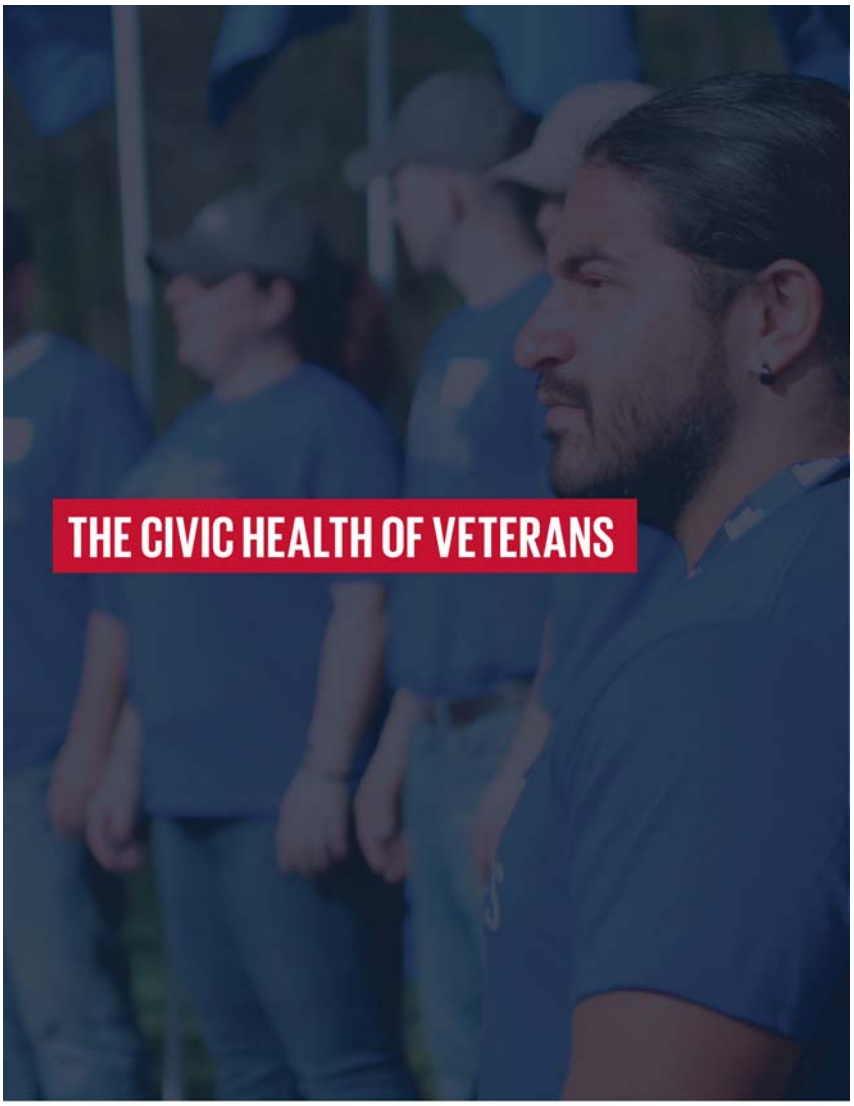
What veterans don't often do is measure their patriotism by the size of their flag or the volume they play *God Bless the U.S.A.* while driving down the highway. Veterans and military family members don't always need to vociferously demonstrate how much they love America, because they have lived it, and their patriotic participation speaks for itself.

WHERE DO VETERANS LEARN PATRIOTISM?

It's important to understand both why and how veterans exhibit patriotism, if only because their actions are trusted and their service is respected by almost all Americans. But where do veterans learn how to be patriots? It is certainly not a class taught at boot camp. Rather, for veterans, learning patriotism is experiential.

Patriotism comes from veterans' participation in the social experiment that is the United States military. The idea of learning how to serve a purpose greater than yourself, for selfless reasons, alongside people who look different than you and come from places with which you are unfamiliar is a quick and enduring lesson in all that makes America great. Veterans subject themselves to a kind of learning that transcends rhetoric, political posturing, and the idea that one side is correct and the other is wrong.

Veterans know that when one group of Americans lose, we all lose—as a military unit or as a nation. It is for these reasons, and the experiential nature of service-derived patriotism, that veterans often scoff at the overblown vitriol that divisive politics has brought to American society; instead more often opting to be quiet patriots in their communities, in the voting booths, and every other place where it truly matters.


THE CIVIC HEALTH OF VETERANS

THE CIVIC HEALTH OF VETERANS

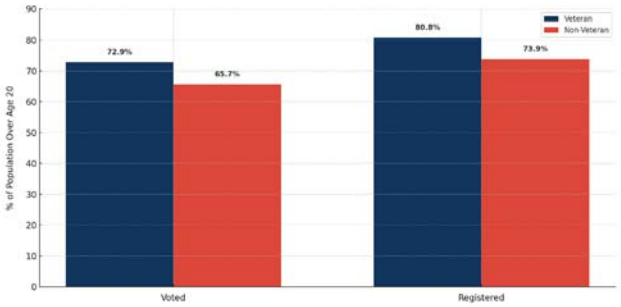
The original purpose of the Veteran Civic Health Index, when established in 2015, was to provide empirical support for the idea that veterans were "civic assets" who should be empowered to lead in their communities. Data on voting, volunteering, giving to charity, working with neighbors, and belonging to civic organizations provided that empirical evidence. Since that publication, the data revealed by the VCHI has been used by countless nonprofit organizations to support their programs, by research bodies conducting related studies, and by corporations to support social responsibility programs aimed at veteran empowerment. The story told by the updated data in this report is relatively similar to what we have previously known about veterans, but it is well worth the effort to regularly reexamine, reevaluate, and reemphasize the numbers that are at the core of veteran civic health.

Voting and Political Engagement

Voting is often considered the most fundamental expression of civic duty, and veterans consistently lead the nation by example. In the 2024 federal election, veterans outpaced their civilian counterparts in both registration and turnout. According to U.S. Census Bureau data, 80.8% of veterans were registered to vote in 2024, compared to 73.9% of non-veterans, and 72.9% of registered veteran voters cast ballots, surpassing the 65.7% turnout among registered non-veterans by a meaningful margin. Similarly in the 2022 midterm elections, veterans were more likely to be registered (78.3% to 68.4%) and registered voters were more likely to vote (64.0% to 51.3%). It is worth noting that, amongst those registered, veterans were 11% more likely than non-veterans to vote in the quadrennial presidential election year, which is impressive. They were also 25% more likely to vote in the mid-term election, signaling a deeper overall commitment to democratic processes.

Veterans have historically shown higher voter participation at local, state, and federal levels. Their consistency over multiple elections, including non-presidential years, off-cycle state and local elections, and special ballots, is another indication of a general commitment to our freedom to self-govern and the democratic process. In fact, veterans are 20% more likely to have voted in the most recent local election (e.g. mayor, school board, etc.) than non-veterans, according to the Census' 2023 Volunteering and Civic Life Supplement. Veterans vote at levels that suggest not habit, but conviction, implying that many veterans view voting as a continuation of their oath to support and defend the Constitution.

2024 PRESIDENTIAL VOTING BY VETERANS AND NON-VETERANS OVER THE AGE OF 20



Veterans also tend to be invested in the electoral process before and after visiting the ballot box. Veterans are over 50% more likely to donate to a political cause than non-veterans, demonstrating their willingness to support campaigns and measures that appeal to them. Perhaps more compelling, veterans are 40% more likely to contact a public official than their civilian counterparts, which implies that veterans remain engaged because they care about and continue to advocate for the outcomes generated by the public officials they help to elect.

For many veterans, the ability and willingness to engage in the processes of local, state, and federal government is a continuation of service. Veterans understand that every decision made in government can have direct impacts in their own community, on those who are currently serving in the military, and for other veterans – many of whom rely on earned government entitlements. Because of this, veteran-facing organizations have grown to serve the political and electoral needs of veterans.

Traditional veteran service organizations, like the American Legion and VFW, maintain a strong presence in America, especially on Capitol Hill. But these "old guard" organizations have admittedly had a difficult time reaching young and middle-aged veterans. In their place, organizations have emerged to serve the post-9/11 generation. Organizations like the VetVoice Foundation, Mission Roll Call, Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, and The Chamberlain Network, offer ways for veterans to engage in policy advocacy.

Many of these post-9/11 organizations attempt to activate civic engagement in veterans through nonpartisan efforts. A prime example of this is Vet the Vote, a campaign dedicated to recruiting veterans to become election workers. In the 2022 and 2024 election cycles, Vet the Vote mobilized over 163,000 veterans and family members to sign up to be poll workers, under the motivation that American elections must be run by everyday citizens who step up to serve their local communities. Who better to carry on this important work than military veterans and their military-connected family members? The response was telling and serves as one of the strongest signs of veteran civic engagement, beyond the data.

VET THE VOTE

Veterans Supporting the Electoral Process

In recent years, confidence in American elections has faced significant pressure. As a way to bolster the election system, Vet the Vote looked to America's most trusted community to reinforce the function and integrity of our electoral processes, recruiting veterans and military family members to serve as poll workers in elections.

Launched in 2022, Vet the Vote is a nonpartisan civic initiative that taps into the trusted reputation and sense of duty among the military-connected community to protect one of America's most fundamental institutions: the ballot box. The campaign was created to address a critical shortage of poll workers through the logical application of veteran and military family manpower. In the wake of the pandemic, election polling places found themselves with inadequate staffing, which meant that elections themselves were at risk of delays, disorganization, and an erosion of trust. Vet the Vote recognized that veterans and military families could step into this breach because they are seen as credible, patriotic, and nonpartisan.

By the end of the 2024 general election cycle, Vet the Vote had successfully recruited over 163,000 veterans and family members to serve as election workers, representing four out of every five zip codes in the country. The campaign's success lies not only in the numbers, but also in the message: the veteran and military family community is invested in our system of self-governance and actively perpetuating it. Polling places staffed by veterans and military family members send a powerful signal to voters across the political spectrum that the process is fair, secure, and trustworthy. And studies have validated that Americans' confidence in the process increases substantially when they know veterans and military families are on the job.[20]

Volunteering

Military service is rooted in selflessness, and that ethos carries over powerfully into veterans' post-service lives. In 2023, Census data showed that 27% of veterans regularly volunteered in their communities, which is slightly lower than the 28.1% of non-veterans who volunteer. However, veterans who volunteer do so in larger sums of time, averaging 93 hours per year – nearly 2.5 full-time work weeks. Compare that to 70 hours for non-veterans, and we find that veterans on average volunteer 35% more hours than non-veterans. In total, veteran volunteering totals nearly half a billion hours annually, or the equivalent of 220,000 full time workers.

This commitment is not confined to veteran-specific causes. While many veterans volunteer with traditional veteran service organizations geared toward supporting other veterans, the trend for post-9/11 veterans has long been to support other aspects of need in the community. Veterans volunteer at food banks, on disaster relief teams, for youth mentorship programs, and in local schools. Veterans consistently report that volunteering gives them purpose, structure, and community – all values deeply rooted in their military experience.

Veterans also bring unique skill sets to the volunteer world: logistical expertise, leadership experience, adaptability, and crisis readiness. These assets make them particularly valuable to nonprofits and civic agencies that depend on reliable, mission-driven volunteers.

Organizations that specialize in veteran volunteering have homed in on the skills veterans possess and missions at which veterans tend to excel. For example, Team Rubicon recruits veterans for disaster relief projects – a field veterans tend to feel comfortable in. The Mission Continues (recently acquired by Travis Manion Foundation) has partnered with organizations like the National Parks Conservation Association to let veterans volunteer inside national parks, supporting a greater mission of environmentalism, conservation, and public lands preservation. And Everytown for Gun Safety, the nation's largest gun violence prevention organization, has explicitly engaged veterans in their work, trading on veterans' deep knowledge of guns.

All told, it's reasonable to assume that veterans are also more effective and impactful in the execution of the volunteer work they chose to undertake. All of this benefits our larger society at both national and community levels.

VETERAN & NON-VETERAN AVERAGE VOLUNTEERING HOURS

Social Connectedness

Social connectedness – the measure of how individuals build and maintain meaningful relationships – is an essential component of civic health. For veterans, this social capital is often built upon shared service, mutual support, and a sense of continued mission.

33%

Veterans are more likely (33%) than non-veterans (28%) to speak and spend time with neighbors.

The Census reveals that veterans are more likely to speak and spend time with their neighbors (33%) than are non-veterans (28.0%). Veterans are also 16% more likely to do favors for their neighbors – such as transportation, childcare, or assistance with errands – and slightly more likely (22.5%) than non-veterans (21.7%) to take collective action with their neighbors.

This exhibition of neighborly comradery is not unexpected, given the environment in which veterans thrived while serving in the military. Both at work and at home, military service members are thrust together with people who have different backgrounds, interests, and personalities than themselves. Not only are they asked to live and work with a seemingly random sample of Americans; many are asked to literally go to war with them. These examples of learning how to coalesce with others undoubtedly explains why veterans are also able to communicate with and support their neighbors in their civilian lives.

Yet, one of only two civic health measures where veterans tend to underperform non-veterans also falls into the category of social connectedness. Veterans are less likely than non-veterans to frequently talk or spend time with friends and family: 78.0% to 82.9%.

In the 2021 VCHI, this measure was also identified as an outlier.[27] That report hypothesized that this lack of connection to family and friends could be an impact of geographic proximity. Because military members frequently move between duty stations, veterans have typically spent time away from their homes and may be more likely to settle elsewhere, impacting their social connections. Nonetheless, veterans remain more likely to discuss political, social, or local issues with friends and family, which reinforces the hypothesis that geography is the leading factor in veterans' slight lack of familial connectedness, related to time.

+37%

Veterans are 37% more likely than non-veterans to frequently discuss political, social, or local issues with their neighbors.

In fact, veterans are 37% more likely than non-veterans to frequently discuss political, social, or local issues with their neighbors. This statistic jumps off the page, demonstrating how, while veterans have been geographically separated from their pre-service lives, they have built – and lead in – communities wherever they find themselves.

SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS OF VETERANS & NON-VETERANS

	Veterans	Non-Veterans
Frequently discus political, social, or local issues with friends and family	33.9%	31.5%
Frequently speak with or spend time with neighbors	33.0%	28.0%
Frequently discuss political, social, or local issues with neighbors	9.3%	6.8%
Frequently talk or spend time with friends and family	78.0%	82.9%
Frequently do favors for neighbors	12.1%	10.4%
Frequently take collective action with neighbors	22.5%	21.7%

Community Involvement

Beyond the ballot box, volunteer roles, and neighborhood involvement, veterans also demonstrate their civic health through a strong awareness of current events and community issues. Veterans are significantly more likely (76.3%) than non-veterans (64.2%) to frequently watch, read, or listen to news about political, social, or local topics. Staying informed is a vital part of staying civically engaged.

It should come as no surprise that veterans also give to charity at higher rates: 55.7% compared to 50.2%. This generosity reflects a continued commitment to the wellbeing of others, even after leaving the military. Veterans often channel their sense of duty and community responsibility into supporting causes they care about, both locally and nationally.

Veterans show up. They are more likely to attend public meetings, a behavior that correlates closely with their tendency to vote and stay socially connected. Additionally, veterans are 30% more likely to belong to a group, organization, or association. While this may partly be due to the widespread availability of veteran-specific organizations in many communities, veterans are also likely to join groups that are not exclusive to veteran membership. Civic organizations, youth mentorship programs, and recreational sports leagues are just a few examples.

It's important for non-veterans to understand that not all veterans readily and consistently identify as "veterans" in every aspect of their post-military lives. Some don't utilize their veteran identity at all; some people just happen to be veterans. This, perhaps, is the key to understanding veterans' roles in society. They are complex individuals who share a former vocation and common ethos. It happens that, in that role, the nation invested in their leadership, team building, and problem-solving abilities. Yet crucially, whether they choose to express it or not, veterans are bringing those abilities to our communities.

VETERANS FOR ALL VOTERS

Country Before Party

For many who serve in the military, politics and service don't mix. While in uniform, some service members abstain from politics altogether. However, when service members become veterans, they show up at the ballot box and take heed of the political happenings in their communities and across the country.

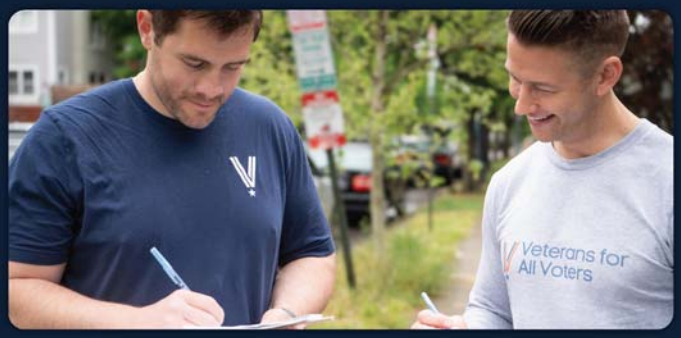
Yet, despite high levels of voter registration and participation in elections, veterans tend to be less partisan than the average American. A 2024 member survey by Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America revealed that 55% of these post-9/11 veterans identify as politically independent, with 27% identifying as Republican and 19% as Democrat.[28] Perhaps experience in the military somehow encourages veterans to stay away from partisan posturing.

In a time of hyper-partisanship, this data suggests that the majority of younger veterans prefer to express their political interest independently. Veterans no doubt place a high value on the ability to work through differences to achieve a common mission, and this is exemplified by a relatively new veteran-facing organization that is growing in prominence: Veterans for All Voters (VAV).

VAV is a nonpartisan organization that mobilizes veteran and military family voices to promote structural electoral reforms that increase trust, access, and fairness in American elections, while eliminating the incentives of hyper-partisanship. It was built on the idea that veterans have sworn an oath to defend the Constitution, and many are uniquely positioned to restore faith in the process. By advocating for reforms like open primaries and ranked-choice voting, VAV seeks to depolarize elections, amplify moderate voices, and ensure that all voters – including independents – have a meaningful choice.

VAV is not a veterans' organization in the traditional sense – it's a civic engagement initiative that is led and supported by those who served. Its members include veterans of every political background and service era. They engage with state-level campaigns across the country, testifying before legislatures, organizing community forums, and partnering with civic coalitions to advance reforms.

At a time when many Americans feel disillusioned by politics, VAV reminds us that country must come before party.



COMPARISON TO THE 2021 VETERANS CHI

Since the publication of the last Veteran Civic Health Index in 2021, the good news for veterans is that they have maintained generally higher rates of civic health measurement compared to non-veterans. Veterans only fail to outpace non-veterans in two measures – regular volunteering and spending time with friends and family.

The bad news is that some of the civic advantage over non-veterans that veterans demonstrate is decreasing. In 2025, across the 18 primary civic health measurements evaluated by this report, the scores for veterans decreased in 16 measurements. For those 16 measurements, non-veterans also decreased in 15 of them, showing an overall trend of less civic engagement. Also, in many of the measures, the decrease for veterans was quite small – eight measures decreased by less than two percentage points.

An overall decrease in civic engagement could be attributed to numerous causes. Certainly the 2020 Covid pandemic resulted in social and behavioral changes worldwide, some of which persisted for years. A comprehensive civic health indicator analysis has not been performed with the express goal of understanding civic behavior changes before, during, and after the pandemic. However, one can assume that social interactions temporarily decreased, while charitable giving increased, for example. Therefore, the numbers seen when comparing the 2021 VCHI to this report may be impacted by the rebound effect from changes in civic health as a result of the pandemic.

Looking more closely at the largest changes witnessed in 2025, the first standout statistic is a 10% decrease in frequent volunteering for veterans from 30.1% in 2021 to 27.0% in 2025. During the same period, non-veterans dropped from 29.9% to 28.2%. While the pandemic hangover may have some impact on volunteering measurements, another factor could be the average age of veterans. Veterans are getting younger on average, and with fewer older, retired veterans, perhaps veterans – overall – have less disposable time. No matter the cause, it is concerning to see veterans performing relatively worse on a key indicator of civic engagement like frequent volunteering.

Veterans also saw a nearly five-point drop in likelihood to belong to a group or organization, whereas non-veterans saw a two-point drop in the same category. Veterans saw decreases in both donating to political causes (13.3% in 2021 to 11.2% in 2025) and donating to charity (59.4% in 2021 to 55.7% in 2025). Non-veterans saw decreases in both measures, as well, but by less.

In one marker – frequently discussing political, social, or local issues with friends and family – non-veterans' participation dropped by 16%, while veterans saw a small marginal decrease of less than one percentage point (a 2% change). This is the category where veterans climbed ahead of non-veterans, after being less likely to discuss issues with friends and family in 2021. This may be a result of hyper-partisanship and political polarization. The more contentious political rhetoric creeps into daily life, the less people are willing to discuss these issues with friends and families. However, veterans tend to be more independently minded and might be demonstrating just that through this statistic.

Veterans in 2025 were more likely (+1.0%) to be registered to vote than in 2021, as were non-veterans (+1.1%). But neither participated in the elections to the same degree. Veteran voter turnout (among registered voters) was down from 74.7% to 72.9%, and non-veterans were down from 66.9% to 65.7%. Nevertheless, veterans were still much more likely to vote.

It's difficult to determine the causes of the decrease in civic health indicators for veterans. On one hand, it's understandable to see veterans following the same trend as the general population, but also it's disappointing to see general civic health diminishing. And while the most meaningful comparison is veterans to non-veterans – where veterans continue to outperform – it would be very much worthwhile to explore both factors that might be depressing veteran performance as well as the potential threats to overall veteran civic health in the long run.

"The good news for veterans is that they have maintained generally higher rates of civic health measurement compared to non-veterans."

THREATS TO VETERAN CIVIC HEALTH

Despite strong positive civic health indicators for veterans, significant barriers remain. Threats to veterans' civic health can prevent them from fully realizing their full potential as leaders and civic assets. These challenges often intersect with issues of public perception, identity, mental health, and changing societal dynamics. Addressing these issues should be essential to efforts to strengthen the civic health of the nation overall.

Persistent Misperceptions

Perhaps the most foundational challenge is the persistent misperceptions of veterans by the public. Polling shows that veterans are among the most trusted members of society,[29] yet paradoxically damaging stereotypes continue to burden the veteran community, perpetuating the enduring "broken hero" trope.[30] Many Americans, influenced by media narratives, assume that most veterans are struggling with trauma, instability, or isolation.[31] In reality, the majority of veterans are thriving, civically engaged, and eager to lead in their communities.

> "Perhaps the most foundational challenge is the persistent misperceptions of veterans by the public."

These misperceptions are not harmless. They can influence hiring decisions, reduce trust in veterans, and create social barriers. Perhaps most alarmingly, they are thought to have a significant negative impact on military recruitment. Veterans often report being treated with pity rather than respect or seen as liabilities rather than assets.[32] This "soft discrimination" in the workplace, civic organizations, or volunteer settings, can cause veterans to feel tokenized, overlooked, or underutilized. Over time, these perceptions may discourage civic involvement.

Mental Health and Social Disconnection

While the civilian public may think that most veterans suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, data collected by the VA leads to estimates that less than 10% of veterans are currently dealing with PTSD,[33] and only 15% of all veterans experience PTSD in their lifetime.[34] PTSD proved to be less prevalent in post-9/11 veterans than in Vietnam-era veterans, and more than 90% of the Americans who deal with PTSD in a given year are not veterans.[35] Nonetheless, the incidence of PTSD is manifestly higher (approximately double) in the veteran population, and all mental health issues can be serious and deserve attention, resource commitment, and treatment.

The combination of overstating mental health issues and the negative stigma around seeking help make the veteran mental health conversation an extremely complicated one. PTSD, military sexual trauma, depression, anxiety, andv moral injury are all more prevalent among veterans, and stigma around mental health or treatments can lead to isolation – a facet of social connectedness where veterans perform poorly compared to civilians. This disconnection, the mental health conditions themselves, or the resulting misperceptions can all blunt the sense of civic belonging and inhibit participation in public life.

Appropriate treatment for mental and physical ailments is essential for veterans who require it and critical to enabling veterans to realize their potential as leaders and civic assets. Veteran service organizations, veterans, and their many allies fought for years to ensure the VA could support the needs of post-9/11 veterans through adequate benefits, healthcare, and mental wellness opportunities – most notably, those provided by the 2022 PACT Act.[36] A retreat from the current levels of service and coverage is likely to have meaningful consequences to veterans' and their families' basic needs and will almost certainly have resulting impacts on veterans' capacity to continue their service to America and their local communities.

Political Polarization

Although about half of all veterans identify as independent or moderate, veterans are frequently portrayed in media or politics as leaning heavily toward one side of the ideological spectrum – often the far-right. This miscasting not only misrepresents the views of veterans, but can be a barrier for civic organizations, public officials, or employers from seeing them as independently minded, nonpartisan contributors.

Furthermore, while veterans have been targeted by violent extremist groups looking to exploit their training, discipline, and perceived credibility, in fact, veterans are less likely to support extreme views and organizations than non-veterans.[37] While veterans who choose extreme ideologies represent a small minority, the public conflation of veterans with political violence or radical movements has the potential to undermine decades of trust and civic leadership development. Veterans' organizations must continue to promote inclusive, non-partisan values rooted in commitments to patriotic American ideals to counteract this narrative.

The Patriotism Paradox

One might think that the very best example of patriotism is military service, and that veterans could corner the market on love of country. But, like so many other rhetorical symbols in this hyper-partisan era, the typical symbols of American patriotism have recently been associated with more conservative political movements, as the political left has dissociated with some of the symbolism and language of being a "patriot." This leaves veterans – as they may be for their service to the nation – with their patriotic expression often stuck irreconcilably between extremes.

Yet the defining characteristics of patriotism are not tied to one political ideology or another. A veteran, or any American, with left-leaning views should never be made to feel ashamed for proudly flying an American flag, just as an American with right-leaning views shouldn't feel that flying the flag alone is a way to prove their patriotism. As veterans know, this country has but one flag, and it's meant to be a symbol for an entire nation – the United States. When the concept of patriotism, and indeed acts of positive patriotism, become associated with one party or ideology, the ultimate result is veterans being left out in the cold, unable to adopt either "side's" patriotic social currency, but unwilling to let go of their own love of the country.

VETERANS IN FEDERAL SERVICE

Public Servants Twice Over

For many veterans, public service doesn't end when they leave the military, rather it evolves to a mission serving as a federal employee. This group of veterans are, in a phrase coined by the Partnership for Public Service, "public servants twice over." Of course, the experience of veterans in the federal workforce has often been shaped as much by political tides as by personal commitment. Nowhere was this more apparent than in early 2025, when the severe reduction in the size of the federal workforce disproportionately impacted veterans.

Veterans make up nearly one-third of the federal workforce. Many work in roles that require stability, expertise, and nonpartisan execution – traits that are foundational to good governance and found in abundance in veterans. In addition to layoffs in early 2025, federal veteran employment programs were underfunded, union protections were weakened, and future advancement was made less accessible. Despite these setbacks, many veterans continue to serve quietly and effectively across agencies.

Veterans don't need handouts to thrive in the federal workforce – they need fair systems, stable structures, and leadership that respects their service. The American people have invested in veterans, and we should all be committed to systems that allow us to reap the benefits.

PUBLIC PERCEPTION VS. CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

"The Next Greatest Generation"

In November 2011, Time magazine featured a cover that captured the expectations of a nation. Against a backdrop of stoic, battle-worn faces, the headline declared post-9/11 veterans to be "The Next Greatest Generation." It was more than a nod to military service; it was a cultural coronation. These were not just warriors, they were future leaders, problem-solvers, and bridge-builders. The phrase suggested that, like the World War II generation – and perhaps unlike intervening generations – these veterans had not only the skills, but also the public trust to return home and remake America.

But more than a decade later, we must ask if that promise materialized. The short answer is: not yet.

The post-9/11 generation of veterans returned home to a country full of goodwill, but short on understanding and connection. Many Americans offered sympathy rather than empowerment, charity instead of investment. At the same time, a crowded field of veteran nonprofits – often well-meaning, but poorly calibrated – reinforced a narrow view of veterans as broken, dependent, or in need of fixing. The result is a civic story half-written – a generation with the potential to lead but still hampered by perceptions and societal factors beyond their control.

"The Sea of Goodwill"

The "Sea of Goodwill" is a term coined in 2011 by the then-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Adm. Mike Mullen. The moniker meant to capture the outpouring of public support for service members and their families. The metaphor stuck, and it became a guiding idea in veteran philanthropy. Billions of dollars and thousands of initiatives followed, all buoyed by the belief that America's collective affection for its veterans could be harnessed into meaningful support.

But goodwill, like seawater, can overwhelm as much as it uplifts. The Sea of Goodwill often translated into a vast, uncoordinated flood of services – many redundant, some ineffective, and others inadvertently harmful. With no rudder to guide it, this well-meaning surge reinforced the idea that veterans were a problem to be solved, not partners in progress. Programs multiplied, but few focused on civic development, leadership, or long-term empowerment. As a result, the Sea of Goodwill may have diluted impact rather than deepened it. It helped veterans survive but failed in many cases to position them to lead.

Broken Heroes...and Raising Money

Efforts to convey the gravity of supporting injured veterans to a public disconnected from military service have often led to confusion that furthers the civilian-military divide. Many well-intentioned nonprofit organizations have built their brands by portraying veterans as broken. These groups may raise awareness and funds, but often at the cost of perpetuating the very myths that marginalize veterans in civic life. Their narratives feed the public imagination that veterans are either superheroes or hopeless cases, leaving little room for the millions of veterans who are neither.

A common violation of veteran perception for the purposes of fundraising is the myriad nonprofits – large and small – that have portrayed veterans to the American donor class as damaged goods to raise money. This tactic was successful in raising billions of dollars over a decade or more, and in many cases the work done by these organizations was laudable. Nevertheless, the cost of these models is not theoretical. The hyper-publicizing of charity programs exclusively focused on veterans' injuries and mental health challenges dilutes trust, and crowds out other needed and impactful programs. It also distorts the public narrative, making it harder for veterans to be seen and to see themselves as civic leaders, rather than objects of sympathy.

Empowerment Over Pity

Over the last decade or more, a new generation of organizations has emerged and thrived by rewriting the narrative. These groups reject the notion that veterans are a burden. Instead, they see veterans as leaders and civic assets – capable, motivated, and already leading in communities across the country. Many of these forward-thinking efforts have been supported by foundations that have intentionally directed resources toward organizations that invest in veterans' civic capacity, not just their needs.

The Mission Continues (the sponsor of the 2021 VCHI) organizes veteran-led service platoons that tackle pressing local challenges in cities across the country.[38] More Perfect Union brings people together in real life to bridge divides through service projects, meaningful conversations, and civic engagement.[39] Beneath the Service equips veterans and their families to become influential leaders in their communities.[40] Veterans for All Voters engages veterans to advocate for inclusive, nonpartisan election reforms in their states.[41] We the Veterans & Military Families invites veterans and their families to continue their service through programs like Vet the Vote.

These organizations don't offer veterans a handout; they offer a platform. They recognize that veterans already possess the discipline, leadership, and civic commitment our country needs. What's missing is not motivation, but access to opportunity, support, and recognition. By shifting the focus from trauma to talent, these groups are helping the post-9/11 generation fulfill the promise imagined on that Time magazine cover. By doing it in the public eye, they begin to shift perceptions of veterans for everyday Americans.

What Now?

To honor the potential of post-9/11 veterans, we must reinvent the narrative. Veterans are ready to lead, but society must pivot from focusing largely exclusively on charity and start building efforts to engage them in civic life. This means investing in leadership programs, showcasing veterans in public roles, and funding organizations that cultivate engagement rather than dependency.

The phrase "The Next Greatest Generation" was never meant to be a compliment. It was a challenge.

To be clear, organizations and government policies that ensure the basic needs of veterans and military families are met are essential to the foundation on which this group's civic health is built. But misperceptions, ill-conceived fundraising efforts, and twenty years of continuous war have been a barrier to this community reaching its full civic potential. Veterans will continue to step forward in city halls, classrooms, nonprofit boards, and polling places. And America must not only meet them there, but support their journey. Only then will the full civic potential of this generation come to light. Only then will we fulfill the promise of what veterans can become – not symbols of sacrifice, but architects of America's civic renewal.

EVALUATING THE MILITARY-CONNECTED COMMUNITY

For decades, research and public narratives have focused almost exclusively on veterans when considering civic contributions from the military population. Veterans' track record as civic leaders sets a standard for the nation to follow. But a critical question remains: do these civic values extend beyond the uniform and into the lives of those who stand beside those who serve?

"But a critical question remains: do these civic values extend beyond the uniform and into the lives of those who stand beside those who serve?"

This question sits at the heart of civic opportunity. If, as the data suggests, connection to military service instills a strong ethic of community participation, then the military-connected community may represent a large, underappreciated civic network. Understanding and measuring the civic health of military and veteran families complements existing research on veterans and may uncover a powerful force for strengthening America and our civic institutions.

Unfortunately, military-connected individuals often fall through the cracks of traditional civic measurement tools. They are not tracked like veterans through the VA. They are not categorized by Census labels. They are only occasionally the subjects of broad-based surveys, many of which don't include civic engagement-related questions. Still, the data we do have – and the culture we can observe – suggests that the ethos of service extends beyond the person in uniform.

Defining the Community

Defining the "military-connected community" is no easy task. It certainly includes the spouses of currently serving active-duty service members. While their dependent children of active duty fall under this definition, the civic participation of minors is beyond the scope of this report, so only adult children of active duty are a relevant population. Also included would be the spouses and adult children of currently serving military members in the National Guard and reserves. All told, this population of military family members (over the age of 18) is estimated at over one million.[42]

Of course, the primary focus of the VCHI is civic participation after military service. Therefore, it makes sense to include the spouses and adult children of military veterans, as well as gold star families – those whose service members passed away. This population is estimated at 105 million, which brings the size of the entire military-connected community to nearly six times that of the veteran population and approximately 40% of all adult Americans.[43]

What unites this diverse population is their proximity to service. But the very qualities that bind this group together also make them difficult to measure. Military spouses change locations every few years. Veteran families may not readily identify with their connection to service. Up-to-date surveying requires investment and intentionality that most civic research tools aren't built for. Despite these challenges, there are data sources and anecdotal evidence that offer windows into the civic lives of this population.

Evidence and Analysis

A growing body of research suggests that military-connected individuals carry many of the same sentiments and civic habits as those who wore the uniform. A 2011 Pew survey found that adults with family connections to the military are 40% more likely than those without these connections to consider themselves highly patriotic.[44] In a 2024 nationwide poll from Blue Star Families, 20% of military-connected respondents had served as election workers, compared to only 12% of non-military connected.[45] In addition, 93% of these individuals believe that voting can influence the country's direction, which was nearly double the rate of confidence found in the general population.[46] If the military-connected community volunteers for elections and has faith in their results, we can reasonably assume that they are voting at higher rates than the general population.

The significant faith in "the system" – a component of which provides the livelihood and community for this subpopulation for much of their lives – is also an important distinction for military-connected Americans. They essentially become "super-voters" and "super-volunteers" in their communities, which provides strong evidence of high civic participation across the board.[47]

Qualitative research reinforces these findings. Military spouses often take on leadership roles in volunteer organizations, PTA boards, base family support groups, and local nonprofits. They coordinate food drives, organize school events, and lead community coalitions – even when moving every two to three years. Their ability to plug into new communities, identify needs, and mobilize solutions is a civic skill set unto itself. This leads to a safe assumption that military family members are volunteering at higher rates than the average American.

It is unlikely that the civic traits observed among military-connected individuals are coincidental. They are certainly correlated and likely causally linked to the civic health indicators modeled by veterans. Military families also often possess heightened awareness of national and local politics. They are attuned to policies on healthcare, education, veterans' benefits, and military funding, because they directly impact their lives. This policy literacy typically translates into civic participation, from voting to advocacy to community organizing.

"It is unlikely that the civic traits observed among military-connected individuals are coincidental."

Building strong social networks is often the lifeblood of the hyper-mobile military spouse population – a necessary part of moving from installation to installation. After transitioning out of active-duty life, the formal networks may dissipate, but the social habits likely endure. In all, civic participation, policy literacy, and social connectedness seem to function like a contagion, passed through proximity, nurtured by shared experience, and reinforced by cultural norms.

Unfortunately, this civic energy is rarely named, much less measured. Military-connected individuals are often seen as adjuncts to veterans – worthy of support, but not recognized as leaders in their own right. This framing is both inaccurate and limiting. It overlooks the extraordinary civic agency military families already exercise and fails to invite them fully into the nation's civic institutions.

Call to Action

The conclusion is that military-connected individuals represent potentially the largest untapped sources of civic capacity in the United States. With more than 100 million American adults in this cohort, if even a fraction of this population were further activated or supported in their civic engagement, the positive impact on American and local communities would be profound. But such a large cohort can be hard to measure, message, and motivate.

More work needs to be done in this area. It demands intentional, data-driven inquiry, similar to that performed for veteran populations or general civic assessments. Military family identifiers should be added in national surveys like the Census Current Population Survey and the American Community Survey. Grantmakers interested in this area should fund qualitative studies that document civic engagement pathways among the military-connected community. Nonprofit organizations that serve the active military family community should create local pilot programs that measure civic health in high-density military population areas. State and local governments should allow these individuals to self-identify on voter registration forms, motor vehicle records, and poll worker applications.

Just as the VCHI has elevated our understanding of veterans as civic assets, a parallel effort focused on military-connected individuals could reshape national perceptions, policymaking, and community engagement strategies.

CONCLUSION

The 2025 Veteran Civic Health Index confirms, as previous reports discovered, that America's veterans remain exceptional civic assets and leaders in our communities. Across multiple measures of civic engagement—from volunteering to voting to supporting neighbors—veterans continue to outpace their civilian counterparts, underscoring a deeply ingrained ethic of service. These findings reinforce the powerful insight that, for so many, service to the nation does not end when the uniform comes off; it simply transforms.

Veterans apply the leadership, team building, and problem solving skills honed in the military to strengthen civic life at home. From leading volunteer disaster responses to coaching youth teams and serving in public office, veterans are stepping into crucial roles in every sector of society, typically at higher rates than those who have never served. In short, veterans and their families are an ongoing force for civic renewal, and their contributions should be leveraged to help strengthen our nation and communities across the country.

At the same time, this report highlights critical opportunities for society to better support and leverage veteran leadership. Today's veteran population is smaller, younger, and more diverse than in past generations. Post-9/11 veterans are poised to step up as the civic leaders of the next half century. A decade ago, Time Magazine called this generation of veterans "The Next Greatest Generation." However, gaps in understanding between the military and civilian world have hindered the fulfillment of this promise.

Fewer Americans have direct connections to military service. Misperceptions about the status and role of veterans color civilian perceptions. Many Americans mistakenly believe most veterans suffer from PTSD, homelessness, unemployment and other problems, fueled by sensationalized media. In reality, the vast majority of veterans are thriving and more engaged than civilians.

Clearly, veterans should be viewed as assets whose talents and experiences benefit our communities. The challenge before us is to bridge the civilian-military divide and ensure every veteran can be empowered to participate meaningfully in civic life.

By celebrating veterans' ongoing civic contributions and addressing barriers to engagement, we not only honor their service, but also enrich the very fabric of our nation. Veterans' ability to strengthen our communities is reliant upon society's willingness to welcome, empower, and partner with them in service to the nation's civic health.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To fully realize the promise of America's veterans as civic leaders, a concerted effort must be made across all sectors. The following recommendations are directed at government agencies, nonprofit organizations, corporate leaders, and civic institutions. These actions aim to improve veterans' civic integration and visibility, dispel misperceptions, and bolster support for engagement by veterans and military families.

Recommendations for Government Agencies

Treat veterans' civic health as a priority and develop programs to support and engage veterans beyond the Department of Veterans Affairs. Less than half of veterans are enrolled in VA services, yet veterans persist in all aspects of civilian life.[48] Thus, issues affecting veterans must be addressed across all agencies. All veterans have been trained with taxpayer dollars to be leaders, team builders, and problem solvers. By ensuring the needs of all veterans are met, we increase the overall capacity of the veteran population to serve our communities. Through intentional engagement and development, communities will reap the benefits.

Recommendations for Nonprofit Organizations

Nonprofits of all types should actively recruit veteran and military family volunteers and employees. Empowering veterans in your organization not only advances your mission with dedicated talent, but also helps veterans rekindle a sense of purpose and belonging. Similarly, build collaborations with veteran-facing organizations that empower veterans. Such partnerships allow veterans to put their advanced civic health qualities to work for the common good. Likewise, nonprofits should consider veterans and military family members for staff and board roles to infuse veteran insights into organizational leadership.

Recommendations for Corporations

The business community plays a vital role in veterans' civic integration. Hiring veterans is not just a patriotic gesture, it's good for business. Companies that hire veterans often find they promote faster and stay with the company longer than non-veterans, boosting productivity and the bottom line. Corporate leaders should continue to expand recruitment of veterans and military spouses across all job functions. Of course, simply hiring veterans is not enough; companies should also cultivate a workplace environment that values and integrates veteran employees.

Recommendations for Civic Leaders

Local civic institutions, such as libraries, community centers, universities, faith congregations, and civic clubs, should create opportunities for meaningful interaction between veterans and civilians. Social trust is a two-way street, and veterans benefit from feeling welcomed in communities that understand the talents and perspectives veterans bring. Organize community dialogues or "meet your veteran neighbor" events where residents can learn about the experiences of those who served. Perhaps also take the opportunity to publicly recognize veterans' civic contributions through civic award programs.

"To fully realize the promise of America's veterans as civic leaders, a concerted effort must be made across all sectors."

VETERAN CIVIC HEALTH MEASURES COMPARED TO NON-VETERANS

CIVIC HEALTH INDICATORS	Veteran	Non-Veteran
Average number of hours volunteering in the past year	93	69
Regular volunteering	27.0%	28.2%
Donate to a political cause	11.2%	7.2%
Donate to a non-political cause	55.7%	50.2%
Frequently talk or spend time with friends and family	78.0%	82.9%
Frequently discuss political, social, or local issues with friends and family	33.9%	31.5%
Frequently speak with or spend time with neighbors	33.0%	28.0%
Frequently discus political. social, or local issues with neighbors	9.3%	6.8%
Frequently do favors for neighbors	12.1%	10.4%
Took collective action with neighbors	22.5%	21.7%
Frequently post views about political. social, or local issues on internet of social media	5.4%	4.5%
Frequently read, watch, or listen to news or information about political. social, or local issues	76.3%	64.2%
Voted in the last local election (e.g mayor or school board)	64.2%	53.3%
Attended a public meeting in the past year	10.6%	9.7%
Contacted a public official in the past year	12.2%	8.8%
Bought or boycotted products of services based on the political values or business practices of that company in the past year	20.1%	17.9%
Belonged to a group, organization, or association in the past year	31.8%	24.7%
Registered to Vote in 2022	78.3%	68.4%
Voted in 2022	64.0%	51.3%
Registered to Vote in 2024	80.8%	73.9%
Voted in 2024	72.9%	65.7%

TECHNICAL NOTES

When analyzing the veteran population, data presented by the Department of Veterans Affairs and that presented by the U.S. Census does not always match. For the purposes of this report, population data from the Census Bureau is prioritized, when possible. When utilizing VA data for ratios and comparisons, VA data is used exclusively.

Unless otherwise noted, data findings presented in this report are based on the National Conference on Citizenship (NCoC)'s analysis of the Census Current Population Survey (CPS) data. Any and all data errors are our own. Volunteering estimates are from the CPS September Volunteering and Civic Life Supplement, 2023; voting and registration data come from the CPS November Voting/Registration Supplement, 2024. Using a probability-selected sample of about 50,000 occupied households drawn from geographically based sampling units, the CPS collects monthly data on employment and demographic characteristics of the nation. Depending on the CPS supplement, the single-year CPS sample sizes for veterans included in this report were 3,779 (Civic Engagement Supplement) and 7,0479 (Voting/ Registration Supplement).

In order to get the demographic estimates of the veterans' background, the sample data was weighted by the veteran weight, computed by the Census Bureau. The veteran weight is designed in such a way that estimates will accurately track the of official statistics reported by the Department of Veterans Affairs. The comparative non-veteran sample demographics are estimated using the final population weight, also computed by the Census Bureau. For all estimates of civic health indicators, we use the specific weights computed for each supplement. These civic engagement weights account for non-response bias.

In this report, we include all veterans for demographic reporting. For age-specific, group-based reporting, we include veterans and non-veterans who are 20 years old and older. We did this because there are very few veterans who are 19 or younger. In this report, we made comparisons between veterans and non-veterans between ages 20 and 49, and comparisons between veterans and non-veterans aged 50 and older.

All surveys, including federal surveys, are subject to sampling error. Margin of error is influenced by multiple factors including sample size, estimate size, population size, and other parameters. Therefore, we do not report one margin of error across all indicators. With that said - due to the large sample sizes in this report (3,779 for the smallest supplement) - sampling error is quite small, within one to two percentage points. However, any analysis that breaks down the sample into smaller groups (e.g., gender, education) will have smaller samples, and therefore the margin of error will increase.

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CIVIC HEALTH INDEX

State and Local Partnerships

NCoC began America's Civic Health Index in 2006 to measure the level of civic engagement and health of our democracy. In 2009, the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act directed NCoC to expand this civic health assessment in partnership with the Corporation for National and Community Service and the U.S. Census Bureau.

NCoC has worked with partners in more than 35 states and cities to use civic data to lead and inspire a public dialogue about the future of citizenship in America and to drive sustainable civic strategies.

STATES

Alabama
University of Alabama
David Mathews Center for Civic Life
Auburn University

Arizona
Center for the Future of Arizona

California
California Forward
Center for Civic Education
Center for Individual and Institutional Renewal
Davenport Institute

Colorado
Metropolitan State University of Denver
The Civic Canopy
Denver Metro Chamber Leadership
Campus Compact of Mountain West
History Colorado
Institute on Common Good

Connecticut
Everyday Democracy

District of Columbia
ServeDC

Florida
Florida Joint Center for Citizenship
Bob Graham Center for Public Service
Lou Frey Institute of Politics and Government

Georgia
Georgia Family Connection Partnership
Georgia Municipal Association

Illinois
McCormick Foundation

Indiana
Indiana University Center on Representative Government
Indiana Bar Foundation
Indiana Citizen Education Foundation, Inc.
Indiana Supreme Court
Indiana University Northwest
Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis
O'Neill School of Public and Environmental Affairs

Kansas
Kansas Health Foundation

Kentucky
Commonwealth of Kentucky, Secretary of State's Office
Institute for Citizenship & Social Responsibility, Western Kentucky University
Kentucky Advocates for Civic Education
McConnell Center, University of Louisville

Maryland
Mannakee Circle Group
Center for Civic Education
Common Cause-Maryland
Maryland Civic Literacy Commission

Michigan
Michigan Nonprofit Association
Michigan Campus Compact
Michigan Community Service Commission
Volunteer Centers of Michigan
Council of Michigan Foundations
Center for Study of Citizenship at Wayne State University

Minnesota
Center for Democracy and Citizenship

Missouri
Missouri State University
Washington University

Nebraska
Civic Nebraska
Nebraska Community Foundation
Nebraska Extension
The Center for Public Affairs Research at the University of Omaha Nebraska

New Hampshire
Carsey Institute
Campus Compact of New Hampshire
University System of New Hampshire
New Hampshire College & University Council

New York
Siena College Research Institute

North Carolina
Institute for Emerging Issues

Ohio
Miami University Hamilton Center for Civic Engagement

Oklahoma
University of Central Oklahoma
Oklahoma Campus Compact

Pennsylvania
Center for Democratic Deliberation
National Constitution Center

Rhode Island
Rhode Island Council for the Humanities
Rhode Island Department of State

South Carolina
University of South Carolina Upstate

Texas
The University of Texas at Austin
The Annette Strauss Institute for Civic Life
RGK Center for Philanthropy & Community Service

Vermont
Vermont's Secretary of State
Vermont Humanities
The Center for Rural Studies
SerVermont
Up for Learning

Virginia
Center for the Constitution at James Madison's Montpelier
Colonial Williamsburg Foundation

ISSUE SPECIFIC

Latinos Civic Health Index
Carnegie Corporation

Veterans Civic Health Index
We The Veterans

Millennials Civic Health Index
Mobilize.org
Harvard Institute of Politics
CIRCLE

Economic Health
Knight Foundation
Corporation for National & Community Service (CNCS)
CIRCLE

CITIES

Atlanta
Community Foundation of Greater Atlanta

Greater Austin
The University of Texas at Austin
RGK Center for Philanthropy and Community Service
Annette Strauss Institute for Civic Life
Leadership Austin
Austin Community Foundation
KLRU-TV, Austin PBS
KUT News

Chicago
McCormick Foundation

Kansas City & Saint Louis
Missouri State University
Park University
Washington University

Miami
Florida Joint Center for Citizenship
John S. and James L. Knight Foundation
Miami Foundation

Pittsburgh
University of Pittsburgh
Carnegie Mellon University

Seattle
Seattle City Club

Twin Cities
Center for Democracy and Citizenship
Citizens League
John S. and James L. Knight Foundation

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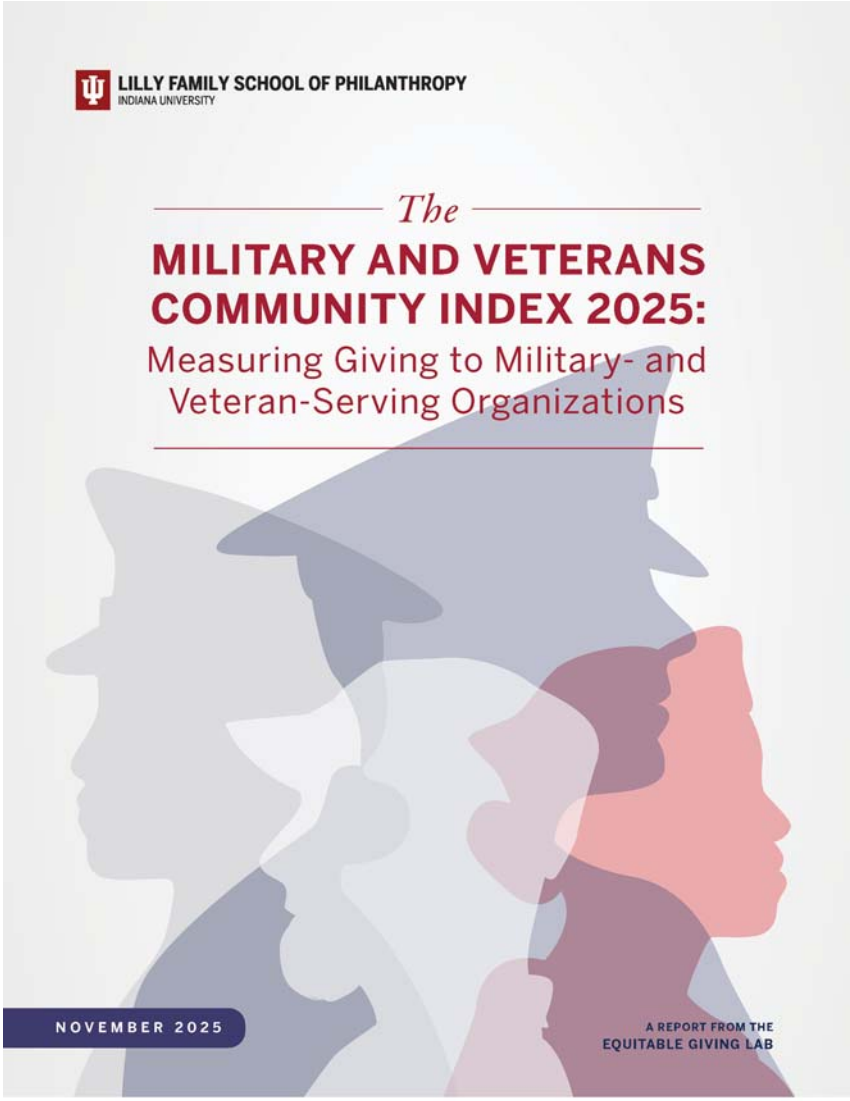
LILLY FAMILY SCHOOL OF PHILANTHROPY
INDIANA UNIVERSITY
The
MILITARY AND VETERANS COMMUNITY INDEX 2025:
Measuring Giving to Military- and Veteran-Serving Organizations
NOVEMBER 2025
A REPORT FROM THE
EQUITABLE GIVING LAB

WRITTEN & RESEARCHED BY:

Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy

The Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy is dedicated to improving philanthropy to improve the world by training and empowering students and professionals to be innovators and leaders who create positive and lasting change. The school offers a comprehensive approach to philanthropy through its academic, research and international programs, and through The Fund Raising School, Lake Institute on Faith & Giving, Mays Family Institute on Diverse Philanthropy, and Women's Philanthropy Institute. Learn more at https://philanthropy.indianapolis.iu.edu/.

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Special thanks to Jon Durnford of DataLake Nonprofit Research for his expertise and collaboration in creating the Military & Veterans Community Index alongside the school.

The school also thanks Steve Schwab, CEO of the Elizabeth Dole Foundation, for his assistance in assembling and convening the Military & Veterans Community Index Advisory Council, along with the Council members for their guidance and feedback:

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This research was completed with funding from Google.org as part of the Equitable Giving Lab. The findings and conclusions contained within are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect official positions or policies of Google.org.

The following citation should accompany any use of the Military & Veterans Community Index data: Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy and DataLake Nonprofit Research. (2025). *Military & Veterans Community Index* [Data file].

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INTRODUCTION

The Military & Veterans Community Index (MVCI) is a new resource from the Equitable Giving Lab that measures giving to nonprofits serving the military, veterans, and their families and communities. The Equitable Giving Lab, a project of the Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy, is an initiative to better understand charitable giving to under-resourced groups in the United States. The MVCI complements existing indices that measure giving to specific populations, including women and girls, the LGBTQ+ community, and communities of color.

The Military & Veterans Community Index and this corresponding report build on previous research identifying the ecosystem of U.S.-based charitable organizations that serve military members, veterans, and their families and caregivers. This report examines how many nonprofits focus on this community's needs, what services they provide, and how these figures have changed over the last decade, from 2013 to 2023.

Because the military is, by definition, connected to and funded by the federal government, detailed information is available about federal funding for military and veterans' services. This information comes from several federal departments, offices, and agencies including the Government Accountability Office, Congressional Budget Office, the Office of Management and Budget, the Department of Defense, the Department of Veterans Affairs, and the newly formed Department of Government Efficiency.

In the nonprofit sector, however, few comprehensive studies have chronicled the full suite of services available to military members, veterans, and their families and caregivers through nonprofit organizations. The Wounded Warrior Project maintains an Information and Referral Service; however, it primarily aims to provide vetted organizations for veterans, family members, or caregivers seeking specific services.[1] In addition to organizations that are designed specifically to serve this community, the Information and Referral Service may also include organizations that are not predominantly focused on serving military members, veterans, and their families, but that overlap in services provided.

In contrast, the MVCI identifies the ecosystem of nonprofit organizations that are dedicated primarily to serving the military and veteran community. For example, Limbs for Life is a global nonprofit organization dedicated to providing fully functional prosthetic care for individuals who cannot otherwise afford it.[2] This nonprofit would be included in the WWP's Information and Referral Service, as some veterans may meet their criteria to receive services, but it would not be included in the MVCI. By contrast, a nonprofit like the Warriors Prosthetic Initiative (WPI), a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization dedicated to helping injured veterans and first responders regain capability and independence after limb loss, would meet the criteria to be included in the MVCI.[3] While this may seem like a superfluous distinction at first glance, this example illustrates the specific needs experienced by military members and veterans. Limb loss from service is different from the general amputee population in its cause, implications for future activity, and the conditions or diseases it may occur alongside (such as traumatic brain injury).[4]

Given the significant role federal funding and budget decisions have in meeting the needs of military members and veterans, this report provides a deeper understanding of the complementary nonprofit landscape. The data cover the past decade, through 2023, the most recent year for which more than 99% of finalized IRS data on charitable organizations were available at the start of MVCI research.

The MVCI covers a period of shifting demographics for the military and veteran populations. Veterans are aging, with a significant percentage of the population over 65 years old.[5] The overall number of veterans is declining and is projected to continue this downward trend.[6] During this period, the U.S. also transitioned away from active combat on foreign soil with the withdrawal from Afghanistan. Each of these elements contributes to an increased and evolving need for benefits and services for service members, veterans, and their family members. While the federal government is charged with providing those services, the social sector has and will continue to fill gaps.

The data provided in the MVCI aim to provide researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and the public with a deeper understanding of organizations with the primary mission of serving military members, veterans, and their families and caregivers. Amid an evolving social and political environment in the U.S., this report offers insights to help individuals and organizations make data-informed decisions.

KEY FINDINGS

1. Giving to MVCI organizations totaled $3.7 billion in 2023, growing from $2.6 billion in 2013 (in inflation-adjusted 2023 dollars).
2. MVCI organizations received 0.67% of total charitable giving in 2023; this percentage was relatively consistent from 2013-2023, at roughly 0.6-0.7% of total giving.
3. Though gradual, the number of MVCI organizations has been steadily falling, decreasing in 9 of the last 10 years. MVCI organizations are growing, however, with fewer organizations maintaining the same percentage of overall donations.
4. MVCI organizations trail other nonprofit organizations in terms of growth in revenue, expenses, and assets, but they outpace non-MVCI organizations in terms of growth in payroll. From 2013 to 2023, MVCI revenues grew 14% (compared to 34% for non-MVCI organizations); expenses grew 21% (compared to 37%), assets grew 20% (compared to 43%), and payroll grew 48% (compared to 30%).
5. MVCI organizations that provide basic human services, like food and financial assistance, receive the most funding ($445 million), followed by mental health or therapeutic service providers ($398 million), survivor care and memorializing organizations ($397 million), and housing services ($353 million).
6. Service animal and animal therapy organizations were the fastest growing subcategory of MVCI organizations, growing 445% from 2013 to 2023 (inflation-adjusted). Philanthropic support for mental health (178%), education (125%), and housing services (114%) also doubled over this period.

BACKGROUND

The population of military members and veterans is far from homogeneous. This group includes the full breadth of demographic identifiers (age, race, geographic residence, etc.), service experience (branch of service, officer or enlisted, geography of service, deployment history, etc.), and ensuing health and lifestyle considerations (physical disabilities, mental health needs, etc.).

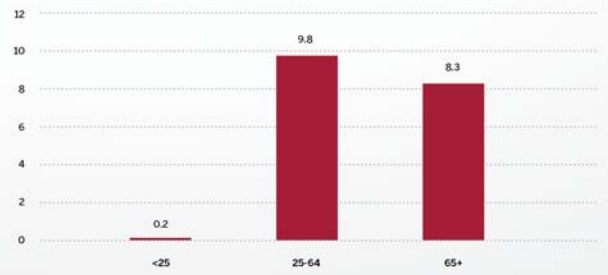
Population data for current service members, veterans, and family members eligible to receive family or survivor benefits are published by several government agencies. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs maintains the National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics (NCVAS), which collects, validates, analyzes, and disseminates key statistics on veteran population and programs to support planning, analysis, and decision-making activities. The U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) maintains the Defense Manpower Data Center (DMDC), a central source for identifying, authenticating, authorizing, and providing information on personnel during and after their affiliation with DoD. The U.S. Census Bureau also collects demographic, social, and economic data on veterans through several of its surveys. The descriptive statistics below are largely taken from these three sources.

There are currently 1.32 million active service members and just under 18 million living veterans in the U.S.[7] Service members, veterans, and their families live in every state, though significant numbers of active-duty members live in California (160,000), Virginia (122,000), and Texas (115,000). Annually, 150,000 active-duty service members transition into civilian life.[8]

Military veterans are diverse across a number of demographics. In terms of racial and ethnic diversity, 23.8% of veterans identify as non-white. Black or African American individuals comprise 12.9% of veterans, and Hispanic or Latino individuals account for 8.9% of veterans.[9] The U.S. Census Bureau estimated in 2023 that 10.9% of veterans are women and female-identifying individuals. While 76.2% of veterans identify as white, data from the Pew Research Center indicate that the veteran population is projected to become increasingly diverse over the next 25 years.[10]

Figure 1 shows that as of 2023, 45.5% of the veteran population is 65 years or older, corresponding with large cohorts who enlisted during earlier wars; this creates new challenges in serving a larger aging population. Just over half (53.4%) of veterans fall between 25 and 65 years of age, and about 1.1% are recent recruits under 25.

FIGURE 1: Veteran population by age (2023, in millions)



Data source: National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. https://www.va.gov/vetdata/index.asp

Nearly three in four veterans served during a war or period of official hostility; Figure 2 provides specific information about the various conflicts in which veterans served.[11] Additionally, physical and emotional trauma associated with combat affects a significant portion of veterans. Over a quarter of all veterans—5.5 million individuals—have a service-related disability.[12] As shown in Figure 2, just 0.6% of the living veteran population today fought in World War II. Service-related disabilities, transition to civilian life and integration, and combat experience all contribute to a broad but evolving spectrum of needs for the MVCI population.[13]

FIGURE 2: Combat service of veterans (2023)

Data source: National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. https://www.va.gov/vetdata/index.asp
Note: Percentages reflect primary conflicts and do not sum to 100% due to additional smaller categories.

In 2001, it was estimated that approximately 70 million individual veterans and their family members were eligible to receive benefits from the Veterans Administration.[14] At the time, this represented almost a quarter of the entire U.S. population, demonstrating that the population served by MVCI organizations is significant, and that the needs of family members and military survivors are unique within this community.

Despite these robust numbers, the total number of individuals affiliated with the military is declining. In 2013, when the MVCI data begin, the veteran population was 22 million; by 2023, it fell to 18.3 million, a decline projected to continue, according to the Congressional Research Service.[15] This drop in population and simultaneous increase in the average age of veterans corresponds with the nation's war activities, as military enrollment was vastly higher in earlier wars (due in part to the end of conscription in 1972).[16]

Distinguishing the Government and Social Sector Roles

The government plays a significant role in providing services and benefits to military members, veterans, and their families. The mission of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is to fulfill President Lincoln's promise to care for those who have served in the nation's military, as well as for their families, caregivers, and survivors.[17]

For fiscal year (FY) 2025, the VA received approximately $400 billion in federal appropriations.[18] Within the VA, the Veterans Health Administration (VHA)—the largest integrated healthcare network in the U.S.—accounts for $118.45 billion of that funding. The VHA operates about 1,300 health care facilities serving approximately 9 million enrolled veterans each year.[19]

Government funding of services for veterans falls into two main categories: mandatory and discretionary spending. Mandatory expenditures cover benefits such as disability compensation, pensions, and education assistance. These programs are determined by law and automatically funded for eligible participants. Discretionary expenditures include medical services and other programs funded through the annual appropriations process.

Combined, these two categories have grown by more than 50% over time, from $245.4 billion in FY2021 to $369.3 billion in FY2025.[20] Growth in mandatory spending reflects expanded eligibility for disability compensation and other benefits; discretionary spending has risen largely due to increased enrollment in the VHA and broader access to care.[21] Given the size of the agencies charged with providing services and the vast and evolving needs of this population, there are many areas supplemented by the social sector.

Although military members and veterans are supported in large part by government funding, this Military & Veterans Community Index does not include government grants or funding. Instead, the MVCI explores the ecosystem of tax-exempt organizations (i.e., nonprofits), how they are structured and funded to serve this population, and how the landscape has changed over the last decade. However, these two sectors operate closely, with funding for the VA increasing year over year and expected to increase for FY2026 to meet the growing needs of an aging and ailing veteran population.[22]

Types of Organizations

MVCI organizations are primarily operated under a few different IRS classifications: 501(c)(3), 501(c)(19), and 501(c)(23). 501(c)(3) organizations, also known as charitable organizations, comprise the vast majority of all U.S. nonprofits, totaling over 1.5 million organizations in 2024.[23] The IRS also has subsections 501(c)(19) and 501(c)(23) specifically for organizations that benefit veterans.[24] 501(c)(19) is the classification that primarily includes Veterans of Foreign Wars and American Legion Posts; there were roughly 26,000 of these organizations as of 2022.[25] 501(c)(23) organizations are less common and limited to organizations founded prior to 1880, such as the Navy Mutual Aid Association.[26]

Depending on the organization and purpose, organizations that serve the MVCI population may also be categorized as:

- 501(c)(4) - social welfare organizations
- 501(c)(7) - social clubs
- 501(c)(8) - fraternal beneficiary societies
- 501(c)(10) - domestic fraternal societies
- 501(c)(2) - title holding corporations

All the above types of organizations have tax-exempt status and may receive charitable dollars to benefit service members, veterans, and their families. For organizations within these final five classifications to be included in the MVCI, they must dedicate at least 80% of their resources to explicitly serve military members, veterans, and their families. Appendix A includes additional information on how organizations were selected for inclusion in the MVCI, and Appendix B shows the largest organizations that fall under each classification.

MVCI organizations receive donations from individuals, foundations, and corporations, and many may have additional revenue sources such as merchandise sales, events, and fees for service. Members of the MVCI populations themselves can be both service recipients and donors. Employment data from federal Office of Personnel Management show that veterans comprise well over a quarter of federal employees, many at the VA.[27] Previous studies from RAND have shown that charitable giving to issues tied to military and veterans is strongly influenced by personal ties to the military.[18]

Issues of Particular Concern to MVCI Populations

It is challenging to dissect one issue area from another for military members, veterans, and their family members as they are profoundly interconnected. Poor mental or physical health after service is tied to poor employment outcomes; for example, post-9/11 veterans have disproportionately higher rates of mental health conditions and also are more likely to be unemployed than non-veterans.[29] Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), substance abuse, and interpersonal violence present at higher rates for individuals who have experienced combat.[30] Suicide rates among veterans are about 1.5 times higher than for non-veterans.[31] These negative outcomes are not limited to combat veterans; reports also cite secondhand experience—for example, knowing a fellow service member or family member experiencing trauma—as triggering similar challenges.[32] Homelessness and housing among veterans have long been concerns for the VA and the public at large. In 2024, after nearly a decade of concerted and aggressive efforts by the VA in partnership with the MVCI ecosystem, veteran homelessness had decreased more than 55% since 2010.[33]

Recent Issues Affecting Funding to MVCI Organizations

Scams and Bad Practice Scandals – 2016

In the early and mid-2010s, several scandals came to light in the nonprofit sector. These ranged from misuse of funds and excessive overhead spending to fraudulent or deceptive missions. Veterans' charities were particularly affected by these scandals, capitalizing on the desire to support returning veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan.[34] While these scandals represented only a small fraction of MVCI organizations, the headline-catching news eroded public trust and created skepticism among donors. Fortunately, many attorneys general whose responsibility it is to oversee the nonprofits of their respective states, as well as larger agencies such as the FTC and IRS, were aggressive in targeting these bad actors and deceptive practices.[35]

As donors, veterans are also particularly vulnerable to charitable fraud and scams, and at higher rates than their non-veteran counterparts.[36] Research from AARP indicates that scammers disproportionally target veterans, and that 86% of service members and veterans have been exposed to at least one scam in the past 12 months.[37] This further adds to an environment of mistrust and skepticism.

Withdrawal from Afghanistan – 2021

In 2021, after 20 years of active combat, the U.S. withdrew nearly all service members from Afghanistan and formally ended combat operations. After two decades of deployments to foreign soil, the focus for MVCI organizations and their donors shifted from supporting troops on the front lines to efforts around integration, mental health services, and employment.[38] This transition is notable as it created an increased need for supporting the "war after the war," possibly shifting the efforts of charitable organizations and interest areas of donors.

The PACT Act – 2022

The Honoring Our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics Act of 2022, or the PACT Act, creates presumptive conditions caused by exposure to toxic conditions during service. This greatly expands benefits to veterans with specific service-related illnesses due to exposure to toxins such as agent orange and the 9/11 site. The VA's budget is expected to increase $52 billion in mandatory expenditures in FY2026 due to the PACT Act, though the effect on the nonprofit community has yet to be seen.[39]

The full effect of these issues and policy changes will become clearer in future years as the Index is updated.

STUDY METHODS

The MVCI includes 501(c)(3) registered domestic charitable organizations with the primary mission of serving service members, veterans, and their caregivers and family members. These organizations were identified through NTEE codes and the use of keywords in their name or mission statements. Organizations that serve many communities, including but not primarily focused on service members and veterans, are not included in this Index.

The Index utilizes IRS data from e-filed and digitized Form 990 and 990-EZ returns. For organizations that do not file these forms, a combination of Form 990-N and "non-filing" registered organizations was included. Additionally, organizations that were registered as 501(c)(19) and 501(c)(23) are included in the Index. The Index includes data from 2013 to 2023—the most recent available data as of September 2025. When it offered meaningful context or comparative insight, the data were also compared to non-MVCI organizations, total charitable donations, and other nonprofit subsectors as defined by *Giving USA*.[40]

For more information on the data sources and processes used in developing the Index, please see Appendix A: Methodology at the end of this report.

FINDINGS

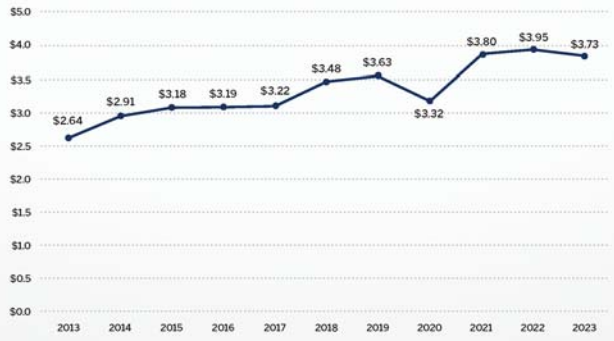
Approximately 50,000 tax-exempt organizations qualify for inclusion in the MVCI, representing 2.1% of the 1.85 million tax-exempt organizations registered with the IRS in 2023. This small percentage of exempt organizations serves 1.32 million active service members and 18 million veterans, in addition to their family members and caregivers.[41]

It is worthwhile to note the exclusionary criteria for this Index. There are many organizations that provide services needed by military members and veterans, from housing to prosthetics. However, the organization must dedicate at least 80% of its program dollars to offering these services to the MVCI population to be included in the Index. As a result, total giving in support of organizations that benefit the military and veteran community is possibly underestimated in the analyses below.

Finding 1: Giving to MVCI organizations totaled $3.7 billion in 2023, growing from $2.6 billion in 2013 (in inflation-adjusted 2023 dollars).

Philanthropic support for MVCI organizations has grown gradually but inconsistently over the past ten years, as shown in Figure 3. Total donations peaked in 2022 at just under $4 billion. In 2013, total giving to these organizations was $2.6 billion. The dip in 2020 follows trends seen in overall giving from *Giving USA*, where non-critical issue areas such as education and arts received less funding at the start of the pandemic.[42] Despite this decrease to $3.3 billion in 2020, MVCI organizations have seen an overall increase in donations over the past ten years.

FIGURE 3: Philanthropic support for MVCI organizations, 2013-2023 (in billions of inflation-adjusted 2023 dollars)



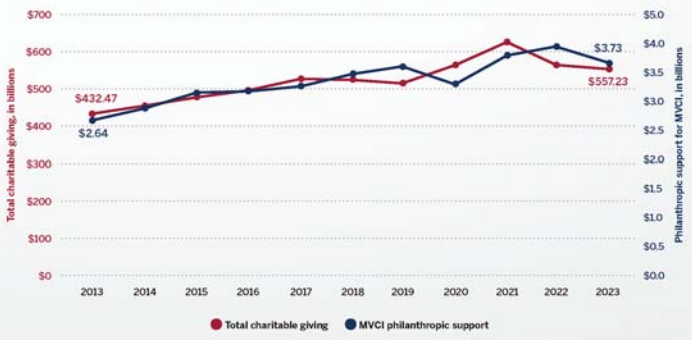
In more recent years, 2022 and 2023 were weaker years for philanthropy writ large. *Giving USA 2025* estimates that U.S. charitable organizations received $592.50 billion in philanthropic support in 2024.[43] The country also experienced high inflation from 2021 through 2023, which contributed to a peak in total giving to MVCI organizations.

Finding 2: MVCI organizations received 0.67% of total charitable giving in 2023; this percentage was relatively consistent from 2013-2023, at roughly 0.6-0.7% of total giving.

The growth in MVCI organizations closely tracks overall giving from 2013 to 2023, as measured in *Giving USA* and shown in Figure 4.[44] In 2023, total charitable giving was $557 billion, up from $432 billion in 2013. Total giving peaked in 2021 at $625 billion, while giving to MVCI organizations peaked shortly after in 2022 at just under $4 billion.

One exception to the MVCI mirroring overall giving trends is in 2020, when MVCI organizations experienced a decline that was not mirrored in overall giving. However, other subsectors experienced a similar decline during this period including giving to health and arts, culture, and humanities. Like health and human service organizations, MVCI organizations rebounded in 2021.

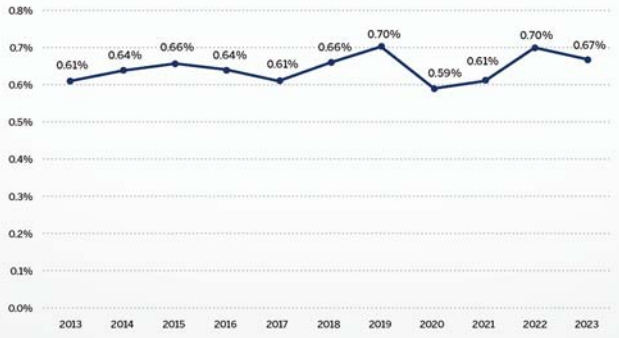
FIGURE 4: Philanthropic support for MVCI organizations compared to total charitable giving, 2013-2023 (in billions of inflation-adjusted 2023 dollars)



Note: Overall charitable giving is based on 2013-2023 data from *Giving USA 2025*.

Despite a reduction in the total number of MVCI organizations (detailed further below), donations to MVCI organizations remained consistent as a percentage of overall donations during this decade, ranging from 0.6%-0.7%, as shown in Figure 5.

FIGURE 5: Philanthropic support for MVCI organizations as a percentage of total charitable giving, 2013-2023

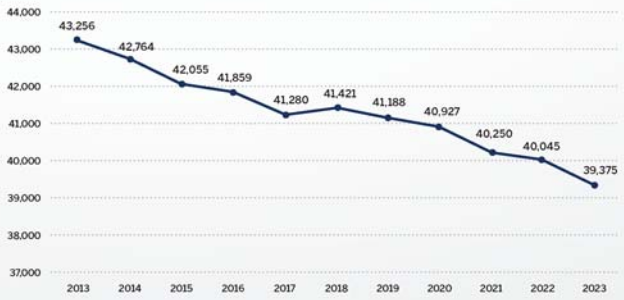


Note: Total charitable giving is based on 2013-2023 data from *Giving USA 2025*.

Finding 3: Though gradual, the number of MVCI organizations has been steadily falling, decreasing in 9 of the last 10 years. MVCI organizations are growing, however, with fewer organizations maintaining the same percentage of overall donations.

In 2013, the number of MVCI organizations that met the definitional criteria to be included in the Index was just above 43,250. In just 10 years, roughly 3,800 closed through mergers, acquisitions, or dissolutions, bringing the total number of organizations serving the MVCI community to under 40,000 in 2023. This contraction in the MVCI ecosystem occurred despite a growth in total dollars received.

FIGURE 6: Number of MVCI organizations, 2013-2023

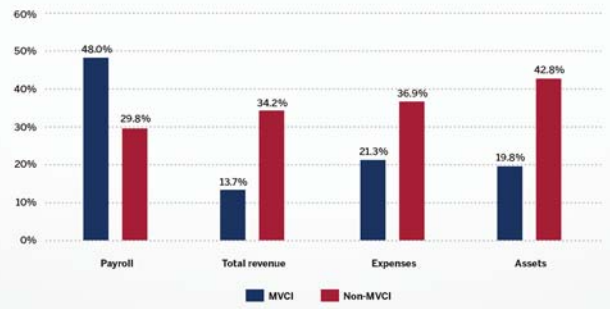


This decline aligns with the declining total veteran population, as significant cohorts from World War II and the Vietnam War have passed away. In the MVCI, the decline in organizations is due to closures of many 501(c)(19) organizations including American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars, and AmVet posts. These tax-exempt organizations operate independent local chapters or posts that have been shuttering as they struggle to meet the needs of younger potential members.

Finding 4: MVCI organizations trail other nonprofit organizations in terms of growth in revenue, expenses, and assets, but they outpace non-MVCI organizations in terms of growth in payroll. From 2013 to 2023, MVCI revenues grew 14% (compared to 34% for non-MVCI organizations); expenses grew 21% (compared to 37%), assets grew 20% (compared to 43%), and payroll grew 48% (compared to 30%).

MVCI organizations grew at a lower rate than other nonprofits across a number of measurements, as shown in Figure 7 (total number of organizations, revenue, expenses, donations, government grants, and assets). In terms of revenue, expenses, and assets, MVCI organizations trail non-MVCI organizations over the short and long term. While MVCI organizations are growing, they are growing at a slower rate than other organizations that serve similarly under-resourced populations.

FIGURE 7: Growth rates for MVCI and non-MVCI organizations, 2013-2023 (inflation-adjusted)



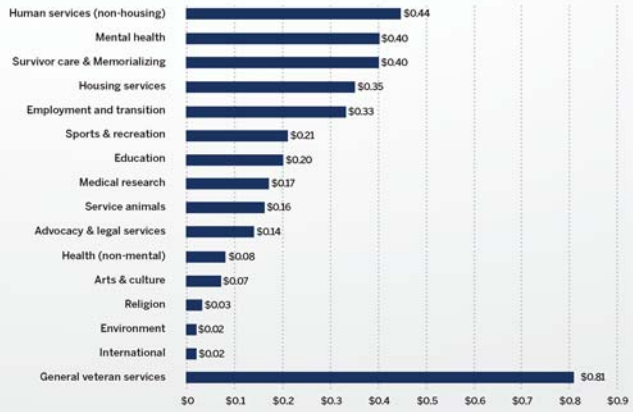
Interestingly, Figure 7 also shows that MVCI organizations have outpaced non-MVCI organizations' growth on one metric: payroll. Payroll has grown by an inflation-adjusted 48.0% from 2013-2023, compared to 29.8% for non-MVCI organizations. This aligns with Finding 3, which described the closing of many legacy 501(c)(19) organizations, which tend to have smaller staffs or be volunteer run. This dichotomy may represent a growing professionalization within the MVCI ecosystem, as smaller or volunteer-led organizations are replaced by larger, professionally staffed organizations which command higher compensation.

Because MVCI organizations have been previously implicated in fraudulent and wasteful spending, it is important to note that both MVCI and non-MVCI organizations have seen payroll growth over this period as a part of a broader trend to professionalize the nonprofit sector.

Finding 5: MVCI organizations that provide basic human services, like food and financial assistance, receive the most funding ($445 million), followed by mental health or therapeutic service providers ($398 million), survivor care and memorializing organizations ($397 million), and housing services ($353 million).

Organizations providing human services were the largest among specifically categorized organizations, receiving nearly $450 million in philanthropic support in 2023, as shown in Figure 8. These organizations might include food pantries, financial assistance, and family support, but do not cover organizations that provide housing services as this is tracked separately. Housing services received $353 million in 2023. Organizations providing mental health care or therapeutic services and survivor care and memorializing were other top categories, receiving $398 million and $397 million, respectively, in 2023.

FIGURE 8: Philanthropic support for MVCI organizations by mission focus subsector (2023, in billions)



Note: Mission focus categories are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Therefore, adding up the dollars in this figure exceeds the $3.73 billion in total philanthropic support for MVCI organizations in 2023.

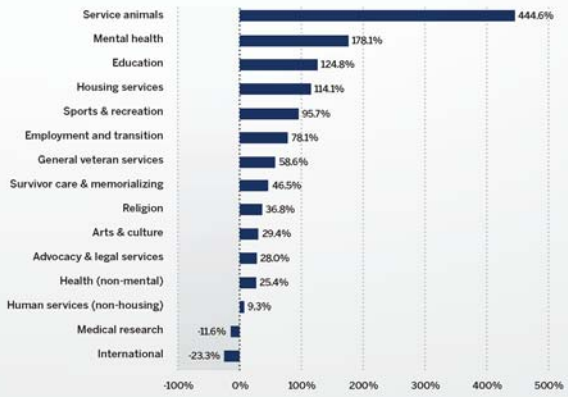
Environmental organizations appeared to receive significant funding in 2023; however, this was skewed by a single organization that received a large first-year donation. Prior to this, environmental organizations serving the military and veteran community had received less than $1 million in donations.

General veteran service organizations (defined here as any uncategorized organization falling under public society benefit, the NTEE category in which veterans' organizations are by default categorized) were the largest, at over $800 million, but do not represent a specific type of service or category. As this category was a catchall and not explicitly tracked, it does not provide a meaningful data point.

Finding 6: Service animal and animal therapy organizations were the fastest growing subcategory of MVCI organizations, growing 445% from 2013 to 2023 (inflation-adjusted). Philanthropic support for mental health (178%), education (125%), and housing services (114%) also doubled over this period.

Figure 9 shows the growth in MVCI subcategories over the last decade. Organizations that provide service animals or animal therapy saw the highest rates of growth in philanthropic support from 2013 to 2023, at 445% in inflation-adjusted terms. Three other categories saw their philanthropic support at least double: mental health (178%), education (125%), and housing services (114%).

FIGURE 9: Change in philanthropic support for MVCI organizations by mission focus subsector, 2013-2023 (inflation-adjusted)



Medical research and international organizations saw a decline in philanthropic support over the decade when adjusting for inflation (-12% and -23%, respectively), although they grew a small amount when inflation is not considered. The decline in international organizations corresponds with the decrease in service members abroad following the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan.

DISCUSSION

The MVCI offers a significant opportunity to examine how the social sector is supporting military members, veterans, and their caregivers and families. Despite some evolution of the MVCI ecosystem (such as a decreasing number of charitable organizations and structural changes indicated by payroll growth over the past decade), the percentage of charitable dollars donated has been closely tied to 0.6%–0.7% of total U.S. charitable giving. In other words, MVCI organizations have maintained a stable share of the philanthropic landscape even amid broader shifts in the sector. However, the other indices in the Equitable Giving Lab show a more clearly upward trajectory in their share of overall donations.

These findings align with ongoing issues affecting military members, veterans, and their families. Demand for services continues to outpace what the VA can provide. Basic human services, such as food pantries and financial assistance, received the largest amount of total donations ($450 million), reflecting nonprofit efforts to close gaps left by federal programs. Similarly, the 445% increase in funding to service animals and animal therapy organizations aligns with a growing awareness of mental health needs and accessibility challenges, particularly among combat veterans who experience higher rates of physical disability and PTSD.

The decrease in the number of MVCI organizations may follow trends in other membership-based organizations, such as the Elks, Lions, Kiwanis, and Rotary clubs. Local closures over the years have been accelerated by aging membership bases and difficulty appealing to younger potential members. Because many MVCI organizations are local chapters of legacy veterans' groups, like the American Legion and Veterans of Foreign Wars, the overall decline in the number of MVCI organizations is largely driven by these chapter and post closures. Membership in the American Legion fell by roughly 700,000 members from 2011 to 2021, and membership in the Veterans of Foreign Wars shows a similar trajectory, dropping from 1.2 million members in 2017 to about 1.035 million in 2021.[45]

This Index, however, does not show the full picture of support—and likely gaps—in services for this community. It does not include donations directly to individuals, advocacy for benefits and services, or direct government funding. These findings also do not address the relative efficiency or effectiveness of funding across organization types or subsectors. Lastly, some organizations serving this ecosystem may have been inadvertently excluded due to the definitional parameters of the Index, such as those operating under fiscal sponsorship. The Index also does not adjust for potential re-granting, which may lead to some double-counting of donations.

IMPLICATIONS

The MVCI is an actionable index that researchers, practitioners, policymakers, funders, and others can utilize to better serve military members, veterans, and their families. The development of this Index builds on prior indices from the Equitable Giving Lab that shed light on giving to traditionally underserved populations, including the Women & Girls Index and the Communities of Color Index. These indices inform funding strategies for donors and funders while helping nonprofits build stronger cases for support. The MVCI adds to this body of work by enabling the application of a military-and-veterans-community lens to existing studies and by informing new research for scholars and practitioners alike. It also provides a foundation for policymakers seeking to shape legislative and policy agendas related to veteran and military family support.

This Index is one of a suite of indices developed through the Equitable Giving Lab, which currently includes the LGBTQ+ Index, measuring charitable giving to U.S. organizations serving the LGBTQ+ community; the Women & Girls Index, the only comprehensive data on charitable organizations dedicated to women and girls in the U.S.; and the Communities of Color Index, the first systematically generated analysis of the philanthropic landscape for communities of color. The development of the Military & Veterans Community Index is a critical step in furthering research on subpopulations within these communities, such as women, LGBTQ+ individuals, and people of color within the military and veteran populations. This intersectional approach can provide deeper and richer insight into the needs of these traditionally underserved groups. Current datasets do not yet allow for detailed breakdowns of funding at this level of intersectionality. Ongoing research, including the development of additional indices as part of the Equitable Giving Lab, aims to fill these gaps and expand understanding of how philanthropy supports historically underrepresented communities.

The MVCI includes the most up-to-date IRS information available, concluding at 2023, and therefore cannot yet provide insight into possible effects caused by recent changes in the social, political, and economic environment. Federal workforce reductions, budget cuts, and potential government shutdowns directly affect funding and services received by this population. In contrast, broader global instability has contributed to an increase in military spending. As the Index is updated in coming years, it will reflect how charitable giving and the nonprofit community respond to these changing dynamics.

Given the steady decline in the number of MVCI organizations, further research distinguishing dissolutions from mergers and acquisitions would offer a more complete picture for nonprofit professionals and practitioners. Such research could spur opportunities for strategic consolidation, enabling organizations to provide broader or more efficient services to their target population. The ongoing decline in 501(c)(19) organizations also warrants further research, particularly given their ability to lobby for policy and legislative priorities that benefit veterans, including additional funding.

Because of the history of fraud and mistrust surrounding MVCI organizations in the prior decade, further research distinguishing payroll increases associated with legitimate professionalization from those linked to inefficiencies or mismanagement would help restore donor confidence. Examining organizational structures, such as leadership tenure, staff experience, and governance models, could clarify whether payroll growth signals a strengthening of the workforce or other structural changes within the sector.

As the philanthropic and policy landscapes continue to evolve, the Military & Veterans Community Index offers a vital tool for understanding how charitable resources reach service members, veterans, and their families and caregivers. By tracking trends over time, the MVCI can illuminate where progress is being made and where critical gaps remain. Sustained attention to this data will help ensure that giving and policy decisions keep pace with the changing needs of the military and veteran community.

APPENDIX A: METHODOLOGY

The MVCI includes organizations serving the military and veteran community identifiable from available IRS data on public charities. It focuses on being comprehensive of nonprofits active from 2012 to 2023, the most recent year for which more than 99% of finalized IRS data on charitable organizations were available as of September 2025. Previous or subsequent fiscal year information was used when 2023 data were unavailable.

Data Sources

Several data sources form the basis of the MVCI, the most important of which are e-file Internal Revenue Service (IRS) data available on Amazon Web Services and irs.gov that provide details for 450,881 501(c)(3) public charities filing IRS Forms 990 and 990-EZ electronically for circa fiscal year 2023. These data were supplemented with 625 digitized Form 990 and 990-EZ returns from IRS Return Transaction Files (RTF). For organizations not filing an IRS Form 990 or Form 990-EZ, a combination of 661,956 charitable organizations filing Form 990-N and 499,972 "non-filing" registered charitable organizations were used to gather further information on typically smaller and religious organizations, for a total population of 1,613,434 registered 501(c)(3), (19), and (23) domestic charitable organizations for fiscal year 2023. Non-filing organizations are defined as registered tax-exempt organizations that did not file any type of Form 990 between the two years leading up to 2023 through one year after, most of which are religion-related charitable organizations exempt from annual 990 filing requirements. The final set of MVCI inclusion and exclusion rules was applied to the full population of 2,040,184 registered 501(c)(3), (19), and (23) domestic charitable organizations that were found in IRS Business Master Files (BMF) at any time between January 2010 and September 2025.

Inclusion Criteria

To be included in the MVCI, nonprofits must be primarily dedicated to serving the military and veteran community, with approximately 80% or more of program expenses serving this purpose for organizations that do not exclusively serve the military and veteran community).

This definition may seem straightforward but measuring giving to the military and veteran community is quite challenging since many charitable organizations have multiple programs that serve different populations. As such, the researchers exercised a certain degree of judgment in creating the MVCI. For example, to the extent possible, the researchers tried to target PTSD organizations that specifically serve the military and veteran community for inclusion in the Index.

In the case of veterans' organizations, there are IRS provisions allowing for the creation of tax-deductible charitable organizations whose membership is virtually entirely members of the military and veteran community. These organizations are not only tax-exempt and tax-deductible but have certain other benefits. The vast majority of these fall under the category 501(c)(19), though 501(c)(23) organizations are a similar, though older, analogous designation. Due to these organizations being by-law veterans' organizations, they are universally included within the Index and comprise a majority of the Index by number, though a much smaller percentage by donation amounts. See Table 1 for more details.

TABLE 1: Notable differences in features between 501(c)(3), 501(C)(19), and 501(c)(23) organizations

Feature	501(c)(3) (Charitable) (Charitable)	501(c)(19) (Veterans' Org)	501(c)(23) (Veterans' Org - Pre-1880)
Primary Purpose	Broad public benefit: religious, charitable, educational, etc.	Welfare of past/present U.S. Armed Forces members, their families, etc.	Primarily providing insurance and other benefits to veterans or their dependents.
Membership Requirements	No specific membership requirement beyond supporting the mission.	At least 75% of members are past/present U.S. Armed Forces members. The vast majority of the remaining members must be current/ former military, cadets, or their families.	At least 75% of members are past/present U.S. Armed Forces members.
Donor Tax Deductibility	Generally tax-deductible for donors.	Contributions can be tax-deductible, but stricter requirements may apply.	Contributions can be tax-deductible.
Political/ Lobbying Activity	Strict limitations; political activities like endorsing candidates are prohibited.	Allowed to engage in some lobbying and political activities.	Similar to 501(c)(19), some lobbying and political activity is permitted.
Benefits to Members	Generally, no direct benefits can be provided to members (no inurement).	Can pay life, sick, accident, or health insurance benefits to members and their dependents.	Primarily focused on providing insurance and benefits.
Examples	Churches, hospitals, schools, foundations	American Legion, VFW.	A few long-standing organizations founded before 1880, primarily providing insurance benefits.

Additionally, there is an extant NTEE code, "W30," which has been used to identify veterans' organizations. However, in testing, organizations categorized as W30 but otherwise not identified by any other rules were often false positives for the purposes of the MVCI. Some were clear false positives, such as Vietnamese-American community centers or support organizations for Chicago's Navy Pier area; others were simply military-focused organizations that did not exist to support the military and veteran community itself, such as military academies or military museums focused on conflicts or equipment. As such, NTEE coding was not considered when deciding on inclusion or exclusion within the MVCI.

Rule Development

Informed by a review of the relevant literature and published organization listings, the researchers developed initial sets of inclusionary words and phrases (key words), exclusionary words and phrases (stop words), and other criteria to establish logical "rules" to identify potential organizations for the MVCI. Generating the final set of around 30 rules (from nearly 50 tested) was an iterative process. Initial rules were applied to organization names, mission statements, and other identifiers. Manual verification of a random sample of the results led to modification of the initial rules and the creation of new rules.

Following this process, the final set of rules was applied to the full population of 2,040,184 registered charitable organizations found in IRS Business Master Files (BMF) between 2010 and 2024, resulting in 57,002 MVCI organizations, 39,375 of which were registered during circa 2023 per BMF. In total, the researchers hand-checked over 1,500 of the potential MVCI organizations identified based on available information, with a special focus on the largest organizations by finances, verifying over 90% of organizations by dollar.

The final set of MVCI rules and their sequencing are available upon request. The rules generally fall into the following 16 categories (exclusionary rules not shown):

- Advocacy and legal services
- Arts and culture
- Education
- Employment and transition services
- Environment
- Housing services
- Human services (not including housing services)
- Medical research
- Mental health
- Health (not including medical research or mental health)
- International
- Religion
- Service animals and other animal services
- Sports and recreation
- Survivor care and memorializing
- And general veteran services, for those otherwise uncategorized

To measure philanthropic support for MVCI organizations, the direct support value was used for charitable organizations filing IRS Forms 990 (Part VIII, Lines 1b, 1c and 1f). Total contributions, gifts, and grants were used for organizations filing Form 990-EZ (Part I, Line 1). A direct contribution per organization estimate was used for those filing Forms 990-N (based on the average direct support value among Form 990 and Form 990-EZ filing organizations with less than $50,000 in revenue for the same filing year). No direct support estimate was used for non-filers.

Limitations

Despite extensive efforts, there are certain caveats to this research due to the subjective nature of identifying and classifying organizations dedicated to the MVCI community, as well as data and resource limitations. Organizations were primarily hand-checked for inclusion in the Index, though manual verification of category alignment was limited. The researchers expect error rates to be minimal, but this could potentially affect the accuracy of dollar estimates for the rule categories.

The datasets used to generate the MVCI focus on public charities; they do not include financial data on religious congregations or any data on private foundations. The Index tracks total philanthropic support for MVCI organizations; the data cannot be disaggregated by funding source (e.g., individuals, foundations, corporations). While some religious organizations are included in the MVCI, many do not have any available government data and therefore could not be assessed for inclusion.

Although the researchers recognize the importance of intersectional identities, the data on MVCI organizations cannot currently be disaggregated based on more specific demographics (e.g., MVCI women and girls, MVCI individuals of color, MVCI LGBTQ+ individuals) at this time. However, work is currently underway to achieve this through the creation of additional indices as part of the Equitable Giving Lab.

APPENDIX B: LARGEST MVCI ORGANIZATIONS

TABLE 2: Top ten MVCI organizations (by 2023 contributions)

EIN	NAME	CONTRIBUTIONS (2023)	SUBSECTOR
202370934	Wounded Warrior Project	$362,646,720	General
262291955	Veteran Tickets Foundation	$212,983,773	General
131610451	United Service Organization (USO)	$124,952,572	General
141260763	Association of the Graduates of the United States Military Academy	$83,347,747	General
800587086	Gary Sinise Foundation	$77,443,925	Survivor Care
131946868	Paralyzed Veterans of America	$76,589,225	Medical Research
842613244	USVETS Housing Corporation	$71,423,070	Employment, Housing
440474290	Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States	$68,689,468	Survivor Care
753240683	Folds of Honor Foundation	$62,298,719	Survivor Care, Education
260086305	Semper Fi and America's Fund	$57,418,339	General

TABLE 3: Top five MVCI organizations in each sub-category (by 2023 contributions)

ADVOCACY

EIN	NAME	CONTRIBUTIONS (2023)
273228310	Boulder Crest Foundation	$15,961,044
541411430	Freedom Alliance	$11,321,406
740964465	Veterans of Foreign Wars, Texas	$7,920,950
350144340	American Legion Auxiliary National Headquarters	$7,829,806
411694717	Minnesota Assistance Council for Veterans	$5,429,993

SURVIVOR CARE

EIN	NAME	CONTRIBUTIONS (2023)
800587086	Gary Sinise Foundation	$77,443,925
440474290	Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States	$68,689,468
753240683	Folds of Honor Foundation	$62,298,719
436074338	Disabled American Veterans	$23,529,726
920152268	Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS)	$18,179,790

EMPLOYMENT / TRANSITION

EIN	NAME	CONTRIBUTIONS (2023)
842613244	USVETS Housing Corporation	$71,423,070
113158401	Fisher House Foundation	$54,537,525
521183585	Special Operations Warrior Foundation	$14,742,936
954382752	United States Veterans Initiative	$10,394,681
208742553	The Mission Continues	$10,191,675

TABLE 3, CONTINUED

HOUSING

EIN	NAME	CONTRIBUTIONS (2023)
842613244	USVETS Housing Corporation	$71,423,070
542143612	Homes for Our Troops	$43,329,743
521521276	Disabled American Veterans Charitable Service Trust	$18,113,295
956056761	AMVETS Department of California Service Foundation	$14,078,171
204540852	Building Homes for Heroes	$12,988,542

MENTAL HEALTH

EIN	NAME	CONTRIBUTIONS (2023)
880748620	Avalon Network	$24,787,039
275219467	K-9s for Warriors	$22,822,086
920152268	Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS)	$18,179,790
521521276	Disabled American Veterans Charitable Service Trust	$18,113,295
273512119	Stop Soldier Suicide	$12,581,185

MEDICAL RESEARCH

EIN	NAME	CONTRIBUTIONS (2023)
131946868	Paralyzed Veterans of America	$76,589,225
521521276	Disabled American Veterans Charitable Service Trust	$18,113,295
471981973	Cohen Veterans Bioscience	$10,755,381
200366717	Intrepid Fallen Heroes Fund	$6,752,643
911452438	Seattle Institute for Biomedical and Clinical Research	$3,944,001

SERVICE ANIMALS / ANIMAL THERAPY

EIN	NAME	CONTRIBUTIONS (2023)
275219467	K-9s For Warriors	$22,822,086
273385763	Golden Paws Assistance Dogs	$10,993,351
453342634	Paws for Purple Hearts	$9,731,875
208814368	America's Vetdogs	$9,628,414
475643489	Paws of Honor	$9,054,652

TABLE 3, CONTINUED

SPORTS & RECREATION

EIN	NAME	CONTRIBUTIONS (2023)
923617259	10 Klicks Outdoors	$23,665,516
270711063	United Heroes League	$6,131,004
465524395	Odyssey Charities	$5,609,934
814662848	Camp Freedom	$4,732,408
208837637	Warriors and Quiet Waters Foundation	$4,425,982

ARTS

EIN	NAME	CONTRIBUTIONS (2023)
521149668	Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund	$6,537,815
582422819	National Infantry Museum Foundation	$6,208,587
521513535	Women in Military Service for America Memorial Foundation	$4,366,627
843880595	National Veterans Memorial and Museum Operation Corporation	$3,078,475
824596922	National Veterans Memorial and Museum Foundation	$2,566,964

EDUCATION

EIN	NAME	CONTRIBUTIONS (2023)
753240683	Folds of Honor Foundation	$62,298,719
221905062	Marine Corps Scholarship Foundation	$18,140,835
470902295	Children of Fallen Patriots Foundation	$16,536,869
431562688	Hire Heroes USA	$14,034,687
061354978	United States Coast Guard Academy Alumni Association	$7,011,340

ENVIRONMENT

EIN	NAME	CONTRIBUTIONS (2023)
923617259	10 Klicks Outdoors	$23,665,516
461213844	Refab	$724,254
270183317	House in the Woods Military and Family Retreat	$327,891
823959113	Wisconsin Hero Outdoors	$116,961
852351144	Warriors and Walleyes Outdoors	$102,395

TABLE 3, CONTINUED

HEALTH, OTHER

EIN	NAME	CONTRIBUTIONS (2023)
261441650	Bob Woodruff Family Foundation	$38,845,027
952706737	Help Hospitalized Veterans	$10,311,384
381359597	Veterans of Foreign Wars National Home for Children	$6,205,825
208837637	Warriors and Quiet Waters Foundation	$4,425,982
824906891	Military Support Foundation	$2,945,192

HUMAN SERVICES (SANS HOUSING)

EIN	NAME	CONTRIBUTIONS (2023)
320033325	Operation Homefront	$42,448,397
331112829	Support Our Troops	$41,212,799
271720480	Team Rubicon	$38,015,532
273228310	Boulder Crest Foundation	$15,961,044
911883466	Armed Services YMCA of the USA	$13,015,822

INTERNATIONAL

EIN	NAME	CONTRIBUTIONS (2023)
521183585	Special Operations Warrior Foundation	$14,742,936
841627277	Troopathon	$1,939,013
593177532	River of Life International Outreach Center	$732,218
272037965	Heroes to Heroes Foundation	$578,041
010415961	Veterans for Peace	$489,656

RELIGION

EIN	NAME	CONTRIBUTIONS (2023)
846027655	Cadence International	$11,558,152
381415401	The Officers Christian Fellowship of the United States of America	$4,154,241
742238462	Military Community Youth Ministries	$2,280,746
812707761	Engage Your Destiny	$1,246,961
455029479	Angels of America's Fallen	$1,230,050

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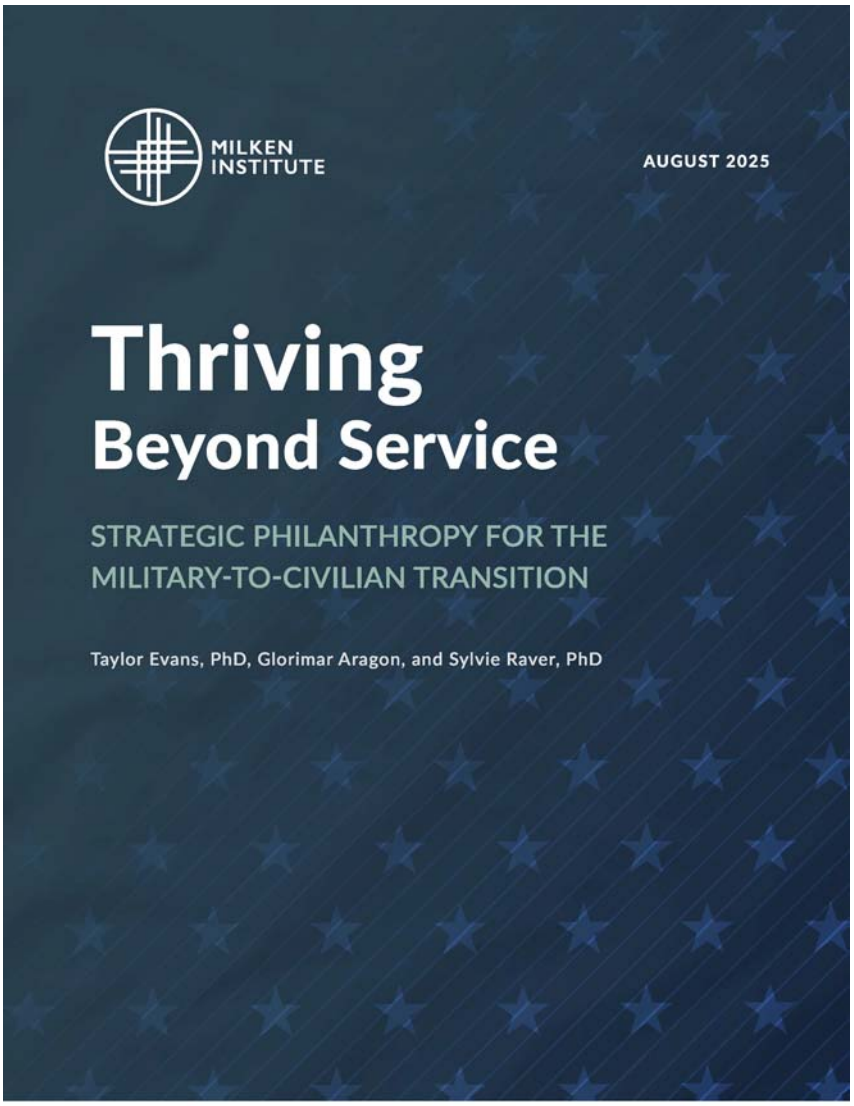
MILKEN INSTITUTE
AUGUST 2025
Thriving
Beyond Service
STRATEGIC PHILANTHROPY FOR THE MILITARY-TO-CIVILIAN TRANSITION
Taylor Evans, PhD, Glorimar Aragon, and Sylvie Raver, PhD

About the Milken Institute

The Milken Institute is a nonprofit, nonpartisan think tank focused on accelerating measurable progress on the path to a meaningful life. With a focus on financial, physical, mental, and environmental health, we bring together the best ideas and innovative resourcing to develop blueprints for tackling some of our most critical global issues through the lens of what's pressing now and what's coming next.

About Milken Institute Strategic Philanthropy

Milken Institute Strategic Philanthropy advances the strategic deployment of philanthropic capital to create a better, more equitable world.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank all the experts who contributed their time and expertise to the insights presented in this report. Notably, we'd like to acknowledge Cayley Tull, president of the Tullman Family Office, and Mary Ann Roeser, president of The Duchossois Family Foundation, for their leadership, thought partnership, and contributions in shaping the final report. We also wish to recognize colleagues at the Milken Institute—Cara Altimus, Emily Musil, Kevin Klowden, Ishita Das, Terry Mulligan, and Kellen Silver—who provided analysis support, feedback, and subject matter expertise on the opportunities presented herein.

Disclaimer

While many organizations and philanthropic endeavors are referenced as examples in this publication, inclusion is not an endorsement.

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Foreword

The transition from military service to civilian life can be profoundly challenging. It may seem obvious, but with less than 1 percent of the total US adult population currently serving in the active-duty military, it is worth underscoring—especially for those of us who have not served.

This is a multifaceted, deeply personal journey that impacts not only veterans but also their families, communities, and the systems surrounding them. And yet, despite the significance and complexity of this transition, support for our veterans remains fragmented, uncoordinated, and often ineffective.

In the veterans funding space alone, an estimated 45,000 nonprofit organizations are working to support this population. That number should give us pause. How can tens of thousands of organizations with no shared performance standards, limited central navigation tools, and inconsistent incentives to collaborate possibly use resources effectively or deliver the impact our veterans deserve?

The truth is, they can't. And the data reflect it.

Despite billions in federal and nonprofit spending each year, the veteran support ecosystem lacks transparency and coherence. Insufficient outcome measurement, limited coordination, and a lack of shared data lead to inefficiencies, duplication, and poorly targeted services. The issue is not a lack of programs or resources. The problem is that far too many programs often don't have their intended effects.

We see the consequences in the numbers. The US Army missed its recruitment goals in 2022 and 2023 by nearly 25 percent, falling short by over 15,000 troops each year. In addition, 60 percent of veterans self-report being underemployed, and military spouse unemployment has remained stubbornly high, hovering around 20 percent for the past decade, four times the national average. Most concerningly, veteran suicide rates remain unacceptably high, accounting for 20 percent of all suicide deaths despite making up just 6 percent of the US adult population—roughly 18 lives lost every day. These numbers should both alarm and energize us to work together to design a better way forward.

The Veterans Community Initiative offers just that: a new path defined by a shared vision, bold collaboration, measurable approaches, and a commitment to lasting impact. This strategic philanthropy guide is a call to action. For funders, it lays out a framework for more strategic, data-driven philanthropy. For organizations, it champions performance, transparency, and collective alignment. And for all of us, it presents a challenge: If not us, who?

Veterans are worthy of all our support. Their service and sacrifice should earn more than gratitude. They deserve a strong, enduring commitment to their well-being and success. Supporting veterans should not be relegated to a niche category of philanthropy. It is a responsibility we all share, one that intersects with mental health, education, workforce development, family well-being, and civic strength.

It's time to give smarter—together.

Cayley Tull
President
Tullman Family Office

Mary Ann Roeser
President
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Executive Summary

Military service is a profound form of public service and a uniquely selfless profession. Each year, approximately 200,000 service members leave the military—a process known as the military-to-civilian transition (MCT). Whether anticipated or sudden, this transition has no universal timeline or single pathway. Veterans and their families must often manage multiple challenges simultaneously: securing employment, housing, and other basic needs; navigating federal benefits; establishing physical and mental health care; relocating and integrating into new communities; and redefining their identity and purpose post-service. These demands are intensified by the abrupt shift from a highly structured military environment to a civilian world that requires greater personal autonomy.

Comprehensive support is essential to assist veterans in navigating the MCT and avoiding the risks of mental health challenges, unemployment, and family stress that can prevent veterans from thriving in civilian life. When veterans are supported in this transition, they are better positioned to contribute their leadership and skills to their communities, which reinforces the value of military service. Moreover, when military service is visibly honored through strong post-duty support, it enhances public trust in the armed forces and strengthens national security by encouraging future generations to serve.

In recognition of veterans' service and sacrifice, a broad network of stakeholders—including government agencies, nonprofit organizations, and philanthropic institutions—provides a wide range of support to them. These efforts span employment training, homeownership assistance, health care, mental health services, and benefits navigation. However, despite significant investments of time, capital, and care to help veterans and their families navigate the complexities of the MCT, the current system still falls short in fully meeting the diverse and evolving needs of all who undergo this critical life change.

In 2024, Milken Institute Strategic Philanthropy partnered with the Tullman Family Office and The Duchossois Family Foundation to examine unmet needs, funding trends, and systemic challenges within the veteran support ecosystem. One goal of this partnership was to develop a public-facing investment guide for current and prospective funders, nonprofit leaders, and policymakers so they can understand the current state of the field, inform organizational strategies, and identify opportunities for strategic collaboration across sectors. Our analysis involved extensive research, interviews with over 80 experts, and analysis of funding data from more than 17,000 organizations active in the veteran support ecosystem. The assessment findings reveal stark gaps: While many organizations contribute meaningfully, efforts are often fragmented, with groups focusing on specific aspects of transition—such as health, economic opportunity, and community connection—at varying levels of scale, coordination, and efficacy.

This philanthropic guide outlines the key elements of the military-to-civilian transition and the current landscape of support systems. Building on this foundation, we identify strategic philanthropic opportunities to strengthen transition support across four priority areas. For clarity, the ecosystem-wide opportunities are introduced first, followed by an overview of the current state of the veteran transition support ecosystem, to provide the necessary context to understand the three core elements of the MCT—health and well-being, economic opportunity, and community—introduced separately in subsequent sections. Recognizing that progress in one area is most sustainable when aligned with advances across others, we recommend a comprehensive approach, and we have highlighted throughout the guide where investment in one element would have a ripple effect across other aspects of the MCT.

We hope this guide serves as an orienting framework for those already engaged in the veteran support ecosystem and inspires new funders to advance a more coordinated, comprehensive response to the needs of those who have served.

Strategic Philanthropic Opportunities to Support the Military-to-Civilian Transition

Philanthropic Priority A

SUPPORT VETERAN ECOSYSTEM REFORM AND INNOVATION

Opportunity A.1: Increase Resource Navigation Efficiency for Veterans, Families, Veteran-Serving Organizations, and Funders

Philanthropy can strengthen the veteran support ecosystem by promoting and incentivizing alignment, transparency, and collaboration. Key actions include enhancing resource navigation, conducting data-informed assessments of modern MCT needs, scaling technology-driven platforms to navigate resources, and enabling cross-sector partnerships to improve support for veterans and their families.

KEY APPROACHES

- **Approach A.1.1:** Strengthen the Veteran Support Ecosystem Through Alignment and Transparency
- **Approach A.1.2:** Lead Data-Informed Assessment of Modern Transition Needs
- **Approach A.1.3:** Scale Data-Driven Resource Navigation Platforms to Improve Access and Anticipate Veteran Needs
- **Approach A.1.4:** Catalyze Cross-Sector Collaboration Through Strategic Co-funding Initiatives

Philanthropic Priority B

ENHANCE VETERAN HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

Opportunity B.1: Expand Understanding of Veteran Brain and Mental Health

Philanthropy can invest in predictive models for mental health trajectories, expand underfunded research on mild and repetitive traumatic brain injuries (TBIs), and scale both innovative and proven mental health treatments. Together, these efforts can improve early intervention, treatment access, and long-term outcomes for veterans and their families.

KEY APPROACHES

- **Approach B.1.1:** Understand the Continuum of Mental Wellness to Improve Predictive Power
- **Approach B.1.2:** Expand Mild TBI Research and Care
- **Approach B.1.3:** Advance Novel and Effective Veteran Mental Health Therapies

Opportunity B.2: Enhance Health-Care Access and Delivery

Philanthropy can improve health-care access for veterans and their families by integrating Department of Veterans Affairs and community systems through regional health networks to enhance coordination, continuity, and outcomes.

KEY APPROACHES

- **Approach B.2.1:** Develop an Integrated Health Network to Optimize and Scale Support

Philanthropic Priority C

ADVANCE ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

Opportunity C.1: Increase Opportunities for Career Advancement

Philanthropy plays a critical role in advancing career opportunities for veterans and military spouses, supporting skill building, education, and training initiatives that foster professional and financial fulfillment. By driving collaboration and supporting scalable, data-driven models, philanthropy can ensure long-term success in the civilian workforce for veterans and their families.

KEY APPROACHES

- **Approach C.1.1:** Address Underemployment Through Data Collection and Collaboration
- **Approach C.1.2:** Expand Transferable Skill-Building Opportunities
- **Approach C.1.3:** Integrate Veteran Experience to Improve Care and Expand Career Pathways
- **Approach C.1.4:** Invest in Entrepreneurship Pathways
- **Approach C.1.5:** Enhance Veteran Support in Higher Education

Opportunity C.2: Address Basic Needs and Financial Stability

Stable housing, food security, and financial stability are foundational to a successful transition from military to civilian life. Philanthropy can play a vital role by funding and scaling programs that meet basic needs and build long-term financial resilience for veterans and their families.

KEY APPROACHES

- **Approach C.2.1:** Prioritize Short-Term Housing and Food Security Support
- **Approach C.2.2:** Fund Efforts to Prepare Veterans to Overcome Financial Hardship

Philanthropic Priority D

INCREASE COMMUNITY AND CONNECTION

Opportunity D.1: Strengthen Advocacy and Reframe Public Understanding of Veterans' Transition and Support Needs

Philanthropic support for policy reforms can strengthen the overall support ecosystem by bolstering advocacy efforts for veterans, families, and caregivers. Philanthropy can also help shape the public narrative and reframe the understanding of military service through targeted storytelling and education, fostering a more inclusive, informed approach to supporting veterans and their families.

KEY APPROACHES

- **Approach D.1.1:** Bolster Advocacy Efforts for Veterans, Families, and Caregivers
- **Approach D.1.2:** Reframe Public Understanding of Military Service and the Veteran Experience

Opportunity D.2: Enhance Transition Support for Military Families

Acknowledging the MCT and adapting services to center the family unit's economic stability, safety, and well-being can meaningfully enhance transition support. This philanthropic opportunity would advance comprehensive, family-centered solutions during the MCT.

KEY APPROACHES

- **Approach D.2.1:** Develop a Family Transition Framework
- **Approach D.2.2:** Support Holistic Solutions to Safety Concerns in Veteran Families and Communities

An Imperative for Comprehensive Support for the Military-to-Civilian Transition

Veterans are former service members from one of the six branches of the US military: Air Force, Army, Coast Guard, Marine Corps, Navy, and Space Force. Separation from active duty, whether voluntary or involuntary, marks the start of the MCT, a complex and often lengthy process. During this transition, veterans face life-altering decisions, such as where to relocate their family, what civilian career to choose, and how to secure physical and mental health care. Many veterans report that fully adjusting to civilian life can take five or more years, with evolving health, economic, and community needs throughout the journey.

To support this transition, veterans may engage with a vast network of services spanning the federal government, nonprofit and private sectors, communities, and individuals. Access to these services is shaped by factors such as discharge status, era of service, and geographic location, as well as each veteran's unique needs and circumstances.

The September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks catalyzed a major shift in MCT support, ushering in a new era of national security awareness and public commitment to supporting returning service members. Since then, federal, nonprofit, and philanthropic efforts have expanded significantly, with the establishment of thousands of veteran-serving organizations, particularly focused on the needs of post-9/11 veterans.

DEFINING *VETERAN*

The term *veteran* is used to describe a former service member. United States Code Title 38 defines a veteran as "a person who served in the active military, naval, or air service, and who was discharged or released therefrom under conditions other than dishonorable."

However, outside of the government, many organizations supporting veterans—nonprofits and philanthropy specifically—use a more inclusive definition of *veteran*, encompassing former service members regardless of discharge status and length of service, and all members of the National Guard and Army Reserve, members of the US intelligence community, and other shadow roles often at the forefront of national security operations.

This report uses an inclusive definition of *veteran* that includes all service members regardless of branch, discharge status, or length of service, to capture needs overlooked by traditional channels of veteran support.

While attention to the MCT has fluctuated with military conflicts, policy priorities, and societal focus, the importance of comprehensive support remains clear. Effective MCT support enhances veterans' quality of life, strengthens civilian communities through deeper military-civilian connections, and bolsters national security by supporting an all-volunteer force **(Figure 1)**, thus benefiting veterans, families, and the nation as a whole.

Figure 1. Outcomes of Comprehensive MCT Support

Source: Milken Institute (2025)

A Comprehensive Transition Support Framework

To better understand and organize the essential elements of MCT support, the Milken Institute developed a comprehensive framework, depicted in **Figure 2**. This framework illustrates how each element of MCT support, though distinct, is interdependent and collectively essential to addressing the personalized needs of veterans and their families. The core elements include physical and mental health care; access to basic needs, such as food, housing, employment, and education; and strong family, peer, and community connections. The veteran support ecosystem encompasses all stakeholders dedicated to providing comprehensive transition support across these elements of thriving.

Figure 2. Four Core Elements of a Comprehensive Military-to-Civilian Transition

Source: Milken Institute (2025)

A MULTISECTOR VETERAN SUPPORT ECOSYSTEM

Due to the complexity of and number of stakeholders within the veteran support ecosystem, the following sections present only an overview of sectors and their ongoing challenges.

Federal Government

Federal support is designed to operate nationally, guiding veterans through the transition to civilian life primarily through legislative (see **Appendix**) and agency-led initiatives. Three core agencies lead this effort: the Department of Defense (DOD), the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), and the Department of Labor (DOL). While the DOD supports service members during active duty, the VA plays a central role post-service, particularly in addressing veterans' physical, brain, and mental health. Within the VA, the Veterans Health Administration delivers health care and drives biomedical innovation, and the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) manages pensions, disability compensation, and benefits tied to education and post-service employment. The DOL primarily focuses on advancing veterans' employment through job training and workforce development, which are key factors influencing long-term health and economic well-being.

However, diffusion of responsibility across stakeholders, narrow programmatic foci, and evolving administrative priorities can significantly influence federal funding for veteran support. For example, while the DOD and VA each play essential roles on either side of the transition process, no single agency is solely responsible for overseeing the full continuum of support. Programs like the Transition Assistance Program, which involve collaboration across multiple agencies, reflect a shared commitment but can make coordination and funding more complex. Federal programs typically operate at a national scale with defined scopes, which can make it challenging to address the full range of individualized transition needs.

These dynamics, along with changes in administrations that can shift funding and policy priorities, contribute to a support landscape that is responsive but sometimes fragmented. In this context, nonprofit and philanthropic organizations are well positioned to complement federal efforts, helping bridge gaps and strengthen support for veterans and their families.

Nonprofit

Veteran-focused nonprofit organizations—as many as 45,000—operate in parallel with government stakeholders, offering services that reflect the diverse needs of transitioning veterans. Those offerings range from direct services to advocacy. Regardless of their operating models, nonprofit organizations serving veterans and their families, termed broadly as *veteran-serving organizations*, are integral to a holistic support system that addresses the multifaceted needs of veterans transitioning to civilian life. A specific subgroup of veteran-serving organizations, termed *veteran service organizations* (VSOs), is accredited through the VA to assist veterans in navigating and applying for VA benefits, such as health-care services.

The ecosystem's wide-ranging composition—including organizations of different sizes, service offerings, funding models, and geographic reach—enhances its ability to address complex challenges. However, this diversity also introduces obstacles, particularly around fundraising, strategic coordination, and long-term sustainability. In the absence of standardized accountability metrics or consistent impact tracking, it can be difficult to distinguish high-performing organizations, presenting challenges to transparency and accountability to the public.

The lack of performance standards has also made it harder to make informed funding decisions and contributed to a competitive funding environment that may inadvertently discourage collaboration among veteran-serving organizations, negatively affecting veteran support.

Additionally, fluctuating interest in military and veteran-related issues can affect funding levels, creating uncertainty for nonprofit organizations, even as demand for their services remains steady. Addressing these challenges presents an opportunity to improve coordination, increase transparency, and strengthen the nonprofit sector's overall impact on veteran support.

Philanthropy

Philanthropy plays a critical role in sustaining and advancing support for veterans and their families post-service. Funders—including private and public foundations, corporate philanthropy, and individual donors—are integral to comprehensive veteran transition support and bolster direct services and research initiatives across health, economic, and community domains. Philanthropy's adaptability and flexibility are uniquely valuable, allowing it to respond to emerging needs and fill critical gaps. However, these same qualities can create challenges in navigating a complex support ecosystem that often lacks transparency and coordination.

Philanthropic funding in the veteran space tends to mirror broader sector trends, prioritizing issues like housing, employment, mental health, and financial stability. While many civilian-focused funders share these goals, they may not recognize the alignment with veteran-focused efforts, missing opportunities for partnership. Limited transparency between funders and service providers reinforces silos, resulting in an ecosystem segmented by issue area and population and reducing the potential for crosscutting impact. Concerns about the sustainability of philanthropic support have also grown amid shifting priorities. Interest in veteran-related initiatives often fluctuates with political and social climates, military conflict, and changes in federal leadership.

> There is an ongoing call for the philanthropic community to remain engaged and transparent with one another in pursuit of more collaborative, sustainable veteran transition support.

While there are notable successes within individual areas of veteran support, efforts often remain siloed. Government agencies, nonprofits, philanthropy, and the private sector typically concentrate on specific elements of the transition experience rather than addressing the full continuum of needs. This fragmented approach creates an uneven landscape that places the burden of coordination on veterans and their families, who must independently piece together support from multiple sources.

It also poses challenges for funders seeking to adopt a holistic yet strategic approach, as they must identify where needs are most acute and where philanthropic investment can achieve the greatest impact. Ongoing engagement, collaboration, and transparency across philanthropic actors are essential to ensure stable, long-term support for veterans and their families. Alongside addressing focused gaps in support across health and well-being, economic opportunity, and community, philanthropy has a powerful opportunity to approach these systemic challenges by investing in the infrastructure that underpins the ecosystem itself.

PHILANTHROPIC PRIORITY A

Support Veteran Ecosystem Reform and Innovation

PHILANTHROPIC PRIORITY A

Support Veteran Ecosystem Reform and Innovation

To ensure a meaningful and lasting impact, the veteran support ecosystem must be optimized through greater coordination, shared development of goals and measures of impact, and a unified commitment to improving outcomes. Philanthropy can drive systemic reform (**Figure 3**) that improves the efficiency and navigability of this system by investing in data-informed resource navigation, setting accountability standards for veteran-serving organizations, and funding comprehensive assessments to realign support systems with modern veteran needs.

Figure 3. Philanthropic Opportunities to Support Veteran Ecosystem Reform and Innovation

		Primary Elements of Impact			
Opportunity Area	**Approach**	Support Veteran Ecosystem Reform and Innovation	Enhance Veteran Health and Well-Being	Advance Economic Opportunity	Increase Community and Connection
Opportunity A.1: Increase Resource Navigation Efficiency for Veterans, Families, Veteran-Serving Organizations, and Funders	**Approach A.1.1:** Strengthen the Veteran Support Ecosystem Through Alignment and Transparency	✓			
	Approach A.1.2: Lead Data-Informed Assessment of Modern Transition Needs	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Approach A.1.3: Scale Data-Driven Resource Navigation Platforms to Improve Access and Anticipate Veteran Needs	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Approach A.1.4: Catalyze Cross-Sector Collaboration Through Strategic Co-funding Initiatives	✓			

Source: Milken Institute (2025)

OPPORTUNITY A.1

INCREASE RESOURCE NAVIGATION EFFICIENCY FOR VETERANS, FAMILIES, VETERAN-SERVING ORGANIZATIONS, AND FUNDERS

Philanthropy plays a crucial role in strengthening the veteran support ecosystem by promoting alignment, transparency, and collaboration. Key actions include enhancing resource navigation, conducting data-informed assessments of modern MCT needs, scaling technology-driven platforms to navigate resources, and incentivizing cross-sector partnerships to improve support for veterans and their families.

Approach A.1.1: Strengthen the Veteran Support Ecosystem Through Alignment and Transparency

The complexity and lack of clear performance standards across veteran-serving organizations create challenges for organizations and funders, hindering transparency, coordination, and impact. Philanthropy helps shape the ecosystem but often operates in silos, making strategic funding and collaboration difficult. By building and aligning around common metrics, codeveloping definitions of organizational effectiveness, and creating tools to help stakeholders identify high-performing organizations by focus area, funders can elevate transparency and cohesion. These efforts would promote data-informed decision-making, reduce duplication, and direct support toward the areas of greatest need and measurable impact.

Approach A.1.2: Lead Data-Informed Assessment of Modern Transition Needs

The needs of veterans and their families continue to evolve, but many current approaches to support are based on outdated assumptions, leading to inefficiencies, duplication, and critical gaps. A data-informed assessment of modern transition needs could help identify which solutions must be developed, scaled, or updated while surfacing underrecognized milestones that require attention and investment. This effort would provide valuable insight to veterans, families, veteran-serving organizations, and funders alike. With the right partners and scope, philanthropy is well positioned to galvanize attention, drive this assessment, and help transform how the ecosystem supports today's transitioning service members.

Approach A.1.3: Scale Data-Driven Resource Navigation Platforms to Improve Access and Anticipate Veteran Needs

Resource navigation remains a significant burden for veterans and their families, who often spend considerable time locating services across a fragmented ecosystem with inconsistent eligibility requirements and organizational inefficiencies. Technology-enabled platforms like Combined Arms and Unite Us have made progress in streamlining access, but their impact is constrained by geographic reach. Philanthropy can catalyze the scaling of these technologies nationally, building a centralized platform that not only eases access to community, state, and federal resources but also generates data to strengthen referral networks and develop predictive models that anticipate veteran needs.

Approach A.1.4: Catalyze Cross-Sector Collaboration Through Strategic Co-funding Initiatives

Despite a shared desire to reduce redundancy and improve coordination, meaningful collaboration in the veteran support ecosystem remains the exception rather than the norm due to competitive funding and a lack of

transparency and standardization. Siloed military-civilian systems and limited engagement from funders outside the traditional veteran space further constrain cross-sector collaboration, even when mission overlap exists in areas like mental health, housing, and caregiver support.

Philanthropy has an opportunity to model efficiency and catalyze collaboration through co-funding initiatives, leveraging mechanisms—such as pooled funds, specialized grant offerings, prizes, innovation competitions, and accelerators—that incentivize partnerships among veteran-serving organizations and between veteran- and civilian-focused organizations. This approach could encourage the codevelopment of solutions based on shared priorities while using the individual organizational strengths of funded service providers and helping to integrate veteran support into civilian systems. Taken further, co-funding opportunities could be aligned with agreed-upon common metrics of organizational effectiveness to elevate high-performing veteran support providers and encourage consolidation within the field. These collaborative efforts could result in a stronger, more unified ecosystem better equipped to meet the evolving needs of veterans and their families and better positioned to use powerful, streamlined data to inform storytelling.

State of the Field

This section includes an overview of the veteran support ecosystem, including stakeholders and funding.

KEY STAKEHOLDERS AND FUNDING SUMMARY

The transition from military to civilian life is a deeply personal and nonlinear journey that requires support across all dimensions of life. While individualized support is necessary, the veteran support ecosystem is crucial in providing systemic support and infrastructure, with investment and impact spread across three primary stakeholder groups: the federal government, nonprofit veteran-serving organizations, and philanthropy. Although many initiatives yield secondary and tertiary impacts across multiple dimensions of transition, the interconnected nature of veteran support is often undermined by siloed efforts. Despite shared goals and significant potential for synergy, many organizations operate independently without a shared understanding of organizational effectiveness and impact, leading to duplication of services and inefficiencies in funding.

Figure 4 provides an overview of selected stakeholders that are referenced in and/or contributed to this report. Check marks indicate each group's primary areas of impact on the veteran support ecosystem to illustrate how different stakeholders contribute to the MCT.

The check marks do not capture the entirety of each organization's programmatic offerings or the scale of organizational support across different elements of veteran support. Furthermore, many of the nonprofits in this ecosystem also provide grants to other nonprofits and implement direct service programs. Therefore, nonprofit and philanthropic organizations have been combined in Figure 4 to encompass the breadth of organizational models. *Health and Well-Being* includes physical and mental health care; *Economic Opportunity* encompasses access to basic needs, such as food, housing, employment, and education; and *Community* refers to family, peer connections, and community support. *Ecosystem* denotes the building and maintenance of foundational infrastructure, such as data and knowledge resources, as well as field and capacity building. The veteran support ecosystem encompasses all stakeholders dedicated to providing comprehensive transition support across these elements of thriving.

Figure 4. Select Stakeholders and Their Primary Impact Areas Across Core Elements of Transition Support

Stakeholder Group	Select Stakeholder	Ecosystem	Health and Well-Being		Economic Opportunity			Community	
		Infrastructure	Physical Health	Brain and Mental Health	Basic Needs	Employment	Education and Training	Family	Community and Connection
Federal Government	Department of Defense	✓				✓			
	Department of Labor	✓				✓	✓		
	Department of Veterans Affairs	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		
Nonprofits and Philanthropy	A. James and Alice B. Clark Foundation	✓							✓
	Blue Star Families	✓						✓	✓
	Bob Woodruff Foundation	✓							✓
	Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness at Penn State	✓							
	D'Aniello Institute for Veterans and Military Families	✓				✓	✓	✓	
	Elizabeth Dole Foundation	✓						✓	✓
	Gary Sinise Foundation				✓			✓	✓
	Headstrong Project			✓					
	The Heinz Endowments	✓				✓			
	Hire Heroes USA					✓		✓	
	Home Depot Foundation				✓	✓			
	Military Family Advisory Network	✓						✓	
	Paralyzed Veterans of America	✓	✓	✓					
	RAND Epstein Family Veterans Policy Research Institute	✓							
	Stop Soldier Suicide			✓					
	Team Red, White & Blue		✓						✓
	Veteran Transitions Research Lab	✓				✓			
	Veterans for All Voters								✓
	Walmart Foundation					✓	✓		
	Warrior-Scholar Project						✓		✓
	Wounded Warrior Project	✓	✓	✓				✓	

Source: Milken Institute (2025)

SUPPORT VETERAN ECOSYSTEM REFORM AND INNOVATION

The ecosystem must prioritize ongoing evaluation to strengthen coordination and maximize impact. To this end, within the nonprofit community, select academic centers and research institutes (**Figure 5**) represent neutral third parties that rigorously analyze quantitative and qualitative data to identify where support is concentrated, where high-impact organizations are delivering measurable results, and where critical gaps remain. With increased and sustained investment, these institutions are well positioned to expand their reach and help scale evidence-based practices across the broader ecosystem.

Figure 5. Academic Centers and Research Institutes

Within the nonprofit community, **academic centers and research institutes** provide high-quality information about the **state of veteran support organizations**, the **impact of existing programs**, and **gaps in services and knowledge**. Given the broad applicability of their work, these institutions receive a combination of philanthropic and government funding to support research and inform programmatic initiatives across the veteran support ecosystem.

Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness at Penn State specializes in research, evaluation, and implementation of insights to support the well-being of military families.

Duke University's Veteran Transitions Research Lab conducts research to understand the unique challenges of the MCT to support positive veteran employment outcomes through policy and structural changes.

Syracuse University D'Aniello Institute for Veterans and Military Families leverages actionable research, programs, and analytics to empower service members, veterans, and their families.

RAND Epstein Family Veterans Policy Research Institute conducts innovative, evidence-based research, often in partnership with philanthropy, to improve the lives of service members, veterans, and military families.

Sources: Milken Institute (2025), adapted from Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness *at Penn State (2025);* Veteran Transitions Research Lab *(2025);* Syracuse University D'Aniello Institute for Veterans and Military Families *(2025);* RAND Epstein Family Veterans Policy Research Institute *(2025)*

The stakeholders in the veteran support ecosystem share responsibility for developing and funding services that address the diverse needs of veterans and their families. In early 2025, the Milken Institute analyzed funding levels related to health and well-being, economic opportunity, and community support across key government, nonprofit, and philanthropic stakeholders. The methodology of this analysis is summarized in the **Appendix**.

Figure 6 provides a high-level summary of funding directed into the veteran support ecosystem across elements of transition by federal government, nonprofit, and philanthropic funders. The figure uses the most recently available government budget (FY 2024) and the most recent complete Internal Revenue Service (IRS) tax filing data (FY 2021). While the federal government primarily funds and delivers standardized services, particularly in health and well-being, nonprofit and philanthropic actors play a complementary role, significantly shaping support for veterans' economic and community needs. Community-focused initiatives receive the least federal investment, while many veteran-serving organizations provide support for military families and local engagement. In response, philanthropy has directed resources toward community-driven programs to amplify the impact of these organizations.

Figure 6. Overview of Funding Across Key Stakeholder Groups and Their Relative Scale Across the Core Elements of Transition

	Health and Well-Being	Economic Opportunity	Community
Federal Government 2024	**$143.0B**	**$19.0B**	**$17.0B**
Nonprofits and Philanthropy 2021	**$3.8B**	**$6.2B**	**$5.4B**

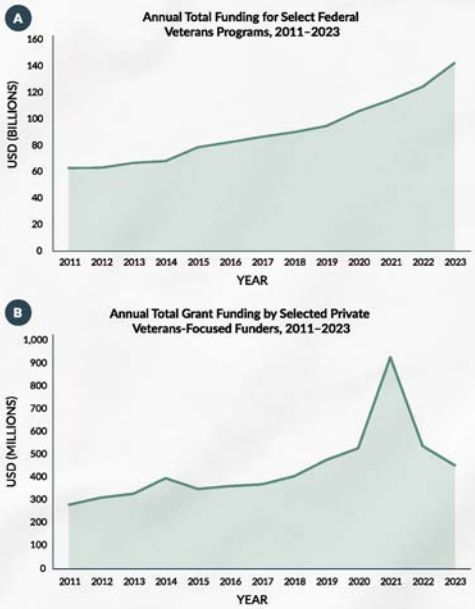
Source: Milken Institute (2025)

Limitations in data quality and availability prevent a complete longitudinal analysis of public and private funding into the veteran support ecosystem. However, a targeted analysis of investments by select stakeholders can provide additional insights into the current state of the veteran support ecosystem. A snapshot of federal and philanthropic investment between 2011 and 2023 is shown in **Figure 7**.

At the federal level, annual investment in federal programs supporting veterans, notably through the VA and DOL, has increased steadily from 2011 to 2023 (**Figure 7A**). Total annual investment has more than doubled in this time frame, rising from approximately $60 billion to $140 billion and reflecting the federal government's commitment to the evolving and long-term needs of the post-9/11 veteran population.

To examine trends in philanthropic support for veterans during the same period, we analyzed publicly available IRS tax filing data from a subset of funders with sustained commitments to the veteran support ecosystem—specifically those profiled in **Figure 4**. As shown in **Figure 7B**, total annual grantmaking from this sample reveals a more nuanced picture: Overall funding increased only modestly between 2011 and 2023, with a sharp but short-lived peak in 2021, likely responses related to COVID-19, followed by a return to prepandemic levels. While this analysis is not a comprehensive or fully quantitative account of all private funding for veterans since 2011, it offers insight into the general trajectory of philanthropic investment in this space.

Figure 7. Annual Funding Across Select Federal Programs and Select Funders, 2011–2023



Notes:

A) Annual total funding for select programs across the VA and DOL between 2011 and 2023, with data obtained from each agency's annual budget.

B) Annual total of grants made by select private funders between 2011 and 2023, with data obtained from annual IRS 990 filings by the selected stakeholders profiled in ***Figure 4****. These include the Walmart Foundation, Home Depot Foundation, The Heinz Endowments, A. James & Alice B. Clark Foundation, Wounded Warrior Project, Elizabeth Dole Foundation, Gary Sinise Foundation, and Bob Woodruff Foundation*.*

**Some of the funders included in this analysis are nonprofits that provide services to veterans and also distribute funding to community partners and thus serve as a dominant source of funding within the veteran support ecosystem.*

Source: Milken Institute (2025)

Philanthropy has a history of sustaining and scaling nonprofit efforts and, thus, has played a crucial role in the veteran support ecosystem, leading and influencing ecosystem priorities to expand the depth, breadth, and quality of support services for veterans and their families. Its flexibility and ability to incentivize stakeholders to model behaviors they aspire to see from others make it especially well suited to respond to emerging needs, cultural shifts, and gaps across the ecosystem. Through strategic investments to drive alignment, transparency, and collaboration, philanthropy can transform the efficiency and effectiveness of veteran support systems and help reshape the veteran transition experience. In addition to investment into the broader veteran support ecosystem, focused funding to address element-specific gaps is crucial to achieving comprehensive, collaborative transition support for veterans and their families.

PHILANTHROPIC PRIORITY B

Enhance Veteran Health and Well-Being

PHILANTHROPIC PRIORITY B

Enhance Veteran Health and Well-Being

Supporting the health and well-being of veterans is essential to their successful transition from military to civilian life. While the federal government remains the primary provider of veteran health services and a key funder of veterans-focused health research, nonprofits are enhancing and expanding care. Philanthropy (**Figure 8**) can catalyze progress to understand and address the complex mental and physical health needs of veterans; scale access to innovative, evidence-based care models that improve long-term well-being; and advance collaboration between veteran and civilian health systems to ultimately enhance health outcomes and streamline care.

Figure 8. Philanthropic Opportunities to Enhance Veteran Health and Well-Being

		Primary Elements of Impact			
Opportunity Area	**Approach**	Support Veteran Ecosystem Reform and Innovation	Enhance Veteran Health and Well-Being	Advance Economic Opportunity	Increase Community and Connection
Opportunity B.1: Expand Understanding of Veteran Brain and Mental Health	**Approach B.1.1:** Understand the Continuum of Mental Wellness to Improve Predictive Power	✓	✓		
	Approach B.1.2: Expand Mild TBI Research and Care		✓		
	Approach B.1.3: Advance Novel and Effective Veteran Mental Health Therapies		✓		
Opportunity B.2: Enhance Health-Care Access and Delivery	**Approach B.2.1:** Develop an Integrated Health Network to Optimize and Scale Support	✓	✓		✓

Source: Milken Institute (2025)

OPPORTUNITY B.1

EXPAND UNDERSTANDING OF VETERAN BRAIN AND MENTAL HEALTH

Philanthropy has an opportunity to transform veteran mental and brain health by investing in predictive models for suicide prevention, expanding underfunded research on mild and repetitive TBIs, and scaling both innovative and proven mental health treatments. Together, these efforts can improve early intervention, treatment access, and long-term outcomes for veterans and their families.

Approach B.1.1: Understand the Continuum of Mental Wellness to Improve Predictive Power

Philanthropic investment can significantly impact veteran well-being by addressing pre- and post-service mental health. Funders can accelerate a shift toward upstream, predictive mental health solutions by supporting the development and validation of a digital model that integrates ecosystem data. Such a model could proactively identify suicide risk and guide early interventions, ultimately improving outcomes for veterans, military families, and, potentially, the broader population.

Simultaneously, a crucial opportunity exists to gain deeper insights into mental health at the onset of military service. This type of assessment represents an unmet need in veterans' health research. Philanthropy can support national research efforts, providing grants to capture and analyze mental and brain health data from individuals entering service. Integrating this pre-service understanding with interventions—such as proactive tools like Crisis Response Plans (which can be scaled) and technological innovations for early risk detection and data-informed modeling—addressing post-service challenges offers a comprehensive approach.

Approach B.1.2: Expand Mild TBI Research and Care

Current TBI research across the government and academia primarily focuses on severe cases, but mild and repetitive TBIs remain under-investigated and underfunded. Greater understanding of the full TBI spectrum, particularly mild TBIs, could improve prevention, diagnosis, treatment, and management of these brain injuries during and after military service. Philanthropy could support expansion of TBI research and clinical trials to include mild, repetitive cases and fund longitudinal studies to track TBIs' long-term effects on health and social needs.

Approach B.1.3: Advance Novel and Effective Veteran Mental Health Therapies

The growing need for personalized brain and mental health care has driven investment in new diagnostic, therapeutic, and treatment approaches, including psychedelics and technology-assisted therapies. Philanthropic support for ongoing or future clinical trials can help integrate these innovative therapies into mainstream care. In parallel, highly effective treatments for conditions like post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) already exist. Philanthropy can be crucial in scaling access to these proven treatments, including evidence-based nonpharmaceutical options and established medications. By improving access, philanthropy ensures veterans benefit from cutting-edge innovations and well-established, effective care.

OPPORTUNITY B.2

ENHANCE HEALTH-CARE ACCESS AND DELIVERY

Philanthropy can strengthen health-care access for veterans and their families by integrating VA and community systems through regional health networks that improve coordination, continuity, and outcomes.

Approach B.2.1: Develop an Integrated Health Network to Optimize and Scale Support

Many veterans and military families seek care from nonprofit or civilian providers after service for convenience or comfort, but these systems are often not designed with the needs of the military-connected community in mind, impacting care efficiency. Creating pathways to integrate and optimize support across veteran and civilian health-care systems could help veterans thrive after service. Research from the D'Aniello Institute for Veterans and Military Families at Syracuse University has shown that veterans' health-related social needs are better addressed when VA health centers and community-based organizations have stable and established partnerships.

A regional integrated health network could be piloted to integrate health care across a referral network that includes a VA medical center and community providers to achieve interoperability and improve patient navigability and continuity of care. This model would build on existing federal efforts, such as the VA's Community Care Network, which links VA facilities with non-VA providers to expand access. While the VA offers pathways for eligible veterans to seek care outside its medical centers and has tools to share electronic health information, extensive coordination remains limited. Complex referral processes, eligibility restrictions, and ongoing interoperability challenges between medical systems continue to hinder seamless care. As a neutral convener, philanthropy is well positioned to pilot and evaluate a truly integrated approach—one that strengthens access, improves delivery, and centers the needs of veterans across systems.

State of the Field

Health and well-being support is one element of the constellation of support veterans need to thrive post-service. This section gives an overview of current veteran physical, brain, and mental health needs and supports during the MCT.

PHYSICAL HEALTH

Military service places intense physical demands on the body, from operational strain to combat exposure and injury, frequently resulting in long-term health impacts. These effects are often recognized as service-connected disability (SCD). As of 2022, about 5.4 million veterans—nearly 30 percent—had an SCD, almost double the rate in 2008. In contrast, the national disability rate remained relatively stable over that period, highlighting the unique physical toll of military service. Yet even beyond diagnosed disabilities, many veterans struggle to maintain their physical health after separation from the military, as the loss of structured routines and access to military fitness resources can make it difficult to prioritize exercise, rehabilitation, and preventive care.

Chronic pain is a leading physical health issue for veterans, often stemming from service-related injuries and stressors. Defined as consistent pain lasting more than three months, chronic pain affects more than 65 percent of veterans and exists at higher rates and with greater severity among veterans than among non-veterans. Veterans ages 20–64

are especially impacted, with younger veterans (ages 20–34) showing the most significant disparity with non-veterans (27.1 percent of veterans experience chronic pain, compared to 9.4 percent of non-veterans). Chronic pain contributes to mental health challenges like depression and anxiety, and can limit work productivity, affecting financial stability. Its complex impact underscores the need for integrated care approaches across veteran health systems.

SPOTLIGHT | Million Veteran Program Expands Veteran-Focused Biomedical Research

Advancing the understanding of veteran-specific health conditions like chronic pain can improve the diagnoses of and treatment for both veterans and civilians. Most veteran health research is conducted through the VA's Office of Research and Development and its Centers of Excellence. A key initiative is the Million Veteran Program (MVP), a large-scale longitudinal study launched in 2011 to examine how genetics, lifestyle, and environment influence health. With over 1 million participants, the program has generated important clinical insights into conditions such as lung cancer, heart disease, and suicide risk. As of March 2025, MVP data have resulted in over 400 publications that are providing clinically relevant insights for enhancing disease risk prediction, improving diagnosis, and expanding potential therapeutic strategies.

BRAIN AND MENTAL HEALTH

The experiences of post-9/11 veterans have reshaped national attention on veteran health, particularly the impact of combat on brain and mental health. This population faces elevated risks for TBI, PTSD, and suicide, making these areas key priorities in both research and clinical care.

Traumatic Brain Injury

TBI, which occurs when the brain is damaged by physical force, has affected more than 500,000 veterans since 2000, according to the DOD Traumatic Brain Injury Center of Excellence. Most reported cases (82 percent) are mild TBIs, which often go undiagnosed due to their complexity and heterogeneity. While TBI diagnostic criteria and determination of the condition's severity have primarily required a loss of consciousness, there is increased recognition, with new medical understanding, that this threshold may fail to capture many veterans who never lost consciousness but still suffered acute and/or repeated traumas during training or combat. Even mild TBIs can cause lasting cognitive and neurological effects, highlighting the need for improved diagnostics and understanding of their long-term impact.

To this point, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services now recognizes TBI as a chronic condition, effective January 2025. This acknowledgment represents a significant milestone for expanding resources and benefits to veterans and civilians with brain injuries.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

PTSD, first formally diagnosed among Vietnam veterans, can affect anyone but is notably prevalent among service members. About 7 percent of veterans report PTSD in their lifetime. However, rates are significantly higher for post-9/11 veterans (29 percent) than those in other service eras. Rates among post-9/11 veterans are likely influenced by factors such as the delayed formal recognition of the condition and reliance on data from VA health-care users, who may present with higher rates of PTSD.

While there is no pharmacological treatment approved primarily for PTSD, multiple evidence-based and experimental therapies exist to treat the disorder—including Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing, cognitive processing therapy, prolonged exposure therapy, and Stellate Ganglion Block—and these therapies can be augmented by peer-to-peer support from within veteran cohorts. These nonpharmaceutical treatment options are highly effective when delivered frequently, consistently, and with wraparound supports (such as lodging and financial assistance) that minimize barriers to access and opportunities for treatment avoidance.

However, barriers to treatment remain, including a persistent stigma associated with seeking care for mental health conditions and the limited capacity of many treatment providers, which reduces overall access.

> PTSD can be treated effectively with proper evidence-based care. Success depends on regular treatment, ongoing support, and follow-up. The promise of success with treatment highlights the need to improve access to quality mental health services.

While the VA remains the central mental health-care provider for veterans, academic centers and nonprofits have augmented the VA's capacity and expanded access with innovative models. Programs at academic institutions—such as the Emory Healthcare Veterans Program and the Road Home Program affiliated with Rush University—provide personalized treatment regimes, rapidly identify treatment nonresponders to adjust approaches, and expand access through widespread adoption of virtual care. These programs complement VA services while extending reach to underserved veterans.

The role of private-sector innovation is also growing. Noninvasive neurotechnology-based Magnetic Electroencephalogram Resonance Therapy (MeRT) and emerging psychedelic treatments like methylenedioxymethamphetamine (MDMA) are showing efficacy when used in combination with other evidence-based psychotherapies and represent the promising, personalized approaches under development. As these experimental and alternative therapies evolve (**Figure 9**), they not only advance care access and delivery for veterans but also influence broader mental health advancements across civilian populations.

Figure 9. Emerging Trends for Improving Veteran Brain and Mental Health

Advancements in Care Access and Delivery

Accelerated/concentrated care programs address logistical hurdles associated with mental health care, such as time, cost, and child care.

Personalized treatment recognizes the unique clinical and therapeutic needs of patients to provide optimal care.

The role of technology is increasing through the integration of digital diagnosis, treatment, and care delivery methods.

Provider education expands the pool of accessible providers trained to meet the health-care needs of veterans and their families.

Experimental and Alternative Therapeutic Strategies

Psychedelics, more specifically MDMA, can be combined with psychotherapy to treat PTSD.

Stellate Ganglion Block assists in quieting the sympathetic nervous system, reducing hypervigilance, and enhancing the efficacy of additional therapeutic strategies.

Complementary approaches build on treatment plans for increased personalization of care and can include offerings such as pelvic floor therapy, art therapy, and equine therapy.

Source: Milken Institute (2025)

Veteran Suicide

Despite decades of investment and well-intentioned programming, veteran suicide remains one of the most persistent and devastating challenges facing the community. According to the VA's *2023 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report*, the 2021 age- and sex-adjusted suicide rate for veterans was 78.1 percent higher than for non-veterans—the most significant gap since 2001. Between 2020 and 2021, the age-adjusted suicide rate for women veterans rose nearly 25 percent, with a 280 percent increase in firearm suicide for veteran women compared to their non-veteran peers.

Promisingly, the *2024 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report, Part 1 of 2: In-Depth Reviews* indicates a ~24 percent decline in age-adjusted female veteran suicide rates between 2021 and 2022—an encouraging sign of progress. Conversely, male veterans saw a 1.6 percent increase in age-adjusted suicide rates during the same period, underscoring the continued need to understand suicide risk across the entire veteran population, scale effective interventions, and develop solutions upstream of crisis.

Retrospective research has identified risks for heightened suicidality during the MCT that include challenges with mental and physical health, housing, financial security, diminished sense of purpose, and social isolation. Understanding these underlying risks can help direct resources and interventions upstream of crisis. Scaling simple and effective tools like the Crisis Response Plan can also help direct resources and interventions. A Crisis Response Plan is a proactive and individualized plan that helps veterans acknowledge reasons for living, identify connections in their community, and note providers to contact in the event of a crisis.

Technology and innovation play a role in developing predictive methods that identify at-risk individuals and families and help mitigate risk factors. For example, the VA program Mission Daybreak has been repeatedly lauded as an important driver of suicide prevention efforts. It funds innovations in artificial intelligence, data science, and clinical medicine led by veteran-serving organizations, start-ups, and academic institutions to address the veteran suicide crisis.

Public-private partnerships are similarly advancing solutions to address the high proportion of firearm suicides in the veteran population. With firearms involved in more than 70 percent of veteran suicide deaths, more initiatives are needed to address firearm storage and safety within the veteran community. The ongoing partnership between the VA and the National Shooting Sports Foundation, a firearm industry trade association, is one such initiative.

SPOTLIGHT | Stop Soldier Suicide and Mission Daybreak

In 2023, the VA announced that Stop Soldier Suicide, a veteran-serving organization founded in 2010 by US Army veterans, was the first-place winner of its Mission Daybreak program's grand challenge. Stop Soldier Suicide's Black Box Project leverages artificial intelligence and machine learning to detect patterns on digital devices entrusted to the organization by surviving family members of veterans who have died by suicide. These technological approaches are being used to build predictive models that identify veterans who are at the greatest risk for suicide and when interventions might be most effective.

KEY STAKEHOLDERS

Federal Government

Federal support for veteran health and well-being is primarily provided through the VA. More specifically, the Veterans Health Administration is the nation's largest health-care system and provides veterans with physical, brain, and mental health services. The Veterans Benefits Administration provides medical and financial benefits, including pensions, disability compensation, and benefits tied to education and post-service employment. These wraparound supports further health and economic well-being. Working in concert, these two arms of the VA are widely recognized as drivers of long-term health, biomedical innovation, and economic well-being for veterans post-service.

Nonprofits and Philanthropy

A group of veteran-serving organizations, termed *veteran service organizations*, are accredited through the VA to assist veterans in navigating and applying for VA benefits, including access to health-care services. While the VA is a central stakeholder providing high-quality health-care services, several challenges preclude the VA from meeting all

the health-care needs of veterans and their families. These include limitations to federal funding and selective veteran ineligibility, provider capacity, and geographic access.

Functioning in parallel with government stakeholders, some veteran-serving organizations are relied on for their ability to provide crucial support for veterans and their families across various dimensions of need, including health and well-being. Organizations providing health-care services, such as The Headstrong Project, have stepped in to augment and personalize health-care services, particularly for the broader military community. In addition, organizations such as Team Red, White & Blue have created spaces—physically and digitally—for veterans to foster and maintain connections through physical activity.

Nonprofit providers can reach members of the military community who may be distrustful of or ineligible for VA services—including those with less-than-honorable discharges, military spouses, and caregivers. These organizations are deeply embedded in the veteran support ecosystem, offering not only trusted, timely care but also referrals to a broader network of services that address health, economic opportunity, and community connection.

Many nonprofits accelerate access by accepting informal referrals from VA providers, bypassing slow, bureaucratic processes. However, this limits access to federal reimbursement, making philanthropy essential to sustaining and expanding care. Flexible, impact-driven philanthropic investment—mainly from private foundations—can fuel innovative health-care service delivery, biomedical research, and advocacy, helping close persistent gaps in care for veterans and their families.

PROMINENT MEMBERSHIP-BASED VETERAN SERVICE ORGANIZATIONS

The American Legion, American Veterans, Disabled American Veterans, Paralyzed Veterans of America, Veterans of Foreign Wars, and Vietnam Veterans of America—sometimes called the "Big 6"—are membership-based VSOs. According to the Department of Veterans Affairs Office of Healthcare Innovation and Learning, these organizations represent over 6 million veteran members. In addition to helping transitioning veterans navigate the complicated VA benefits claims process, these organizations prioritize veteran advocacy by lobbying for and influencing federal VA health-care and benefits policy.

Private Companies

Lastly, private companies play a special and meaningful role in discovering, developing, and disseminating innovative technologies that enhance health care for veterans and civilians alike. Given the potential to generate a profit, private industry initiatives have different stakeholders, funding levels, and mechanisms than public-sector investments. Still, the advancement of brain and mental health care remains a leading priority of this sector, with particular focus on developing therapeutics to treat PTSD, including psychedelics.

FUNDING SUMMARY

In early 2025, the Milken Institute analyzed funding levels related to health and well-being across key government, nonprofit, and philanthropic stakeholders using the most recently available government budget and IRS tax filing data. Funding data for private industry stakeholders were not available.

Figure 10. Snapshot of Recent Funding Across Veteran Health and Well-Being Stakeholders

	Health and Well-Being
Federal Government	$143.0B
Nonprofits and Philanthropy	$3.8B

Source: Milken Institute (2025)

Our analysis of the primary programs outlined in the 2024 VA budget revealed an estimated $143 billion federal investment via the VA to support veteran health care, including biomedical research, as shown in **Figure 10**. Diving deeper into Veterans Health Administration data, an analysis of medical program funding showed that top funding priorities in 2024, other than nonrecurring maintenance and leases, included telehealth (~21 percent), homelessness (~11.5 percent), suicide prevention (~11.2 percent), and education and training (~10.7 percent). Notably, the prioritizing of telehealth, mental health, and education aligns with emerging trends in veteran health and well-being, including the rising role of technology and expansion of provider education to meet increasing demand and personalization of services.

Given the nature of their tax filing status, data for nonprofit and philanthropic stakeholders were analyzed together using the methodology outlined in the **Appendix**. The analysis revealed an estimated total revenue of at least $3.8 billion from nonprofit and philanthropic stakeholders related to veteran health and well-being in 2021, the year for which the most complete and recent dataset was available.

The magnitude of federal investment compared to nonprofit and philanthropic investment underscores the role of the VA as the country's most extensive integrated health system and central provider of health care to veterans. However, nonprofit and philanthropic stakeholders continue to invest significant time and capital to meet the personalized health-care needs of veterans and their families.

In particular, two large VSOs—the Wounded Warrior Project (WWP) and Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA)—fund and deliver important services across the ecosystem. In 2022, WWP allocated nearly $54 million toward program services, including $48 million in grants to veteran-serving organizations, research institutions, and local governments, and $5.4 million in emergency financial assistance to individuals. Notably, WWP does not take government funding, underscoring the value of philanthropic contributions to essential service providers in the ecosystem. That same year, PVA distributed $6.5 million to support research, local chapters, disaster relief, and scholarships.

PHILANTHROPIC PRIORITY C

Advance Economic Opportunity

PHILANTHROPIC PRIORITY C

Advance Economic Opportunity

Military service has long been viewed as a pathway to economic opportunity, offering access to education, training, and stable employment for those who serve. But the sustainment of upward mobility after separation is not guaranteed. Economic stability is a cornerstone of a successful transition to civilian life, yet many active-duty families face financial stress driven by housing costs, frequent relocations, and underemployment. These challenges are often rooted in barriers to accessing basic needs, quality jobs, and education, all of which are closely tied to overall well-being.

Cross-sector solutions that improve access to jobs, education, and services are essential to long-term stability for veterans and their families. Philanthropy (**Figure 11**) can advance veteran economic opportunity by investing in data-driven models that expand access to basic needs, financial stability, employment, and education and training—critical components of a successful post-service transition. Focused giving and coordinated action can amplify existing efforts and drive sustained, systemic impact.

Figure 11. Philanthropic Opportunities to Advance Economic Opportunity

		Primary Elements of Impact			
Opportunity Area	**Approach**	Support Veteran Ecosystem Reform and Innovation	Enhance Veteran Health and Well-Being	Advance Economic Opportunity	Increase Community and Connection
Opportunity C.1: Increase Opportunities for Career Advancement	**Approach C.1.1:** Address Underemployment Through Data Collection and Collaboration	✓		✓	
	Approach C.1.2: Expand Transferable Skill-Building Opportunities			✓	✓
	Approach C.1.3: Integrate Veteran Experience to Improve Care and Expand Career Pathways		✓	✓	✓
	Approach C.1.4: Invest in Entrepreneurship Pathways			✓	✓
	Approach C.1.5: Enhance Veteran Support in Higher Education	✓		✓	

Figure 11. Philanthropic Opportunities to Advance Economic Opportunity, continued

		Primary Elements of Impact			
Opportunity Area	**Approach**	Support Veteran Ecosystem Reform and Innovation	Enhance Veteran Health and Well-Being	Advance Economic Opportunity	Increase Community and Connection
Opportunity C.2: Address Basic Needs and Financial Stability	**Approach C.2.1:** Prioritize Short-Term Housing and Food Security Support		✓	✓	
	Approach C.2.2: Fund Efforts to Prepare Veterans to Overcome Financial Hardship			✓	✓

Source: Milken Institute (2025)

OPPORTUNITY C.1

INCREASE OPPORTUNITIES FOR CAREER ADVANCEMENT

Philanthropy can advance career opportunities for veterans and military spouses, supporting skill building, education, and training initiatives that foster professional and financial fulfillment. By driving collaboration and supporting scalable, data-driven models, philanthropy can ensure long-term success in the civilian workforce for veterans and their families.

Approach C.1.1: Address Underemployment Through Data Collection and Collaboration

Veteran underemployment—often tied to the underutilization of military-acquired skills and credentials—limits economic mobility and well-being. Philanthropy can leverage both its funding and convening power to support efforts that track education outcomes and employment trajectories, helping postsecondary institutions adapt their offerings and employers develop hiring practices that better recognize veteran talent. These insights can also inform the design of pipeline programs that connect veteran learners to high-demand fields, ensuring their inclusion in a rapidly evolving, skill-based workforce.

Approach C.1.2: Expand Transferable Skill-Building Opportunities

Veterans and their families need access to develop work-ready skills to succeed in the civilian workforce. Philanthropy can strengthen these efforts by funding proven organizations focused on providing skills training and work-ready credentials, partnering with other funders to amplify existing efforts to upskill veterans and military spouses, and investing in local and place-based partnerships that connect education providers with employers. Expanding access to high-quality, in-demand training across all sectors and trades helps ensure veterans and spouses are prepared to compete and thrive.

Approach C.1.3: Integrate Veteran Experience to Improve Care and Expand Career Pathways

Expanding veteran representation in health and mental health care offers a dual benefit: It creates meaningful career pathways for veterans and improves care through lived experience. Veterans bring unique insight into military culture, making them well suited for roles as mental health providers, researchers, and frontline health professionals. Philanthropy can accelerate this impact by funding dedicated spots for veterans in graduate health programs and supporting military cultural competency training for civilian providers. Integrating the veteran experience into care and research not only strengthens economic opportunity for those who have served but also can enhance outcomes for veteran patients, representing an opportunity for synergistic support and impact.

Approach C.1.4: Invest in Entrepreneurship Pathways

Entrepreneurship offers veterans and military spouses a flexible, mission-driven career path, but many lack the foundational knowledge and networks to succeed. Increased access to training, resources, and guidance can better prepare them to engage in the small business economy. Strategic funding to organizations supporting veteran and military spouse entrepreneurship can expand capacity and scale proven programs. Supporting veteran- and military spouse–founded businesses can also strengthen the broader small business landscape and reinforce entrepreneurship as a viable post-service pathway.

Approach C.1.5: Enhance Veteran Support in Higher Education

Many higher education institutions seek to recruit and retain veterans, but their resources are often tailored to traditional, first-year students. Equipping these institutions with increased military cultural competency is key to creating a shared language that better serves veterans and military-connected individuals.

Philanthropy can provide financial assistance to institutions committed to revamping, creating, or sustaining veteran initiatives. This could have a transformative impact on academic advising, peer mentorship, mental health, financial literacy, and career advising. Such initiatives would provide an incentive for institutions that may not otherwise have the resources to create or revamp these services. Additionally, funding data collection on veteran educational attainment and GI Bill usage can help identify gaps, inform future programs, and guide strategic investments in higher education for veterans.

OPPORTUNITY C.2

ADDRESS BASIC NEEDS AND FINANCIAL STABILITY

Stable housing, food security, and financial stability are foundational to a successful transition from military to civilian life. Philanthropy can fund programs that meet basic needs and build long-term financial resilience for veterans and their families.

Approach C.2.1: Prioritize Short-Term Housing and Food Security Support

Philanthropy can address housing and food insecurity by supporting organizations that conduct research to better understand risks and intervene early during the MCT to provide direct services to support these needs. Funders can support veteran-serving organizations that screen for housing and food security during evaluations to identify at-risk

families and leverage this information to intervene early during the MCT. Supporting resource navigation efforts at community nonprofits can also help veterans access services more quickly and prevent issues. Resource navigators can raise awareness of available programs, assist at-risk individuals, and provide feedback on service gaps. Scaling resource navigation platforms can further expand tailored support for veterans and families.

Approach C.2.2: Fund Efforts to Prepare Veterans to Overcome Financial Hardship

Transitioning service members often face acute financial hardship, which, if not addressed, can become a lasting issue. Financial literacy is crucial, as veterans are frequent targets of predatory scams. Funding programs that teach financial fluency can help veterans and military families manage financial challenges during and after the MCT. Additionally, supporting emergency cash assistance programs at the nonprofit level can provide timely relief and prevent short-term difficulties from turning into long-term financial problems.

State of the Field

Post-service access to economic opportunities remains a predictor of MCT success for veterans. The following section discusses current veteran economic opportunity needs—basic needs, employment, and education and training.

BASIC NEEDS

Access to safe, affordable housing and nutritious food is essential to long-term stability and well-being. According to the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans, homelessness stems from interconnected issues, such as a lack of affordable housing, limited income, poor access to health care, and mental health or substance use challenges. Housing instability often begins during service, as frequent relocations—on average, every 2.5 years—can create financial strain, missed payments, and credit issues that persist post-service and erode financial stability. Housing instability can also take a toll on health and well-being, contributing to increased stress, disrupted access to medical care, and worsened mental health outcomes for both veterans and their families.

These setbacks can intensify the challenges of renting or buying a home and contribute to food insecurity, as stable housing is directly correlated to consistent food access. In 2023, 13.5 percent of all US households experienced food insecurity, compared to 20–25 percent of military families. Those most at risk include families new to military service, those who have recently relocated, households with children under 18, and active-duty families. Understanding the root causes of food insecurity is essential to building integrated, wraparound support that connects housing, employment, education, and health. Veteran-serving organizations like the Military Family Advisory Network and Blue Star Families are leading data collection efforts to better understand and address these challenges, and they are implementing multiple multi-stakeholder programs to provide direct food assistance support to veterans and military families.

SPOTLIGHT | Reduction in Veteran Homelessness

Housing is foundational to well-being, and housing insecurity—including homelessness—is closely tied to mental health challenges, family strain, and income instability. While the causes of veteran homelessness are complex, they are solvable through coordinated support. Since 2010, veteran homelessness has dropped 55 percent, driven by efforts from the VA, state agencies, and community partners. To date, Virginia, Delaware, Connecticut, and 85 communities have effectively ended veteran homelessness.

Programs that combine stable housing with integrated health and social services have proven especially effective. For example, Operation Homefront supports military families with housing and financial assistance, while Bastion offers intentional housing and wraparound care for veterans recovering from trauma. These models highlight how targeted, collaborative support can create lasting stability for veterans.

EMPLOYMENT

Employment is a critical driver of a veteran's MCT, contributing to economic stability, social integration, and mental well-being. By the end of 2010, the unemployment rate for post-9/11 veterans was 12.1 percent, compared to under 9 percent for the non-veteran population. In response, veteran-focused hiring was prioritized across the US economy, and hundreds, if not thousands, of employment-focused nonprofits rose to help veterans navigate the workforce landscape and supplement federal career transition programs.

Likely because of these efforts, unemployment rates for veterans have steadily declined over the past decade. The 2024 annual average unemployment rate for veterans was relatively comparable, if not slightly lower, than for all Americans (age 18 and over), at 3.0 percent and 3.9 percent, respectively. However, important demographic differences persist, with veterans ages 18–34 experiencing higher unemployment rates than veterans at more advanced career stages.

Despite overall gains, these disparities highlight the need for more targeted strategies to support veterans, especially younger cohorts, in securing meaningful, long-term employment. While it's long been a focus in the veteran support ecosystem, securing meaningful post-service employment is rarely straightforward—many veterans cycle through several jobs before finding a fulfilling career.

Veterans have transferable skills but often face challenges translating their experience to civilian roles, navigating career interests, and overcoming concerns about identity or confidence. Addressing both institutional and personal barriers can expand opportunities and empower veterans to pursue careers with clarity and confidence. **Figure 12** outlines ongoing challenges to attracting and retaining veteran talent in the civilian workforce. These challenges can be addressed through targeted efforts to increase military cultural competency, collaboration across military and civilian workforce systems, and employer-led initiatives to integrate veterans into company culture.

Figure 12. Ongoing Challenges to Attracting and Retaining Veterans in the Civilian Workforce

Heroization	Civilians, including family members, place undue expectations on what careers a veteran should pursue, defaulting to a societal norm of pushing veterans to other service roles. This affects both job-seeking and hiring behaviors, and establishes perceptual barriers that impact veteran employment. Ensuring that hiring managers consider this potential pitfall—and that job descriptions reflect that consideration—is crucial for long-term success.
Data Sharing	The military and civilian workforce systems do not routinely share employment history or data. Technology could be implemented to assist civilian employers in accessing crucial elements of a veteran's employment records, credentials, and training for use in hiring, training, and promotion. This access would also help alleviate the veteran's burden to serve as the mediator between the systems.
Workforce Culture	Military and civilian employment cultures are distinct, with notable differences in promotion opportunities, relationships to management, and perceived priorities. However, there are also similarities, such as the hierarchical structures and expectations around adherence to policies and rules. Creating a shared language between the two systems could support the MCT and make the career transition easier.

Source: Milken Institute (2025)

Enacting Best Practices and Resources to Employ and Retain Veterans

Across the academic, health-care, and technology sectors, there is growing momentum to bring more veterans into leadership and veteran-serving roles. The federal government remains the largest employer of veterans—with veterans comprising about 25 percent of the federal civilian workforce in 2024, and the DOD and VA leading in veteran hires. However, early data suggest that recent hiring freezes and layoffs in the federal workforce in early 2025 have disproportionately affected veterans and military spouses.

As the public-sector workforce shifts, building pathways into the private sector for veterans is increasingly urgent—and a top priority across both public and private sectors. Multiple federal agencies, including the VA and DOL, have developed effective recruitment and retention strategies, and these are widely shared to help civilian employers better attract and support veteran talent. In addition, the private sector has focused on actionable strategies to overcome challenges in hiring and retaining veterans in civilian roles. Evidence-based best practices include translating military experience into

civilian job roles, implementing structured onboarding and mentorship, prioritizing skills-based hiring, and fostering an inclusive, military-friendly culture. Promoting leadership opportunities for veterans also ensures their lived experience informs more effective, veteran-centered employment solutions across sectors.

From Unemployment to Underemployment

While veteran unemployment has been trending in the right direction over the past two decades, underemployment remains a major challenge for the veteran population. Underemployment refers to low-wage employment or employment that does not use a veteran's full range of skills, experiences, and abilities.

> **According to a 2023 report from The Veterans Metrics Initiative, approximately 61 percent of veterans report being underemployed due to disparity among their skills, education, experiences, and their post-transition employment in the civilian job market.**

Veterans may leave service with leadership experience, technical certifications, or advanced training that goes unrecognized in the civilian sector. For example, a veteran who led logistics operations in the military might be hired into an entry-level warehouse role, despite possessing management and supply chain expertise. Skills-based hiring, which prioritizes competencies over formal education or direct experience, offers a promising pathway to address this gap.

While many veteran-friendly employers have adopted this approach, its broader impact on veteran employment and underemployment remains underexplored. A 2023 McKinsey study estimated that widespread adoption could add up to $15 billion to the US economy over a decade. The nonprofit Hire Heroes USA has piloted efforts to provide veterans and military spouses with more options for skill development and validation by partnering with various training providers. Employers like Walmart are leading the way by promoting awareness of skills-based hiring to advance veteran hiring initiatives. Philanthropic and corporate partners are well positioned to amplify these efforts and help shape a more inclusive and skills-driven workforce.

SPOTLIGHT | Building Financial Fluency and Stability

Veterans and military families need strong financial literacy to prevent and navigate hardship, especially during the transition from service, when many face brief but significant income gaps. Even short-term loss of income can trigger long-term financial instability. Wraparound support and emergency financial relief—like the assistance from Operation Homefront's Critical Financial Assistance Program—can provide crucial short-term aid. Complementary efforts, such as financial education programs from organizations like Operation Hope, equip veterans with the skills to manage complex financial situations and build long-term stability.

EDUCATION AND TRAINING

The Post-9/11 GI Bill has expanded access to education and training for veterans and their families, covering tuition, housing, books, job training expenses, and licensing fees and helping many pursue postsecondary credentials and new career paths. Free upskilling programs—such as those provided by the DOD's SkillBridge program and the nonprofit NPower—also support service members and veterans in building networks and gaining civilian workforce skills. However, these offerings are limited, and key gaps remain.

A lack of veteran-specific education data limits visibility into veterans' educational and career outcomes and prevents a comprehensive understanding of veterans' experiences, as well as resources and interventions that can be particularly impactful. Efforts to increase data sharing between government agencies and analysis by nonprofit research institutions are ongoing and are helping to track outcomes of Post-9/11 GI Bill users and uncover persisting gaps.

For example, a 2024 analysis offered a first look at the outcomes for the 54 percent of eligible veterans who used these GI benefits. This analysis found that while the use of GI Bill benefits leads to higher rates of degree and credential attainment, the resulting gains in earnings vary and are often lower for veterans who attend for-profit institutions.

Separately, to meet the diverse employment needs of veterans, workforce development programs, philanthropy, and educational institutions have introduced their own initiatives, such as scholarships and advocacy efforts, to boost postsecondary attainment among the military-connected population. Holistic data collection and analysis on education and workforce outcomes could significantly transform the landscape for veterans and their families by providing key insights on gaps and highlighting policy needs.

Further, veterans often face financial strain during periods of unemployment while pursuing education, and employers may overlook skills gained through military service. Philanthropy can help bridge these gaps by investing in initiatives that connect education to meaningful employment—for example, programs that provide wraparound supports, increase access to transferable skills, and build partnerships with community employers.

Navigating the Higher Education Landscape

While higher education can provide opportunities for economic mobility, traditional institutions often do not meet the needs of veterans, and veterans' identities may not be fully reflected in these settings. Despite this, veterans demonstrate resilience, with 20 percent earning degrees and continuing their education.

Balancing wraparound support with community engagement is key to addressing their needs without further isolating them from civilian students. Organizations like the Warrior-Scholar Project help veterans transition to college through offerings such as intensive, immersive academic boot camps. Many schools have dedicated veteran support offices and initiatives that collaborate with veteran-serving organizations and offer academic preparation, peer and wellness support, and opportunities for leadership development. By scaling these efforts, institutions can better accommodate veterans, leveraging their technical skills and lived experiences to foster academic, career, and personal growth.

Veterans are also often targeted by for-profit schools seeking to take advantage of the GI Bill, making it critical to sustain policies and practices that protect veterans' educational benefits from being exploited. Additionally, providing insight into higher education's "hidden curriculum"—the unwritten norms, rules, expectations, and social dynamics of higher education—can better prepare veterans to navigate and succeed in the academic environment.

According to the Department of Veterans Affairs, 62 percent of student veterans are first-generation college attendees. Scaling initiatives that support first-generation students can dually support veterans in higher education.

While education helps veterans gain credentials, the military service-to-college path may delay workforce entry and limit access to civilian internships or professional networks. As a result, veterans are often seen as either overqualified due to extensive workforce experience, or underqualified due to a lack of traditional career pathways and progression, pushing them into lower-paying positions and hindering long-term career growth. Ensuring employers understand the breadth of skills veterans possess, in combination with higher education, is crucial in developing a more comprehensive view of veterans' abilities and potential contributions to the workforce. Thus, data collection on veteran educational attainment and outcomes is necessary to build more informed pathways.

Preparing for Diverse Career Options

Several education and training pathways—outlined in **Figure 13**—can shape a veteran's post-service trajectory by exposing them to a range of meaningful and financially sustainable careers. These pathways include traditional two- and four-year degrees, workforce development and upskilling programs, apprenticeships, and entrepreneurship training.

However, most of these programs are only accessible after military separation, limiting early planning when it's most critical. Preparing service members before transition is essential to ensuring long-term success. Programs like the NPower SkillBridge partnership offer a promising model, providing cybersecurity training during active duty to support direct entry into the civilian workforce. Expanding early access to education and training can better equip service members to explore diverse career pathways post-service and gain long-term economic mobility.

Figure 13. Emerging Trends in Education and Training to Support Diverse Veteran Career Options

Higher Education	Higher education is evolving to better support veterans in pursuing diverse and workforce-aligned career paths. Emerging trends include flexible degree programs, online and hybrid learning, and increased partnerships between colleges and employers. Programs like Syracuse University's D'Aniello Institute for Veterans and Military Families (IVMF) offer tailored educational pathways and career support, helping veterans align their education with long-term goals.
Skills Training	Skills training provides opportunities to develop technical and soft competencies and skills. Notable examples for service members include industry training, apprenticeships, and internships. For example, SkillBridge, a program led by the Department of Defense, builds on relationships with industry partners to guide service members through experiential learning and civilian career exploration.
Trade Education	Careers in the skilled trades can be a natural fit for veterans, drawing on military-acquired skills while offering competitive pay, structure, leadership opportunities, and a clear path for advancement. These careers also support family stability by easing community integration. Veterans can access the trades through vocational training, technical degrees, or apprenticeships and may be able to apply education benefits to training-related costs.
Entrepreneurship	Entrepreneurship offers a rewarding post-service path for some veterans, but many face barriers such as limited access to capital, networks, and awareness of support programs. Organizations like Dog Tag or the Bunker Labs program at IVMF help bridge these gaps by providing education, training, and connections to support veterans and their families in launching and growing businesses.

Source: Milken Institute (2025)

KEY STAKEHOLDERS

Federal Government

The US departments of Veterans Affairs, Labor, and Defense lead several initiatives and offerings to support veterans' economic opportunities after service. Examples include the VA's readjustment benefits, which help veterans and their families transition to civilian life; the Department of Labor's Veterans' Employment and Training Service (VETS), which promotes veteran employment at the federal and state levels; and the Department of Defense's SkillBridge program, which connects service members with industry partners for civilian job training during their final months of service. As new administrations and legislation emerge, the federal veteran support landscape will continue to evolve, though progress at the national level often depends on securing or reallocating funding, which can pose logistical and sustainability challenges.

Nonprofits and Philanthropy

Veteran-serving organizations are essential partners in advancing veteran economic opportunity and complement federal efforts with tailored support for basic needs, employment, education, and training. These organizations serve veterans across the transition spectrum—from active duty to post-service—helping to prevent and address financial challenges. For example, the Military Family Advisory Network offers pre-transition programs, such as food assistance initiatives, to tackle the root causes of economic hardship early. Organizations like Hire Heroes USA and Hiring Our Heroes focus on post-service employment, while community-based groups—including local religious organizations, food banks, and charities—often fill critical gaps that fall outside the scope of traditional veteran-serving organizations.

Many of these organizations rely on philanthropic support to sustain and expand their impact. While some funders focus broadly on veterans or economic mobility, others target specific issues, such as homelessness. For instance, The Home Depot Foundation's Veteran Housing Grants Program has made significant strides in reducing veteran homelessness. The A. James & Alice B. Clark Foundation has been a major supporter of economic opportunity for veterans; it has substantially invested in workforce development programs, higher education access, and post-service career pathways. With the foundation set to sunset in 2025, new philanthropic leaders have a growing opportunity to step in and sustain, scale, or innovate in this space to continue advancing veteran economic opportunity.

FUNDING SUMMARY

Using the most recently available government budget and IRS tax filing data, the Milken Institute analyzed funding across key government, nonprofit, and philanthropic stakeholders (see **Appendix**).

Together, the VA and DOL contributed approximately $19 billion to veteran economic opportunity in 2024 (**Figure 14**). Federal efforts through the VA, notably the VBA, provide economic support to veterans and their families through financial assistance, loans, education and training, and other services. However, these programs are based on VBA eligibility requirements and may not be available to some transitioning service members and their families.

Two flagship federal initiatives—the DOL VETS office and the Post-9/11 GI Bill—are primary drivers of veteran education, training, and employment. DOL VETS programs are expected to receive $335 million in 2024, while the GI Bill is projected to account for approximately $8.2 billion, or 47 percent, of the total federal investment in veteran economic opportunity across select programs (see **Appendix**). This significant investment highlights the need for comprehensive data collection to ensure that these funds lead to meaningful economic outcomes for veterans.

Using the most comprehensive data available, our analysis found that nonprofits and philanthropic stakeholders supporting veteran economic opportunity generated at least $6.2 billion in revenue in 2021. This figure includes overlapping investments in areas such as health, well-being, and community, given the interconnected nature of veteran transition. Economic opportunity remains a core focus for many of these funders.

Philanthropy sustains the veteran-serving organization ecosystem, both by supporting efforts financially and by fostering collaborations to scale impact. However, philanthropic giving may shift in response to changes in federal support, economic conditions, and the rising costs of education and training. Ensuring that investment in economic opportunity for veterans and their families is sustainable and unwavering is an important step in protecting those who serve our nation.

Figure 14. Snapshot of Recent Funding Across Veteran Economic Opportunity Stakeholders

Source: Milken Institute (2025)

PHILANTHROPIC PRIORITY D

Increase Community and Connection

PHILANTHROPIC PRIORITY D

Increase Community and Connection

Traditional MCT support has primarily focused on the individual veteran. This approach overlooks how military families, peers, civilian communities, and local support systems impact the transition process. If MCT support efforts expand to include family and broader community support, the transition experience can become more holistic, fostering long-term success for both veterans and their loved ones.

Through strategic, coordinated action, philanthropy (**Figure 15**) can invest in solutions that prioritize the entire family unit—advancing safety, economic security, and well-being—and support efforts to advocate for and communicate the vital role of family and community in the MCT.

Figure 15. Philanthropic Opportunities to Increase Community and Connection

		Primary Elements of Impact			
Opportunity Area	**Approach**	Support Veteran Ecosystem Reform and Innovation	Enhance Veteran Health and Well-Being	Advance Economic Opportunity	Increase Community and Connection
Opportunity D.1: Strengthen Advocacy and Reframe Public Understanding of Veterans' Transition and Support Needs	**Approach D.1.1:** Bolster Advocacy Efforts for Veterans, Families, and Caregivers	✓			✓
	Approach D.1.2: Reframe Public Understanding of Military Service and the Veteran Experience	✓			✓
Opportunity D.2: Enhance Transition Support for Military Families	**Approach D.2.1:** Develop a Family Transition Framework	✓			✓
	Approach D.2.2: Support Holistic Solutions to Safety Concerns in Veteran Families and Communities		✓		✓

Source: Milken Institute (2025)

OPPORTUNITY D.1

STRENGTHEN ADVOCACY AND REFRAME PUBLIC UNDERSTANDING OF VETERANS' TRANSITION AND SUPPORT NEEDS

Philanthropic support for policy reforms can strengthen the overall support ecosystem by bolstering advocacy efforts for veterans, families, and caregivers. Philanthropy can also help shape a narrative to reframe public understanding of military service through targeted storytelling and education, fostering a more inclusive, informed approach to supporting veterans and their families.

Approach D.1.1: Bolster Advocacy Efforts for Veterans, Families, and Caregivers

The federal government is a major stakeholder with significant funding dedicated to supporting service members, veterans, their families, and caregivers, and efforts to shape policies that center the family unit could help address ongoing challenges across the ecosystem. By joining ongoing stakeholder communities or funding organizations leading advocacy efforts, philanthropy can help build on existing momentum to ensure that US policies have a positive impact on service members, veterans, families, and caregivers. Such efforts can support a more holistic, integrated approach to veteran care, ensuring that the needs of veterans and their families are addressed in tandem, strengthening the overall ecosystem.

Approach D.1.2: Reframe Public Understanding of Military Service and the Veteran Experience

Public perception of veterans is often shaped by limited personal exposure and reductive media narratives, contributing to a perception of veterans as victims rather than assets to their communities. These misperceptions can compound transition challenges for veterans and their families while weakening public appreciation for the value and complexity of military service. Shifting these narratives is critical—not only for strengthening support systems for veterans but also for maintaining the integrity of an all-volunteer force and broader national security.

Philanthropy can advance a more accurate and inclusive understanding of military service by supporting targeted storytelling, public education, and cross-sector partnerships that amplify diverse veteran voices. Shared values and a collective sense of responsibility among veteran- and civilian-focused funders are essential to forming strategic partnerships that improve quality of life for veterans, their families, and the broader public. Strategic social impact campaigns that reflect these values can deepen civilian engagement, attract new funders to the veteran support ecosystem, and help build the cultural foundation needed for long-term investment in those who serve.

OPPORTUNITY D.2

ENHANCE TRANSITION SUPPORT FOR MILITARY FAMILIES

Acknowledging the MCT and adapting services to center the family unit's economic stability, safety, and well-being can meaningfully enhance transition support. This philanthropic opportunity would advance comprehensive, family-centered solutions during the MCT.

Approach D.2.1: Develop a Family Transition Framework

Military families undergo transition alongside the veteran, yet their experiences and challenges are often overlooked. While much attention is paid to the veteran's post-service journey, there is no clear definition of a successful family transition. Existing government resources, such as the VA's Journeys of Veterans Map and Military OneSource, provide some, albeit limited, guidance tailored to family needs.

A comprehensive, data-informed family transition framework—shaped by lived experience—could define key milestones and preparation points to better support spouses, children, and other family members. In addition to guiding family-centered planning, such a framework would help veteran-serving organizations, funders, and policymakers identify gaps and deploy timely, targeted interventions.

Philanthropy has a critical opportunity to advance this effort by investing in scalable solutions, such as those that improve military spouse employment, and by elevating spouses as key stakeholders in policy and program design. Prioritizing the family unit in transition planning is essential to strengthening family readiness and ensuring successful outcomes for veterans.

Approach D.2.2: Support Holistic Solutions to Safety Concerns in Veteran Families and Communities

Veterans' experiences with high-stress situations and firearms pose distinct community safety concerns, particularly within military-connected families. Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a significant but often overlooked issue, with underreporting, stigma, and fragmented services hindering effective prevention and intervention. Public-private partnerships are addressing broader safety concerns in veteran families. These efforts include initiatives focused on firearm safety and secure storage, which are critical given the heightened risk of firearm involvement in both suicides and domestic violence situations.

Philanthropy can lead by funding efforts that expand understanding of risk factors for IPV and other safety risks, raise awareness of available support, develop trauma-informed safety plans, and enhance referral pathways. By integrating firearm safety with IPV prevention and family support, this initiative would address the multifaceted safety concerns within veteran communities, ensuring a more comprehensive and responsive approach to protecting veterans and their families.

State of the Field

Community—whether through family, peers, or civilian connections—is essential to a successful MCT. This section outlines current community needs and support during the MCT.

FAMILY UNIT

A veteran's family plays a crucial role in transition success. Yet their sacrifices often go unrecognized, and they lack tailored support. Addressing the needs of transitioning families—including caregivers, who are often family members—is key to a successful MCT. Military spouses and children are integral to the veteran's well-being and decisions; however, most veteran support systems and programs were designed with a single service member in mind, overlooking both the family's layered needs and the impact of family support. A veteran with a spouse, children, or caregivers faces numerous decisions—including housing, employment, and health-care decisions—that impact the entire family's health and well-being.

Philanthropy can support targeted efforts to understand the modern needs of the family unit and engage military spouses, caregivers, and children in designing and implementing solutions, such as those led by the Military Family Advisory Network and Blue Star Families. These efforts are essential to addressing the complex needs of family units during the MCT.

Military Spouses

Spouses of veterans and active-duty military—a population currently estimated at over 12 million people in the US—play a critical role in the MCT. They often manage essential responsibilities—such as child care, education, family financial management, relocation logistics, health care, and benefits navigation—while balancing their own careers. To support them, in 2019, the DOD launched the Military Spouse Transition Program (MySTeP), which provides resources throughout the military spouse experience. MySTeP's final stage—Stepping Beyond—prepares families for the transition to civilian life, but the program's self-directed nature places an additional responsibility on the spouse amid an already burdensome process. Despite such efforts, military spouse unemployment has remained stubbornly high, at around 20 percent for the past decade—four times the national average—due to challenges such as frequent relocations, limited access to child care, inflexible work arrangements, and barriers to education and career advancement.

Recognizing the central role spouses play in family stability and veterans' long-term success, several veteran-serving organizations are developing programs that center the family unit. These initiatives expand access to affordable child care, promote telework and flexible employment, and support licensure portability across state lines.

However, such programs remain limited in reach and scale. Moreover, military families often face compounding stressors—such as delayed VA benefits, relocation challenges, and child care costs—that can heighten financial strain and marital distress. Research on civilian contexts shows that financial hardship is a strong predictor of relationship instability, and this can be further exacerbated in military families by health and economic challenges, exposure to trauma, and access to weapons. These overlapping risk factors contribute to elevated concerns around community safety and IPV in veteran populations. While resources like the National Domestic Violence Hotline offer broad support, more targeted research and prevention strategies are needed to address the dynamics of IPV in the veteran and military family community.

Caregivers

Broadly, caregivers provide care and/or assistance to individuals with wounds, illnesses, and injuries, including mental health conditions. Military and veteran caregivers, constituting 5.5 percent of the US population, or 14.3 million people, support service members both during and after their time in the military. Often unpaid, these caregivers—who are frequently spouses, children, friends, or neighbors—shoulder significant physical, emotional, and financial burdens. Their contributions are essential to the well-being and successful transition of veterans, yet they often face their own challenges, including limited access to support services, financial strain, and emotional stress.

Acknowledging caregivers' crucial role in the ecosystem, the Elizabeth Dole Foundation has specialized its focus to better understand and support military and veteran caregivers. In late 2024, the foundation, in partnership with the RAND Epstein Family Veterans Policy Research Institute, released the results of a deep investigation into military and civilian caregiver demographics, needs, and support. Recommendations called for military and veteran caregiver support to be comprehensive and locally informed, encompassing mental health services, financial assistance, tailored and inclusive programs, integration into health-care teams, workplace accommodations, expanded home health care, and ongoing research and evaluation to meet their diverse and evolving needs.

SPOTLIGHT | Caregiving Support as a Shared Responsibility

Caregiving is a shared experience across military and civilian populations, with over 20 percent of American adults providing some form of care. Advances in both military and civilian medicine have extended lifespans, increasing the prevalence of complex conditions, such as combat-related injuries and neurodegenerative diseases, which require long-term support. This convergence underscores the urgent need to invest in the health, economic stability, and community resources caregivers need to thrive. Examples of organizations providing related services include the Rosalynn Carter Institute for Caregivers, which partners with the Wounded Warrior Project to use evidence-based practices and cross-sector partnerships to address the diverse needs of caregivers through confidential coaching and virtual support. Engaging philanthropic and cross-sector funders focused on intersecting issues (like veteran support, brain health, and health equity) can elevate caregiving as a shared societal responsibility and drive systemic progress.

Military Children

Military children face unique challenges throughout their parents' military service and the family's transition to civilian life. Frequent relocations and separations can disrupt education, friendships, and mental health, shaping their overall life experience. Despite these hardships, military children often develop valuable skills, such as resilience, adaptability, leadership, and social awareness.

Philanthropy can invest in programs that address their needs while fostering stability, connection, and long-term opportunity. In addition to direct services, systems-level solutions—like coordinated school policies that minimize learning disruptions during relocations—can support smoother transitions. Prioritizing the well-being of military children not only supports their own development but also uplifts veteran and military families as a whole.

COMMUNITY AND CONNECTION

Building community with civilians can be challenging for veterans and their families post-service. However, shared experiences and values offer a powerful foundation for veterans to foster authentic connections with fellow veterans and civilians.

Veteran-to-Veteran Connection

Veteran-to-veteran connection is a powerful driver of trust, accountability, and belonging during the MCT. Shared experiences—ranging from the rigors of service to the challenges of reintegration—create an immediate sense of understanding and camaraderie that few other relationships can replicate. These peer bonds often serve as a critical bridge during transition; veterans can offer each other emotional support, practical advice, and a shared language for navigating change. Veterans with strong peer networks are more likely to engage in and complete programs, access resources, and feel empowered in their post-service identities.

Organizations across the veteran ecosystem leverage these connections through peer mentorship models, group-based interventions, and community-building initiatives designed to meet veterans where they are—culturally and geographically. Whether through structured peer support or informal connections, veteran-to-veteran networks can reduce isolation, promote mental health, and foster purpose and identity after service.

Strengthening Community with the Civilian Sector

After service, veterans and their families often return to communities that may lack an understanding of military culture, which can exacerbate transition challenges and leave veterans feeling alienated. Ensuring veterans feel welcome and supported within their communities is crucial for a successful transition.

Witnessing a positive transition experience could encourage more Americans to consider military service as a pathway to economic mobility, civic duty, and community involvement. However, media and political narratives often focus on negative aspects of military service and transition, reinforcing differences between the military and civilian communities.

Providing opportunities for veterans and civilians to engage in values-driven collaboration—as outlined in **Figure 16**—is a powerful approach to fostering and strengthening communities. One example of such an effort is The Mission Continues, which brings together veterans and non-veterans, including nonprofit partners and community leaders, to impact communities through leadership and volunteerism.

By focusing on shared values and goals, increasing civilian understanding of military culture and veterans' transition needs, and integrating support systems that recognize the skills of veterans and their families, communities can strengthen local leadership and veterans' social capital, and provide veterans with a sense of purpose and belonging.

Figure 16. Emerging Trends to Build and Strengthen Veterans' Communities

Volunteerism	Volunteerism is a powerful tool for uniting veterans and civilians, fostering community resilience, and enhancing the well-being of those who served and the communities they are integrated into. For example, Team Rubicon, a veteran-led humanitarian organization, mobilizes veterans and civilians to provide disaster and recovery services ranging from immediate disaster response to long-term rebuilding efforts.
Civic Participation	By engaging in activities like voting, advocacy, and public service, veterans can leverage their unique skills and experiences to drive positive change while strengthening their connection to civilian life and society. For example, Veterans for All Voters, a nonpartisan organization, engages and empowers veterans and their families to participate in the democratic process by encouraging voter registration, education, and civic participation.

Source: Milken Institute (2025)

KEY STAKEHOLDERS AND FUNDING SUMMARY

Federal investment in the core MCT element of community and connection is often a result of a primary investment in veteran health and well-being through the VA or in economic opportunity through the DOL. While both departments contribute to community solutions through secondary impact, totaling an estimated $17 billion between selected programs, the government's role is primarily focused on veterans themselves.

Nonprofits have long led the way in supporting military families and fostering peer and civilian connections. These organizations typically provide direct services to family members or create opportunities for veterans to connect with peers and civilian communities. For example, the Military Family Advisory Network focuses on the intersection of economic opportunity and community by addressing military families' financial and food security. Similarly, Blue Star Families and Team Red, White & Blue offer both physical and digital spaces where veterans, families, and civilians can build community around shared experiences and interests.

Figure 17. Snapshot of Recent Funding Across Veteran Community Stakeholders

	Community
Federal Government	$17.0B
Nonprofits and Philanthropy	$5.4B

Source: Milken Institute (2025)

INCREASE COMMUNITY AND CONNECTION

Our analysis found that nonprofits and philanthropic stakeholders supporting veterans' community priorities and initiatives generated at least $5.4 billion in revenue in 2021 (**Figure 17**). Embedded in the community, veteran-serving organizations have been instrumental in collecting data about needs, experiences, and opinions to inform the larger veteran support ecosystem. More specifically, Blue Star Families has established a national research infrastructure that leverages its trust and community to capture data on the state of military family support. The organization conducts an annual Military Family Lifestyle Survey, publishing results with the larger community to inform systemic needs and ignite ecosystem-wide change.

While many organizations support initiatives that emphasize connection, few center community as the core focus of their giving. The Elizabeth Dole Foundation stands out in this space, prioritizing caregiver support—including military spouses, children, and civilians—as foundational to community well-being. Through coalition building, research, and data-driven advocacy, the foundation has cultivated a robust cross-sector community to advance support for caregivers, veterans, and the broader veteran support ecosystem. The recent Senator Elizabeth Dole 21st Century Veterans Healthcare and Benefits Improvement Act serves as a strong example of how coalition building can drive meaningful reforms in veteran care. These reforms can be expanded to ensure that veterans, their families, and caregivers all receive the comprehensive support they need.

A Call to Action for Strategic Philanthropy

Comprehensive support for the MCT ensures that the sacrifices of each service member are honored with lasting commitment from their nation and communities. September 11, 2001, marked a turning point in our nation's history and ushered in a renewed relationship with the military, characterized by increased attention and investment in MCT support. Ongoing investment in veterans' health, economic opportunity, and community needs is a shared responsibility. Acting on this moral imperative—by strengthening and optimizing existing efforts—improves the lives of veterans and their families; contributes to stronger, more resilient communities nationwide; and bolsters national security.

Addressing gaps and inefficiencies in the veteran support ecosystem requires stakeholders to integrate siloed efforts in pursuit of truly comprehensive support. Across sectors—government, nonprofits, philanthropy, and private industry—numerous well-intentioned initiatives have emerged to meet the diverse and evolving needs of veterans. While federal funders often prioritize standardized, scalable solutions, nonprofits and philanthropy are well positioned to address more personalized and nuanced challenges. By aligning and bridging these efforts, philanthropy can help unify support across systems and sectors, advancing a more cohesive and effective approach for all who have served.

Delivering the MCT support veterans and their families deserve is not a solo mission, and diverse experts and leaders have called for the need to do better, together. Cross-sector collaboration, grounded in a shared commitment to those who have served, enables both specialization and synergy, as the veteran support ecosystem strives for improvement and a higher level of collective achievement. With its flexibility and convening power, philanthropy can drive change by funding initiatives that foster innovation, scale effective solutions, and align stakeholders around shared values. By pursuing the opportunities outlined in this guide, philanthropists can address both targeted gaps in MCT support and broader system inefficiencies—acting on a shared responsibility and demonstrating that a rising tide lifts all boats.

Appendix

Stakeholder and Funding Methodology and Disclaimers

This section includes additional details on data access, analysis methodology, and limitations.

US FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

The Milken Institute analyzed stakeholder and funding trends of the federal government from publicly available budget data from the Office of Management and Budget, Department of Defense, Department of Veterans Affairs, and Department of Labor.

NONPROFITS AND PHILANTHROPY

The Milken Institute analyzed tax filing data from 2011 to 2021 for all electronic filers of Internal Revenue Service Forms 990, 990-EZ, and 990-PF. Data were aggregated from the National Center for Charitable Statistics and IRS datasets. The Milken Institute developed a set of inclusion and exclusion criteria for identifying organizations serving veterans, including National Taxonomy of Exempt Entity codes and keywords related to veterans and the military. Organizations interviewed as part of the research for this project were also included.

Organizations filing Form 990 were identified using keyword searches by organization name, "doing business as" (DBA) name, "organization's mission or most significant activities" (Form 990, Part I, line 1) categorization, and organization mission (Form 990, Part III, line 1). Organizations filing Form 990-EZ were identified using keyword searches by organization name, DBA name, and "organization's primary exempt purpose" (Form 990-EZ, Part III) categorization. Organizations filing Form 990-PF were identified only by name. For 990-PF organizations, the research team linked annual extract data released by the IRS's Statistics of Income program to National Center for Charitable Statistics' cumulative Unified Business Master File to capture defunct organizations not included in the IRS's Business Master File datasets. Extract data for 990-PF filers are not available for returns filed in 2017, 2018, and 2019 and were pulled manually for analysis included in **Figure 7**.

An initial analysis identified 18,205 organizations meeting criteria for inclusion. Milken Institute staff then manually reviewed keyword-identified organizations and removed 966, resulting in a sample size of 17,239. Researchers manually removed false positives (e.g., organizations containing keywords used in other contexts, such as "[Name]'s Army" or "Soldiers for [Cause]"), as well as veterans-focused organizations outside the scope of this project.

Out-of-scope organizations included those related to public monuments, memorials, and museums; historical societies dedicated to the preservation of military history; and organizations focused on public awareness or education but not provision of services to veterans. Reserve Officers' Training Corps organizations, military schools, extracurricular organizations at military service academies, think tanks, cemeteries, and funeral services were also removed. The Milken Institute recognizes the importance of these organizations in the veterans ecosystem, but they were not considered transition services for the purposes of this analysis. Thematic keywords used to identify issue areas were not manually reviewed and may contain false positives.

Organizations that had a National Taxonomy of Exempt Entity code W30 (indicating military and veterans' organizations) but did not meet exclusion criteria were presumptively included and were not manually reviewed. During the manual review of keyword-identified organizations, the research team identified additional exclusion keywords that were then applied to W30 organizations for consistency.

Select US Federal Directives, Legislation, and Programs to Support Veterans and Their Families

The federal government influences veteran support through a variety of activities, including legislation passed through Congress. Those interested in following the progression and status of legislation related to veterans and their families can reference a veteran bill tracker maintained by the Wounded Warrior Project. In addition, the president has the power to influence short-term priorities and actions of the federal government by issuing executive orders. As commander in chief, the president has an opportunity—and responsibility—to highlight the needs of the military and veteran communities through this mechanism. **Table 1** summarizes recent legislation across several dimensions of veteran support.

Table 1. Recent Federal Activity Impacting Veterans and Their Families

Title	Description
Executive Order 13822: Supporting Our Veterans During Their Transition from Uniformed Service to Civilian Life	Signed by President Trump in **January 2018**, this executive order bolstered support for transitioning service members and particularly focused on a veteran's first year post-discharge, -separation, or -retirement. The order called for the development of a Joint Action Plan by the departments of Defense, Veterans Affairs, and Homeland Security containing reforms, and subsequent tracking of outcomes, to improve access to mental health resources. The Joint Action Plan was released in April 2018.
John S. McCain III, Daniel K. Akaka, and Samuel R. Johnson VA Maintaining Internal Systems and Strengthening Integrated Outside Networks Act of 2018 (VA MISSION Act of 2018)	The MISSION Act, signed by President Trump in **June 2018**, established a new veterans Community Care program allowing eligible veterans to use local health-care providers instead of the VA. This is particularly impactful for veterans in states that lack a full-service VA facility because the legislation reduces the burden of traveling to receive care.

Table 1. Recent Federal Activity Impacting Veterans and Their Families, continued

Title	Description
Executive Order 13861: National Roadmap to Empower Veterans and End Suicide	Signed by President Trump in **March 2019**, this executive order prioritized a cross-sector approach to end veteran suicide and develop both the 1) Veteran Wellness, Empowerment, and Suicide Prevention Task Force and 2) President's Roadmap to Empower Veterans and End a National Tragedy of Suicide (PREVENTS), a comprehensive roadmap to end veteran suicide. The Roadmap was published in June 2020.
Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring Our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics (PACT) Act of 2022	Passed by Congress and signed by President Biden in **August 2022**, the PACT Act is one of the largest expansions of VA benefits, health care, and research for veterans and their families. The act primarily focuses on Vietnam, Gulf War, and post-9/11 veterans with potential toxic exposures during service.
Executive Order 14100: Advancing Economic Security for Military and Veteran Spouses, Military Caregivers, and Survivors	This executive order, signed by President Biden in **June 2023**, highlighted shared military-civilian experiences and conveyed military families as working American families. Building on executive orders 13583 and 14035, this order directed the development of the Government-wide Military and Veteran Spouse, Military Caregiver, and Survivor Hiring and Retention Strategic Plan (Military-Connected Plan), to be updated every four years. The Strategic Plan for fiscal years 2024–2028 was released in February 2024.
Senator Elizabeth Dole 21st Century Veterans Healthcare and Benefits Improvement Act (The Dole Act)	Passed by Congress and signed by President Biden in **December 2024** with bipartisan support, the Dole Act includes several broad reforms. In addition to the expansion of health-care services and coverage, veterans and caregivers will benefit from streamlined disability claims, job training, and employment opportunities. The act will significantly impact aging veterans and expand their ability to receive at-home care.

Source: Milken Institute (2025)

Federal support applies nationally and provides broad support to our nation's veterans' transition into civilian life. Programs and initiatives provided by the US departments of Defense, Veterans Affairs, and Labor maintain and advance efforts to support the MCT in tandem with legislative directives. Select programs across the departments of Veterans Affairs and Labor are highlighted in **Table 2**.

Table 2. Select Categories of Services Supported Through the US Departments of Veterans Affairs and Labor

		Programs	Description
Department of Veterans Affairs	Veterans Health Administration	**Health-Care Services**	Includes programs supporting ambulatory, dental, inpatient, mental health, prosthetic and sensory aid, and rehabilitation care
		Long-Term Services and Supports	Includes medical-care programs for long-term support (VA community living centers, nursing homes) and additional long-term services, such as adult day care
		Other Health-Care Programs	Includes medical-care programs supporting caregivers, Civilian Health and Medical Program of the Department of Veterans Affairs (CHAMPVA), dependent programs, homeless program grants, and readjustment counseling
		Intramural Research	Includes programs supporting research awards, infrastructure, and capacity for health-care delivery and innovation to improve veterans' lives
	Veterans Benefits Administration	**Education**	Includes several programs supporting veterans' education, including the Post 9-11 GI Bill, dependent's education and training, work-study programs, and licensing/certification benefits
		Veteran Readiness and Employment	Includes programs supporting veterans with costs related to subsistence, tuition, books, and supplies, as well as reemployment services, employment counseling, and job training for those with service-connected disabilities
		Special Assistance	Includes programs (such as grants for adaptive housing, automobiles, and equipment) supporting veterans who require individualized assistance

Table 2. Select Categories of Services Supported Through the US Departments of Veterans Affairs and Labor, continued

		Programs	Description
Department of Labor	Veterans' Employment and Training Service	**State Grants (Jobs for Veterans State Grants [JVSG])**	Supports the JVSG program; the program assists disabled veterans in pursuit of employment and serves wounded warriors and transitioning service members needing intensive services, as well as spouses and family caregivers
		Transition Assistance Program	An interagency program possessing a core component focused on veteran employment, transition to the civilian workforce, and measurement of employment outcomes
		Federal Enforcement of the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act (USERRA)	Investigates and enforces USERRA claims involving federal government employers; USERRA protects service members and veterans from employment discrimination
		National Veterans' Training Institute	Offers educational resources and training to staff providers to ensure quality service to veterans
		Homeless Veterans' Reintegration Program	Promotes employment of veterans experiencing homelessness and is expected to support 18,000 veterans at risk of or currently experiencing homelessness; there is a particular focus on female veterans, veterans with children, and veterans transitioning from incarceration

Source: Milken Institute (2025)

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STARS AND STRIPES

VETERANS

More than 75,000 students affected by VA payment delays for education benefits

By LINDA F. HERSEY
STARS AND STRIPES • October 28, 2025

Adam Stump, a 51-year-old retired Air Force senior master sergeant, stands with his daughter, Natalie, during a family vacation this year. Natalie Stump was approved in August for college assistance, called Chapter 35 benefits, through the Department of Veterans Affairs that has not been delivered to recipients. (Courtesy of Adam Stump)

WASHINGTON — Tuition and housing payments are backlogged for more than 75,000 college and trade-school students who are the dependents and survivors of former military members after a software problem stopped automated delivery of their benefits.

The Department of Veterans Affairs expects the slowdown to continue as payments are processed manually. Computer technicians who can fix the error are furloughed in the federal government shutdown that started Oct. 1, according to the agency.

Although VA acknowledged the payment delays earlier this month, the number of students impacted was not disclosed. Families of students using the benefits continue to express frustration and complain they cannot get their questions answered while federal agencies are closed.

Adam Stump, a 51-year-old retired Air Force senior master sergeant and 100% disabled Afghanistan veteran, said his 18-year-old daughter, Natalie, received notice from George Mason University informing students about the delays in payments known as Chapter 35 benefits.

Adam Stump is a 100% disabled Air Force veteran who served from 1993 to 2014 and deployed twice to Afghanistan. His daughter, Natalie, awaits Chapter 35 benefits from the VA to help with her college costs, but the payments are delayed. Adam Stump is shown in Afghanistan in this 2010 photo. (Courtesy of Adam Stump)

Stump said his daughter, in her freshman year, is still waiting on delivery of her benefits approved in August. "VA had six full weeks before the government shutdown to process that payment," Stump said. "What happened?"

Chapter 35 benefits are sent directly to students to help cover the costs of higher education and job training, including tuition and housing.

Payments typically are made for the month just completed. Students must verify enrollments monthly by email or text, according to VA.

But the problems slowing delivery are not likely to be resolved until late November or December, according to VA.

The GI Bill hotline for answering student questions on educational assistance is closed during the shutdown. A separate hotline for certifying benefits also is not running.

Peter Kasperowicz, VA secretary, said earlier this month that students with delayed Chapter 35 benefits will be paid in full "as soon as possible."

"VA deployed a new benefit delivery system in August and anticipated having the ability to pay staff overtime and deploy automation solutions as needed to ensure a smooth transition and process fall enrollments on a timely basis," said Kasperowicz, who added the government shutdown "deprived" VA of these resources.

The American Legion urged the VA to develop a post-shutdown plan to "effectively and efficiently catch up on missed paperwork to ensure there is no further lapse in benefits for veterans and their dependents."

"Military students utilizing the tuition assistance program are now at an impasse with the lack of new approvals or support in any kind for the program," the American Legion said.

Chapter 35 payments rates for 2025-2026 are $1,574 per month for full-time enrollment and $912 for half-time enrollment. Rates may be less for on-the-job training and apprenticeships.

Stump shared a notice his family received from George Mason about delays in Chapter 35 benefits, also known as dependents' educational assistance.

"The VA has recalled some furloughed employees who have veterans claims experience to assist with processing the backlog," according to the notice. "Due to the ongoing government shutdown, overtime is not authorized, which is further slowing down processing times."

"Unfortunately, the software personnel required to fix this issue have been furloughed, which is delaying the necessary patch," according to the notice.

The university said it forwarded the information from Ken Smith, acting executive director of education service at the VA.

The university also referred students and families facing hardship to the university-based Patriot Pantry, which provides free food and personal hygiene items to enrolled students.

Stump said he has another adult child who graduated from George Mason University after using Chapter 35, and the benefits always arrived on time. Stump faulted VA for lack of communication and creating uncertainty among families.

"The delay doesn't make sense. There seems to be something going on from the VA's end that they are not disclosing fully," Stump said. "The program wasn't broken before. What's the problem now?"

Students eligible for Chapter 35 benefits are dependents of veterans permanently and totally disabled due to a service-connected disability or who died from a service-connected disability.

Beneficiaries also include dependents and survivors of service members missing in action or captured in the line of duty by a hostile force.

VETERANS BENEFITS VETERANS AFFAIRS MILITARY AND EDUCATION FEATURED ON INSTAGRAM

LINDA F. HERSEY

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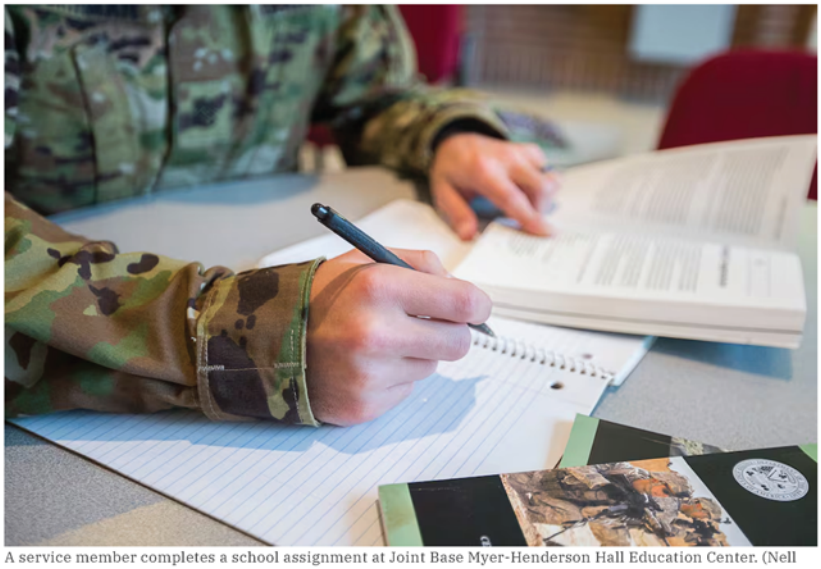
Salute to Veterans

VA tech glitch halts GI Bill payments to thousands, advocates say

By **Hope Hodge Seck**

Nov 3, 2025



A service member completes a school assignment at Joint Base Myer-Henderson Hall Education Center. (Nell King/DOD)

Two months after an IT hiccup at the Department of Veterans Affairs left a significant portion of GI Bill recipients without their anticipated payments for school and housing, some advocates have a message for the VA: Turn the GI Bill hotline back on.

Those missing payments in the wake of the rollout of a new processing system are spouses or children of veterans who have died, are missing, or have a permanent and total service-connected disability — grouped together under the VA's Chapter 35. Up to 75,000 of these claims may be unpaid, according to Ashlynne Haycock-Lohmann, director of Government and Legislative Affairs for the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors.

Ad

And while VA officials lay the blame for the protracted payments delay largely with congressional Democrats, whom the administration holds responsible for the government shutdown that began Oct. 1, multiple groups are expressing frustration with the department's own actions and failure to find a solution.

"VA deployed a new benefit delivery system in August and anticipated having the ability to pay staff overtime and deploy automation solutions as needed to ensure a smooth transition and process fall enrollments on a timely basis," Peter Kasperowicz, a VA spokesman, told Military Times in an emailed statement. "When the Democrats' shutdown hit, VA was deprived of these resources."

He added that federal law required the GI Bill hotline, which is typically used to identify and address payment issues, to be turned off during the shutdown. VA anticipates the pay

issue won't be fully resolved until late November or early December, Kasperowicz said.

Ad

That's not satisfactory to Haycock-Lohmann.

"The shutdown is not the cause of this, and it needs to be very clear that the reason that this happened is because VA's infrastructure failed, and they chose not to tell us until after the shutdown started," she said. "VA could have told us in August."

She added that affected veterans never got clear communication about what was happening due to a communications plan that was upended after VA staff got furloughed in October.

An Oct. 9 letter to VA Secretary Doug Collins from Sen. Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn, and Rep. Mark Takano, D-Calif., the ranking members of the Senate and House Veterans Affairs Committees, expressed "serious concern" at the missed payments and gave the VA an Oct. 13 deadline to provide an explanation, outline the scope of the problem and explain its communications plan.

Ad

"These payments are essential, mandatory funds that veterans and their families rely on for food, rent or mortgage payments, immediate needs, and financial stability," the lawmakers wrote.

A staff member with Blumenthal's office said VA had not yet sent a response to the letter. They added that VA had told congressional staff in August about a glitch that would affect 900 Chapter 35 students, saying the students had been contacted and the issue remediated. But no further information had been forthcoming even as the issue appears to be much larger, and they believed VA has not done any outreach about the matter.

Will Hubbard, the vice president for Veterans and Military Policy at the organization Veterans Education Success and an architect of the current "Forever GI Bill," has been tracking the nonpayment issue closely since he was alerted to the problem by congressional staff.

"There's been no mass communications plan; there's no press release; there's no public anything," Hubbard said. "And that's really been a fundamental issue."

Ad

For Hubbard, the problem also fit a pattern of major VA platform or tech rollouts affecting GI Bill beneficiaries that took place right before the start of the fall semester, when enrollments were surging and tuition payments were coming due.

Hubbard wants assurances from VA that the rollout timing issue will be addressed for the future. He's also concerned that the VA's projected timeline for fixing the current problem is optimistic, and expressed concern about the "destabilizing" impacts of missing payments that roll into next semester.

"What I'm most worried about are the housing payment elements of this issue," he said. "Because, you know, a school might be flexible, and I applaud that, but I suspect that landlords, their patience is going to run thin eventually. It's bad, obviously, to get dropped from school, but it's life changing if you're put out on the street."

TAPS, meanwhile, is calling for the restoration of the GI Bill hotline and a surge in claims processors to accelerate resolution.

Ad

"What they should be doing is bringing back the call center, finding a way to fund the call center. Bring those employees back," Haycock-Lohmann said. "In future shutdown plans, make it very clear that the GI Bill hotline needs to be considered an essential program, and they need to bring back every processor right now."

TAPS staff said they had seen success in “back channel” communication with congressional officials and VA Education Services over specific hardship cases to restore payments. Haycock-Lohmann said all affected students should know that schools are legally prohibited from dropping them over missed GI Bill payments. And, she said, survivors facing issues can reach TAPS for help with their case at casework@taps.org.

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