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"You Never Leave Anyone Behind": A Story of the Young Unemployed Veteran

Jack Nettleton

Trinity College, jacknettleton11@gmail.com

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“You Never Leave Anyone Behind”

A Story of the Young Unemployed Veteran

Public Policy and Law Senior Thesis

Jack Nettleton '13

Trinity College
Hartford, CT

Table of Contents

Table of Acronyms	p. 3
Acknowledgements	p. 4
Introduction—A Different Type of Battlefield	p. 5
Chapter One—The Special Profile of the Young Veteran	p. 10
Chapter Two—Current Opportunities for Young Veterans	p. 24
Chapter Three—State Level Programs and Challenges	p. 39
Chapter Four—Washington State	p. 56
Chapter Five—Opportunities: What can be done?	p. 68
Bibliography	p. 76

Table of Acronyms

Many of the organizations, policies and programs discussed in this thesis have long names—some better known than others. For the sake of space, many of the names are abbreviated as acronyms. The following is a list of all of the acronyms used in this thesis, listed in order of appearance and the chapter where the acronym first appears.

Chapter 1

- BLS—Bureau of Labor Statistics
- VA—United States Department of Veterans Affairs
- CPS—Current Population Survey
- PTSD—Post Traumatic Stress Disorder
- MEB—Medical Evaluation Board
- WCC—Washington Conservation Corps

Chapter 2

- VR&E—Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment
- WWP—Wounded Warrior Project (non-profit organization)

Chapter 3

- VDVS—Virginia Department of Veterans Services
- VWWP— Virginia Wounded Warrior Program (state level program)
- ODVS— Ohio Department of Veterans Services
- CVSO—County Veterans Services Offices
- SAA—State Approval Agency
- ODVA—Oregon Department of Veterans Affairs

Chapter 4

- WDVA—Washington Department of Veterans Affairs
- MOU—multi-agency Memorandum of Understanding
- VCC—Veterans Conservation Corps
- VIP—Veterans Innovation Program
- JBLM—Joint Base Lewis-McChord
- WTB—Warrior Transition Battalion
- OFM—Office of Finance and Management

Acknowledgements

I need to thank my family--specifically my Mom and Dad in addition to Professors Fulco and Cabot. I could spend the next 10 pages explaining the impact each of you have had on my life, but I feel the following is a more profound thank you. The support, encouragement and opportunity you all have given me are the reason why this thesis could be written. Thanks for the garden to plant, grow and harvest a product I am deeply proud of.

This thesis is dedicated to Grandpa. Since March 16th you've watched over my progress, and my writing has improved substantially. Take a break from talking with all your new friends in heaven and enjoy this.

Introduction: A Different Type of Battlefield.

For some veterans, the battle to get out of the unemployment line is proving to be just as formidable as defending the nation. Dustin Shaw served in Iraq for six years and aspires to be a teacher. However Dustin is not being honored at the local minor-league baseball game like we'd expect a young hero like him to be. He is at the Bend National Guard Armory—unemployed. He is looking for a job—Dustin hasn't had a permanent one in four years. Dustin is one of 200 veterans searching for a job at the Bend, Oregon 'Hiring Our Heroes' job fair¹, asking to be hired by the people whom they helped protect overseas.

Unfortunately Dustin's situation is not unique as he is one of the two hundred ten thousand Post-9/11 veterans who is jobless and represented in the 9.9 percent nationwide young veteran unemployment rate.² Dustin's status as an Oregon resident doesn't help his quest to find a new career. At 24.1 percent, Oregon has the highest Post-9/11 unemployment rate in the country.³ While serving in Iraq and Afghanistan, these veterans faced challenges unimaginable to most people, and yet they face more difficult challenges rejoining society once they return home.

Often, these unimaginable challenges linger. The percentage of young veterans coming back from Iraq and Afghanistan with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is estimated to be between 20 to 30 percent, but due to the fact that servicemen and women

¹ "Bend Veterans Job Fair Draws Hundreds Seeking Work." *KTVZ*. Accessed April 18, 2013. <http://www.ktvz.com/news/Bend-veterans-job-fair-draws-hundreds-seeking-work/-/413192/19718712/-/hni1xg/-/index.html>.

² Congressional Research Service. *Employment for Veterans: Trends and Programs*, October 23, 2012.

³ The United States Congress Joint Economic Committee, *Memorial Day 2012: Combating High Unemployment Among Young Veterans*, United States Senate and House of Representatives, 112th Congress (2012).

sometimes choose not to seek help due the stigma attached to the disorder the number could be much higher.⁴ The reality of PTSD not only makes finding employment challenging, but exacerbates reintegration struggles as well. The high percentage of young veterans with PTSD correlates with a high percentage of veteran suicide—349 active members took their own lives in 2012, more than the number who died in combat.⁵ Clay Hunt from Houston, Texas, a Marine veteran who served in Iraq and Afghanistan is one example. In early 2007, Hunt deployed to Iraq. Only a month into his tour, Hunt's bunkmate, Blake Howey was killed by an IED.⁶ Three weeks later, another friend, Nathan Windsor, was shot in an ambush. Hunt was driving the platoon's Humvee a few yards away, under orders to stay put. Hunt tried to heal himself of the traumas of war by doing humanitarian work, but it wasn't enough. After four years of a downward spiral, he took his own life.

Everyone says they want to hire veterans. Businesses like WalMart have pledged to hire every veteran who applies for a job in their first 12 months of active duty.⁷ These decisions are widely celebrated and popular in the press—everyone loves veterans. Unfortunately these perceptions don't change hard facts, young veterans from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars (Post-9/11 veterans) have substantially higher unemployment rates than their non-veteran counterparts. When you look at the Bureau of Labor Statistics

⁴ Steve Gill. Phone Interview. Phone, January 14, 2013

⁵ "The Life and Death of Clay Hunt." *CBSNews.com*. Accessed April 27, 2013. <http://www.cbsnews.com/video/watch/?id=50142077n&tag=api>.

⁶ Ibid

⁷ D'Innocenzio, Anne. "Walmart To Hire More Than 100,000 Veterans In New Pledge." *Huffington Post*, January 15, 2013. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/01/15/walmart-hire-veterans_n_2478426.html.

(BLS) 2011 annual averages, the unemployment rate for young veterans stands at 12.1 percent compared to 8.7 for non-veterans.⁸

President Obama has made the moral case: “No one who fights for this country overseas should ever have to fight for a job”.⁹ Countless politicians just like him have spoken about the need to help young veterans, however their words do not change the hard realities veterans face when they return. Post-9/11 veterans face significant challenges reintegrating into the civilian workforce. When the rubber hits the road, young veterans struggle to find work in the same country they took an oath to defend.

More than anything, we see that the issue of young veteran unemployment is like other problems we see often in America. While there are thousands of organizations and programs across the country to serve veterans, a lack of coordination leads to fewer resources being allocated to the veterans who need them. In addition, when it comes to implementing meaningful policy, a broken Congress talks tirelessly about the need to help our heroes, but fails to deliver meaningful legislation and resources on an issue that enjoys bipartisan support. We also see that in an era where government programs are often labeled as ineffective and wasteful, cutting government services has a high likelihood of affecting young veterans.

This thesis will paint the picture of what it is like to be a young veteran reintegrating back into civilian life. The first chapter will outline the profile of the young

⁸ The United States Congress Joint Economic Committee, *Memorial Day 2012: Combating High Unemployment Among Young Veterans, United States Senate and House of Representatives, 112th Congress (2012)*.

⁹ Jaffe, Greg. “After Decade of War, Troops Still Struggling to Find Work.” *The Washington Post*, March 20, 2013, sec. National. http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/after-decade-of-war-troops-still-struggling-to-find-work/2013/03/19/f064a0ba-8810-11e2-98a3-b3db6b9ac586_story_3.html.

veteran. This chapter will explain why this group merits a special analysis—Post-9/11 veterans face unique challenges that previous veterans have not faced. It will lay the foundation of what a young veteran looks like and identify the specific challenges to obtaining civilian employment.

Chapter 2 will discuss the current benefits available to the young veterans through the United States Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). This thesis aims to show that while these benefits do help numerous young veterans, certain challenges face young veterans when they apply for these benefits that drastically affect their employment opportunities. The role of national non-profit organizations that have sprung up to help fill the needs of young veterans will be discussed. These programs will be analyzed for their unique ability to raise the profile of young veterans returning home.

Chapter 3 focuses on state level reintegration efforts because all young veterans return home. States often face the brunt of the difficult process of aligning young veterans with federal benefits as well as trying to find them employment opportunities. We use three states, Virginia, Ohio and Oregon, as examples not arbitrarily, but strategically to highlight the economic factors that dictate veteran employment at the state level. This chapter will show that even though veterans take the same oath to defend the country, they receive different benefits when they return to their home states.

In chapter 4 we take a close look at the state of Washington. Washington merits its own discussion because the state has implemented unique, first in the nation programs to help combat the unique challenges young veterans face. In addition to describing the state's own VA, a comparison will be made using the previous chapter's example of

Oregon to show how important a robust military presence is to the reintegration efforts of young veterans.

Ultimately conclusions will be drawn about what to do for the unemployed young veteran struggling to reintegrate into civilian life. While the young veteran profile is so unique that it is difficult to come up with a sure fire solution, certain policy recommendations can be made to begin to curb the problem of young veteran unemployment. These recommendations are made not just because it is smart economically, but because it's the right thing to do. Most importantly, these recommendations seek to address the largest challenges facing Dustin, Clay, and all of the young veterans who have stood on the front lines defending our nation and who now are waiting in line for benefits and employment.

Chapter 1: The Special Profile of the Young Veteran

As this discussion develops about what to do for the young servicemen and women returning from combat, addressing the special profile of these young veterans is necessary. Without this description, discussion about problems and in turn solutions becomes unfocused and unproductive. For example as of October 2012, the unemployment rate for all veterans was 6.7 percent, a full percentage point lower than the national average of 7.8 percent.¹⁰ However when you look at the 2011 annual averages of unemployment rate for young veterans it stands at 12.1 percent, compared to 8.7 for non-veterans.¹¹ This chapter aims to identify a working definition of a young veteran as well as identify the problems specific to their re-introduction back into the civilian labor force.

This thesis focuses on the young veterans who have served since the attacks of September 11, 2001, otherwise known as Post-9/11 or Gulf War-era II veterans. By focusing on this specific subset of veterans, it highlights the unique struggles this group has in obtaining civilian employment and differentiates them from Gulf War I, Vietnam and Korea era veterans who are older and have substantially lower unemployment rates.¹² Because of this, young veterans constitute a separate subset of all vets when it comes to employment. Simply, young veterans are vets who served in Iraq or Afghanistan and

¹⁰ Woodward, Ed. "Veteran Unemployment Rate at 6.7 Percent in September; Post-9/11 Vet Unemployment Rate Continues to Fall." Department of Veterans Affairs. <http://www.blogs.va.gov/VAntage/8193/veteran-unemployment-rate-at-6-7-percent-in-september-post-911-vet-unemployment-rate-continues-falling/> (accessed January 23, 2013).

¹¹ The United States Congress Joint Economic Committee, *Memorial Day 2012: Combating High Unemployment Among Young Veterans*, United States Senate and House of Representatives, 112th Congress (2012).

¹² "Table A-5. Employment Status of the Civilian Population 18 Years and over by Veteran Status, Period of Service, and Sex, Not Seasonally Adjusted", January 24, 2013. <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/empsit.t05.htm>.

because of circumstances such as long deployments and disabilities, which will be discussed further in this chapter, face hurdles when trying to obtain civilian employment.

In addition, this thesis also focuses on veterans' ages 18-24, whose 2011 annual unemployment rate was 30.2 percent. This 30 percent unemployment rate is staggering when just taken alone; however it becomes more disheartening when compared to the 16 percent unemployment rate of non-veterans of the same age range.¹³ This chapter will explore why young veterans have substantially higher unemployment rates, but in the mean time this description helps lay foundation for the analysis of the problems facing young veterans.

As of May 2012, 1.9 million Post-9/11 veterans were in the American labor force, accounting for 17 percent of the over 11 million total Veterans in the same work force.¹⁴ Of the Post-9/11 veterans, 234,000 are unemployed, accounting for a 12.1 percent unemployment rate for Post-9/11 veterans. This national average, compiled from the Current Population Survey (CPS) considers state averages that show certain states with much higher unemployment rates than others. For example with a 24 percent Post-9/11 veteran unemployment rate, Oregon has the highest state average, whereas its neighbor to the north Washington has a 13 percent Post-9/11 unemployment rate.¹⁵ This variation in the unemployment rates between the two neighboring states will be discussed and analyzed in the following chapters on the individual challenges to veteran employment at the state level.

¹³ See "Memorial Day 2012" Figure 2 "Unemployment Rates for Veterans and Non-Veterans Ages 18-24"

¹⁴ See "Memorial Day 2012" Post-9/11 and Total Veterans' Unemployment Rates by State

¹⁵ Ibid

Another significant observation from the state data is that the size of state veteran populations most directly mirror general population rankings. For example California, the most populous state, also has the most veterans in the labor force with 980,000.¹⁶ In addition states such as Virginia and Washington that have an increased military presence do not have an extraordinary amount of veterans residing in the state. Virginia, currently 9th in the country with 430,000 veterans in the labor force, is 12th in total population while Washington is 11th in veteran labor force participation and 13th in total population.¹⁷ These statistics are important because young veterans return home, so understanding each state's labor market will help us understand employment challenges specific to young veterans and in turn help each state craft policy to help young veterans find work.

Distinction between young veteran and veteran unemployment rates

When analyzing the specific employment problems for young veterans, it is important to separate data from veterans as a whole and focus on the specific struggles of Post-9/11 veterans. The reason for this is simple; the veteran unemployment rate has been lower than the national average for the past two years. For 2011, the average veteran unemployment rate was 8.3 percent, slightly lower than non-veterans at 8.7 percent.¹⁸ In

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ See "Memorial Day 2012" Post-9/11 and Total Veterans' Unemployment Rates by State

¹⁸ See "Memorial Day 2012" Figure 1. "Unemployment Rates for Non-Veterans and Veterans by Period of Service."

2012 veteran unemployment dropped to 7 percent, below the national average of 7.8 percent.¹⁹

While it is important that veteran unemployment is lower than the national average, it is also necessary to highlight the higher unemployment amongst Post-9/11 veterans. Post-9/11 veterans experienced a similar drop in unemployment from 2011 to 2012, with the group's annual jobless rate dropping from 12.1 percent to 9.9 percent.²⁰ Part of this drop is largely reflected in the improved economic condition. The economy in 2012 in terms of employment data, was much more favorable than 2011 due in large part to an improved economic outlook and more consumer confidence in the market. While there is obvious reason to celebrate reduced unemployment amongst young veterans, the drop does not mean we should abandon efforts to provide young veterans with opportunities to increase their employment options.

While programs to hire veterans remain politically popular, veterans are doing only marginally better in the workforce than the rest of the non-veteran population. First and foremost, Post-9/11 veterans have always had higher unemployment rates than their nonveteran counterparts regardless of economic conditions. From 2007 to 2009, Post-9/11 veterans consistently had higher unemployment rates than their nonveteran counterparts.²¹ What this shows, in conjunction with the data from 2011 and 2012, is that Post-9/11 veterans have consistently had fewer employment opportunities than their

¹⁹ Woodward, Ed. "Veteran Unemployment Still Below National Average; Post-9/11 Annual Rate Falls to 9.9 ." Department of Veterans Affairs. <http://www.blogs.va.gov/VAntage/8504/veteran-unemployment-still-below-national-average-post-911-annual-rate-falls-to-9-9/> (accessed January 23, 2013).

²⁰ See "Veteran Unemployment Still Below National Average; Post-9/11 Annual Rate Falls to 9.9 ."

²¹ Walker, James A. "Employment and Earnings of Recent Veterans: Data from the CPS." *Monthly Labor Review* 133, no. 7 (July 2010): 3–9.

civilian counterparts. In addition, the Great Recession of 2008 adversely affected employment opportunities for young veterans. As will be explored in the following chapters, the recession left a lot of people out of work, leading to higher quality applicants and increased competition for positions that veterans have traditionally held such as manufacturing and construction. This is important because it lays the foundation for policy recommendations aimed to improve economic opportunities for young veterans. If young veterans have consistently been less employed than their civilian counterparts, it makes future policy recommendations more relevant.

Specific challenges for young veterans

Young veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan face significant challenges. Physical and mental disabilities such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), educational attainment, diversity of the armed services and multiple deployments have all contributed to the struggle that young veterans face when assimilating back into the civilian workforce. Some of these difficulties, such as disability and educational attainment have been difficulties for young veterans coming back from all wars. However, improvements in battlefield healthcare that has reduced mortality rates in addition to changes in the labor market have made these struggles more difficult. New challenges such as multiple deployments and a more diverse military have also contributed to high unemployment among the youngest of veterans. In the following sections, each specific struggle highlighted above will be discussed in more detail, which will provide more evidence and data as to why young veterans specifically are having unique challenges in finding work.

Physical Disabilities

Young veterans are coming back from combat with more physical disabilities than any other veteran group before them. Starting with Vietnam, improved medical technologies and quick battlefield evacuations have saved the lives of many soldiers who would have otherwise died from battlefield injuries.²² As these technologies have continued to improve, more servicemen come back from war with disabilities that make transitioning back into the workforce difficult. Fifteen percent of the soldiers wounded in Afghanistan or Iraq have suffered a loss of a limb or eyesight.²³ A 2007 study from Linda Bilmes at the Kennedy School of Government shows that more than fifty thousand soldiers suffered non-mortal wounds compared to three thousand deaths; a ratio of sixteen wounded for every fatality.²⁴ This 16:1 ratio of wounded soldiers to casualties is substantially higher than any other major American war. The next closest ratio is 2.8 to 1 from the Korean War.²⁵

What these statistics show us is veterans are not just coming home wounded, but profoundly wounded. Young veterans already struggle with assimilating back into the civilian workforce, but young veterans with disabilities face increased barriers to full employment. In addition, physically disabled veterans also face the challenge that most jobs young veterans take are in fields that severely disadvantage or prohibit disabled veterans from doing. The top three occupations for Post-9/11 veterans, protective services

²² "Treatment of Veterans." *CQ Researcher* by CQ Press, November 19, 2004.
<http://library.cqpress.com/cqresearcher/cqresrre2004111900>.

²³ See "Treatment of Veterans" pg. 981

²⁴ "Wounded Veterans." *CQ Researcher* by CQ Press, August 31, 2007.
<http://library.cqpress.com/cqresearcher/cqresrre2007083100>. See Chart "Record Number of Troops Wounded in Iraq"

²⁵ See Chart "Record Number of Troops Wounded in Iraq"

such as police and security officers, construction and transportation all require some form of physical strength that physical disabilities may prohibit.

A significant hurdle for physically disabled veterans is access to healthcare provided by the Department of Veterans Affairs (the VA). While the healthcare provided by the VA is considered excellent, the claim approval process can be long and frustrating for young veterans coming back from combat. When disabled service members are discharged from the military, it can take months—sometimes years—for the Defense Department to provide the VA with service records verifying service members are eligible for VA healthcare.²⁶ This delay in approval for VA health benefits can delay the job search process for many disabled veterans and will discourage potential private sector employees from hiring disabled veterans for fear their healthcare will be too expensive.

Mental Disabilities/ PTSD

While physical disabilities put young veterans at a disadvantage in hiring, their mental injuries and the effects of PTSD (both real and perceived) put young veterans at the greatest risk for unemployment. When physically disabled veterans apply for health benefits from the VA, the only hindrance is the lengthy, backlogged approval process before one receives quality healthcare. However for service members experience symptoms of PTSD, the psychiatric treatment available through the VA is not good because Army doctors are young and not experienced in treating PTSD.²⁷ In addition, many young veterans with PTSD come back and face the same review process as physically disabled veterans, with veterans with PTSD often confined to Army medical

²⁶ See “Treatment of Veterans” pg. 981

²⁷ Ibid

facilities waiting for their case to be reviewed by a medical evaluation board (MEB).²⁸

The MEB review process determines the extent to which a disability plays a key factor in a disability claim, and this MEB review process is often lengthened for people suffering from PTSD due to the complicated nature of diagnosing mental health issues.

Consequently, the MEB review process severely hinders veterans in the process of looking for work and seeking out employers that will hire them.

Perhaps the most difficult part for young veterans with PTSD is the stigma attached to mental illness. A study from the *New England Journal of Medicine* noted that up to 17 percent of Iraq veterans exhibited signs of PTSD but only 23 to 40 percent of the PTSD sufferers sought mental health care because of fear of being stigmatized.²⁹ This fear of being stigmatized can prevent veterans from seeking out critically important healthcare, which aside from obvious risks to their personal health makes them less attractive job candidates.

The stigma of PTSD also affects employers considering hiring veterans. Employers hold negative stereotypes about veteran employability based largely on their preconceived ideas and presumptions about mental or emotional dysfunctions associated with PTSD.³⁰ In an interview with Washington Conservation Corps (WCC) Veteran Project Coordinator Stephanie Jackson, she mentioned at her workplace (Washington Department of Ecology) a behavioral health expert trained staff on PTSD to alleviate

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ Ibid

³⁰ Kleykamp, Meredith. "A Great Place to Start? The Effect of Prior Military Service on Hiring." *Armed Forces & Society* 35, no. 2 (October 15, 2007): 268.

staff concerns about PTSD so the workforce was better educated on the issue.³¹ With such a high percentage of veterans coming back with PTSD, barriers to employment based on lack of access to mental healthcare as well as employer hesitance to hire these veterans only continue to make the process of attaining a job more difficult.

Educational Attainment

Since the end of the draft and the move to an all-volunteer force, many young men and women have joined the military right out of high school and without going to college. When these young men and women return as veterans, their civilian counterparts who went to college and earned degrees have an advantage over them in the job market. In a study conducted in 2006, more non-veterans (26.9 percent) than Post-9/11 veterans (19.5 percent) had obtained a bachelors degree or higher.³² This shows that service put young Post-9/11 veterans behind their nonveteran counterparts for degrees that are increasingly sought after in the job market. When the Great Recession hit in 2008, many employers began hiring workers with more education to work in jobs traditionally filled by individuals with only a high school diploma.³³ By joining the armed services out of high school and before obtaining a college degree, young veterans will face significant challenges in transitioning back into the workforce largely because they lack skills and degrees that many jobs now require.

It is also worth noting the role that wartime military recruitment plays in raising young veteran unemployment rates. A major difference between veterans during

³¹ Stephanie Jackson. Interview. Washington Department of Ecology, January 11, 2013.

³² "Employment Characteristics of Gulf War-era II Veterans in 2006: a Visual Essay." *Monthly Labor Review* 131, no. 5 (May 2008): Graph #5.

³³ See "Memorial Day 2012" Challenges Faced by Young Veterans.

relatively peaceful times (1994-2001) and Post-9/11 veterans is the higher percentage of high school graduates. Veterans who served from 1994-2001 were 42.1 percent high school graduates while Post-9/11 veterans are at 33.1 percent.³⁴ In addition, a higher percentage of veterans from 1994-2001 (59.7 percent) scored in the top half of the Armed Forces Qualifier Test than Post-9/11 veterans (55.4 percent).³⁵ While there is no evidence to suggest that the military has more lax recruiting standards, there is evidence that shows more people with less education and aptitude—people who would have trouble finding work regardless of service—are serving in the military.

In addition to educational attainment, young veterans face difficulty explaining how their military experience can translate into the civilian workforce. A recent study by Meredith Kleykamp hammers home the importance of young veterans better marketing themselves. Since many young service members joined the military with little civilian work experience, they lack skills for conducting a job search, creating a resume and interviewing.³⁶ While military service experience can translate into the civilian workforce, young veterans are not trained to effectively market these skills to potential employers. Without higher education, veterans need to demonstrate to employers how their military experience satisfies particular job requirements. In her 2007 study, Meredith Kleykamp concludes that veterans with highly transferable experience from military services, especially minority veterans, have a hiring advantage over similar nonveterans.³⁷ As will be explained in Chapter 3, this is because veterans receive

³⁴ Jason Faberman, and Taft Foster. “Unemployment Among Recent Veterans During the Great Recession.” *Economic Perspectives* no. First Quarter, 2013 Edition (2013).

³⁵ Ibid

³⁶ See “Memorial Day 2012”

³⁷ See “A Great Place to Start? The Effect of Prior Military Service on Hiring.” Pg. 272

employment preferences due to their service to the country. In absence of higher education, young veterans need training in how to communicate their military experience effectively to future employers.

Increased Racial Diversity in the Military

Another unique aspect of the Post-9/11 veterans is they are more racially diverse than the nonveteran population. Beginning with the integration of the armed services in World War II, African Americans and other minorities have become a larger portion of the armed services. In 2006, the percentage of African Americans in the Post-9/11 veteran population was 17 percent, larger than the percentage of African American in the nonveteran population.³⁸ This is important because if African Americans are overrepresented in the Post-9/11 veteran population, there are additional challenges to employment. With the national African American unemployment rate being 14 percent, double the unemployment rate of White Americans³⁹, it is in their best interest to access programs that can aide in finding employment opportunities.

Another major conclusion of the Kleykamp study was that African American military veterans would be advantaged over their nonveteran peers in the hiring process.⁴⁰ Kleykamp found that among African Americans, veterans with administrative experience received a 7.4 percent callback rate for job opportunities, higher than nonveteran African Americans that only had a 4.7 callback rate. This shows that especially for African Americans who have increased employment obstacles, a military background is a helpful

³⁸ "Employment Characteristics of Gulf War-era II Veterans in 2006: a Visual Essay." *Monthly Labor Review* 131, no. 5 (May 2008): Graph #3

³⁹ "Table A-2. Employment Status of the Civilian Population by Race, Sex, and Age." Accessed January 23, 2013. <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/empsit.t02.htm>

⁴⁰ See "A Great Place to Start? The Effect of Prior Military Service on Hiring." Pg. 272

credential for entering the civilian job market after military service. This is important because if more African Americans can see that military experience can translate well into the civilian workforce, more will potentially be enthusiastic about military opportunities in the future, which will in turn help with the overall unemployment situation for the African American community.

Multiple Deployments

Another unique challenge that Post-9/11 veterans face is multiple combat deployments. Long separations with minimal breaks create significant challenges for young veterans and their families.⁴¹ Young veterans rarely have the opportunity to settle down and readjust back into civilian life. Even the most basic of human interactions such as reconnecting with parents, children, or close friends is difficult when veterans go through multiple deployments. This constant back and forth, in addition to the stresses of war, only exacerbates the symptoms of PTSD and makes the condition more harmful for young veterans.⁴²

Multiple deployments also decrease the ability for young veterans to settle down and begin searching for civilian jobs. Recent evidence suggests that more than any other factor; multiple wartime deployments exacerbate young veteran unemployment. According to a Chicago Federal Reserve Bank study, the percentage of active duty personnel who were deployed overseas rose dramatically during wartime.⁴³ During the first Gulf War, 25 to 30 percent of active duty military were overseas. Then during the

⁴¹ Kelly, Diann Cameron. *Treating Young Veterans: Promoting Resilience Through Practice and Advocacy*. New York: Springer Publishing, 2011.

⁴² Ibid

⁴³ See "Unemployment Among Recent Veterans During the Great Recession." Figure 6.

relatively peaceful 1990's, the percentage dropped to 15 percent, only to rise back to 32 percent at the start of the Afghanistan war.⁴⁴ As service members spend time abroad, more of a gap develops between the civilian work and educational experience that non-military members receive as compared to military members.

In addition to the education and experience gap, it appears the additional time spent overseas creates a moral obligation amongst military members to re-enlist as a sign of support to each other. In Clay Hunt's case, he chose to re-deploy (after being wounded and diagnosed with PTSD symptoms) for a 4th time. He believed he had no control over his unit's safety because he was separated from them.⁴⁵ Multiple deployments of Post-9/11 veterans create more barriers between military members and civilian employment and increase the likelihood that the Post-9/11 veteran will experience PTSD.

The Profile:

We now have an image of the challenges many young veterans must overcome when they try to find a civilian job after their military service. While not every veteran has PTSD, low educational attainment, and multiple deployments represent the biggest challenges facing the average young veteran attempting to reintegrate back into civilian life. These problems, such as multiple deployments, are unique to the Post-9/11 veteran and evidence suggests that these deployments lead to a greater likelihood of PTSD. In addition young veterans coming back face immense challenges to receiving mental health services from the VA that delay their job search. While the young veteran may return

⁴⁴ Ibid

⁴⁵ "The Life and Death of Clay Hunt." *CBSNews.com*. Accessed April 27, 2013. <http://www.cbsnews.com/video/watch/?id=50142077n&tag=api>.

home a hero, before he or she can fully reintegrate back to civilian life he or she often becomes a backlogged VA benefit claim. Before we go into the chapter on the federal VA, we must get another image of what the young veteran is in relation to the organization. For this a picture, which captures stacks of pending claims,⁴⁶ is worth a thousand words.



⁴⁶ Glantz, Aaron. "Under Obama, VA's Problems Get Worse." *The Daily Beast*, March 11, 2013. <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2013/03/11/va-s-ability-to-quickly-provide-benefits-plummets-under-obama.html>.

Chapter 2: Current Opportunities for Young Veterans

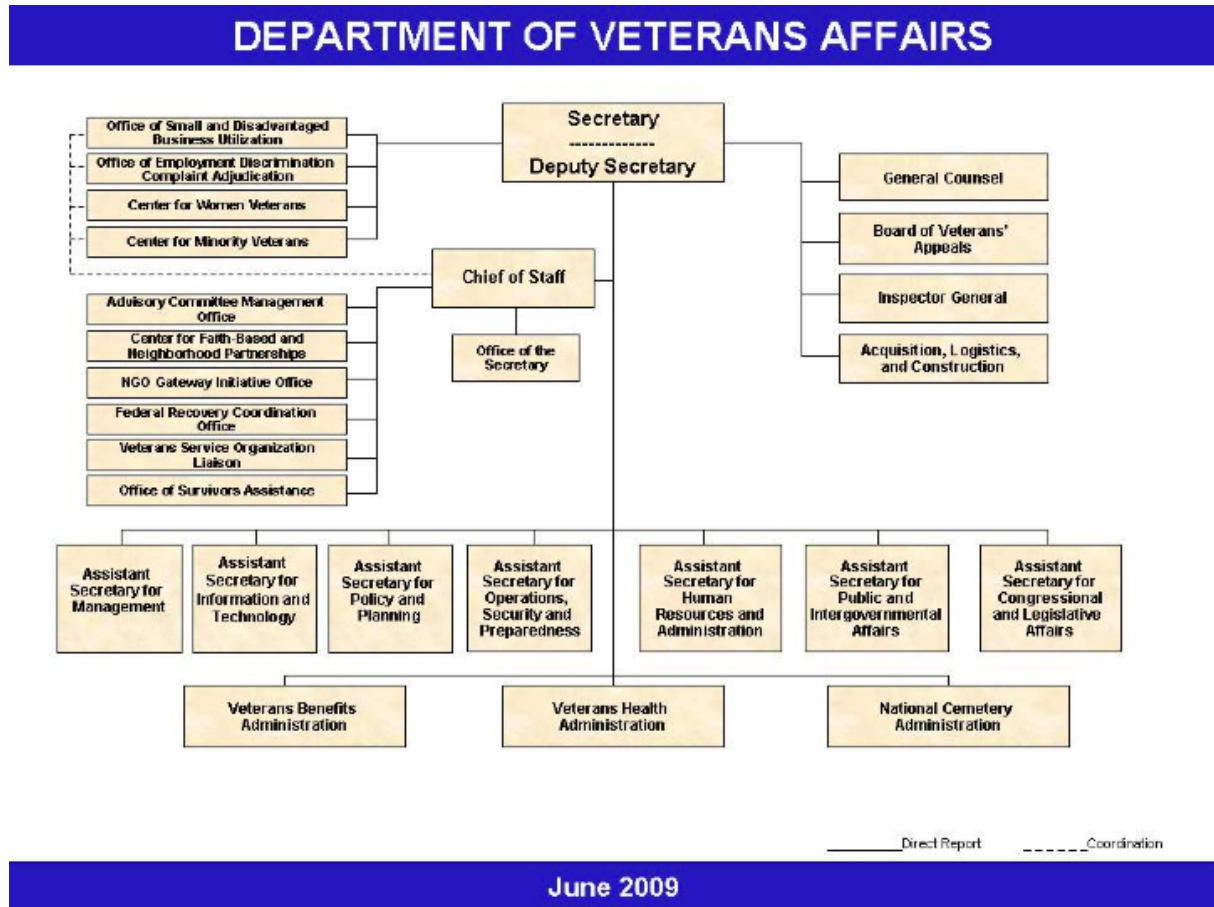
After outlining the specific profile of the young veteran and the special challenges these young veterans face in obtaining civilian employment, it is important to look at the current support structures for young veterans coming back from deployment. The current opportunities for young veterans to get help in transitioning back into civilian life are numerous, but identifying the most helpful and effective programs is difficult. This chapter focuses on the federal programs available to young veterans seeking easier transitions into the civilian workforce. In addition to identifying the federal programs available to young veterans, this chapter explains how these programs work together to provide the specific opportunities young veterans desire. This chapter also focuses on prominent national organizations such as the Wounded Warrior Project and the White House effort “Joining Forces” led by First Lady Michelle Obama and Dr. Jill Biden. This chapter will discuss these organizations’ importance in helping to meet the special challenges of the Post-9/11 veterans as well as assess how well these organizations work with the VA and other organizations to provide help and care for young veterans.

The VA

The United States Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is the main government agency charged with providing veterans with benefits. By all accounts the VA is a massive bureaucracy. It oversees many departments and manages a large budget with many different programs and local offices that need support. The following chart highlights the VA’s organizational hierarchy and the litany of programs it oversees⁴⁷. The

⁴⁷ US Department of Veterans Affairs. “VA 2013 Budget Fast Facts,” 2013.
http://www.va.gov/budget/docs/summary/Fy2013_Fast_Facts_VAs_Budget_Highlights.pdf

two programs most important to Post-9/11 young veterans are the non-discretionary Veterans Benefits Administration and the discretionary Veterans Health Administration.



With a massive bureaucracy comes a massive budget. In 2012, the VA's budget was 127 billion dollars.⁴⁸ This amount was evenly divided between mandatory benefit programs, such as disability compensation and pension payments, and discretionary programs, which consist of primarily medical care programs such as routine checkups and standard doctor visits.⁴⁹ The VA's proposed budget for 2013 increased to 140 billion dollars with more than 10 million dollars worth of guaranteed entitlement spending being

⁴⁸ US Department of Veterans Affairs. "VA 2013 Budget Fast Facts," 2013. http://www.va.gov/budget/docs/summary/Fy2013_Fast_Facts_VAs_Budget_Highlights.pdf

⁴⁹Ibid

added onto the VA budget. These budget numbers are consistent with the dramatic increase in VA spending over the past decade. From 2004-2012, VA expenditures more than doubled, going from 62.3 billion dollars to 140.3 billion. In addition, funding for veterans medical care (the benefit most in demand) has grown to 55 million dollars, which accounts for 87 percent of the VA's Discretionary funding.⁵⁰

The sharp increases in the VA's funding needs in addition to the overall trend of declining government spending has left the VA with extraordinary problems. The growing demand for health-care services for aging World War II veterans coincides with the Post-9/11 veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan with more physical injuries and has strained VA resources.⁵¹ Due to this increase in demand for services, the VA's compensation and pension service has been overwhelmed by backlogged claims.⁵² Currently there are 804,420 veterans waiting to have their claims processed by the VA, and 244,939 of these veterans have been waiting more than a year.⁵³ Although the VA has hired nearly 4,000 new workers to handle claims, the average time to process a claim increased to 8 months—two months longer than a decade ago.⁵⁴ While the VA faces many difficult challenges ahead, the subsequent chapters focus on the current benefits (mandatory and discretionary) that the VA administers and how effective they are in serving the needs of veterans.

⁵⁰ Ibid at Table titled "VA's Historical Perspective"

⁵¹ "Treatment of Veterans." *CQ Researcher* by CQ Press, November 19, 2004. <http://library.cqpress.com/cqresearcher/cqresrre2004111900>.

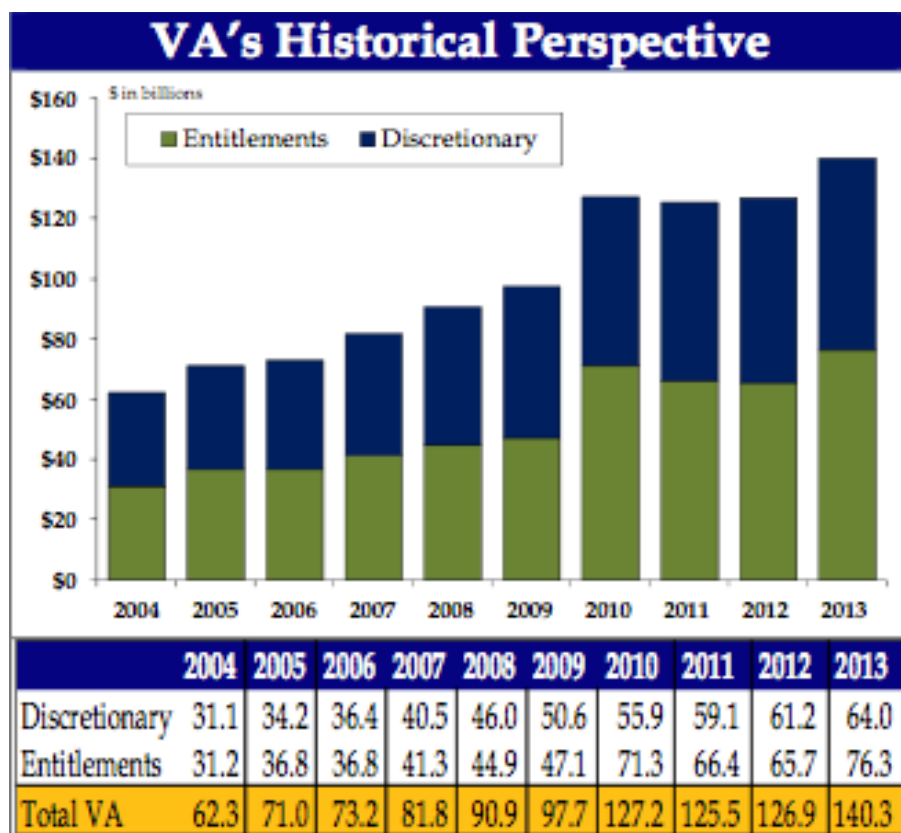
⁵² See "Treatment of Veterans" pg. 976

⁵³ Shane Shifflett. "Map: Where Is the Veterans' Backlog the Worst?" *Center for Investigative Reporting*. Accessed April 26, 2013. <http://vivid-leaf-2293.herokuapp.com/e/pending-claims/timeline/15778463/>.

⁵⁴ Dao, James. "Veterans Wait for U.S. Aid Amid Growing Backlog of Claims." *The New York Times*, September 27, 2012, sec. U.S. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/28/us/veterans-wait-for-us-aid-amid-growing-backlog-of-claims.html>.

Mandatory, Non-Discretionary VA Spending (The GI Bill and Disability Rehab)

The following graph⁵⁵ from the VA illustrates the general increase in VA funding as well as the increase in mandatory entitlement spending. From 2004 to 2008, there was a fairly even split between discretionary and non-discretionary VA spending. However, from 2010 on, non-discretionary VA spending has been consistently higher than discretionary spending.



The single biggest reason for this increase in non-discretionary spending was the passage of the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008 or otherwise known as the The Post-9/11 GI Bill. GI Bill programs generally provide funds for

⁵⁵ See “VA 2013 Budget Fast Facts”

educational costs as well as living expenses for veterans in educational programs.⁵⁶ In 2012, 10.5 billion dollars was spent on GI Bill related benefits, making it the largest benefit package available to current veterans.⁵⁷ More importantly, the Post-9/11 GI Bill targeted funds to Post-9/11 veterans who served after September 2001.⁵⁸

Under the Post-9/11 GI Bill, veterans are eligible for payments to cover tuition and fees, housing, books and supplies, tutorial and relocation assistance, and testing and certification fees.⁵⁹ In addition, individuals who served on active duty for 36 months are eligible for tuition and fees benefits of up to the amount of in-state tuition at a state public university.⁶⁰ These benefits last for 36 months and are usually available within 15 years after discharge from active duty.⁶¹ The primary purpose of this new GI Bill was to provide the same type of exceptional educational benefits and opportunities for young veterans that were available to veterans after the Second World War, a GI Bill that has been frequently cited as one of the most effective government benefit programs ever implemented.

While the GI Bill after World War II has received acclaim for its effect and scope, the Post-9/11 GI bill also seeks to provide young veterans with exceptional educational benefits. As of the end of 2010, the Post-9/11 GI Bill has helped more veterans both in terms of the number of participants and total benefit obligations than the other GI Bills.⁶²

⁵⁶Congressional Research Service. *Employment for Veterans: Trends and Programs*, October 23, 2012. Page. 5

⁵⁷ Ibid

⁵⁸ Cassandra Dortch. *The Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008 (Post-9/11 GI Bill) Primer and Issues*. Congressional Research Service, September 21, 2012.

⁵⁹ Ibid

⁶⁰ Ibid “Summary”

⁶¹ Congressional Research Service. *Employment for Veterans: Trends and Programs*, October 23, 2012. Page. 9

⁶² See “*The Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008 (Post-9/11 GI Bill) Primer and Issues.*”

This ambitious scope is necessary because many of the jobs in the new modern economy require significant education and training beyond the high school level. Allowing veterans to pursue their higher education goals is a critical element to finding employment in the civilian economy and is one of the shrewdest policy moves that can be made to reduce young veteran unemployment. Since acquiring a Bachelor's degree or higher is often the ticket to stable, consistent civilian employment, the GI Bill can be incredibly effective in allowing veterans to effectively transition into civilian life.

We see in the data exactly how the Post-9/11 GI Bill can be effective. Data from the third quarter of 2012 shows that Post-9/11 veterans have an unemployment rate two percentage points higher than non-veterans.⁶³ When analyzing the educational attainment of Post-9/11 veterans and non-veterans, we see that non-veterans have more Bachelor's degrees than Post-9/11 veterans. According to a May 2008 Monthly Labor Review report, 27 percent of non-veterans have completed a bachelor's degree or higher compared to only 19 percent of Post-9/11 veterans.⁶⁴ This is significant because of how the civilian labor force has changed and how it affects young veterans. With the Great Recession in 2009, many employers began hiring workers with more education to work in jobs traditionally filled by individuals only with a high school diploma.⁶⁵ Simply put, due to their time in the service, young veterans have fallen behind their non-veteran counterparts in terms of educational attainment and for the time being this falling behind is reflected in the unemployment data. In other words: young veterans were serving in the military

⁶³ See "Employment for Veterans: Trends and Programs" Table 1

⁶⁴ Walker, James A. "Employment Characteristics of Gulf War-era II Veterans in 2006: a Visual Essay." *Monthly Labor Review* 131, no. 5 (May 2008): Page 8, Graph no.5.

⁶⁵ See "Memorial Day 2012" Challenges Faced by Young Veterans.

rather than pursuing their education which in effect has been a disadvantage in a bad economy.

There is no policy to allow veterans to make up for time, but young veterans simply need time to catch up with the educational attainment of their civilian counterparts. The good news is that once they have caught up, veterans are more likely to be employed than non-veterans. The same third quarter 2012 data that show Post-9/11 veterans with two percentage point *higher* unemployment rates than non-veterans (9.9 percent and 7.9 percent respectfully) also shows that veterans of the First Gulf War in the early 1990's have an unemployment rate (5.9 percent) two percentage points *lower* than non-veterans.⁶⁶ This is significant because it shows the civilian labor market, mainly the public sector, has dedicated a significant amount of effort to give veterans preference in getting employment.

Under the Federal Hiring Preferences and Special Hiring Authorities benefits, veterans receive preferences when applying for nearly all competitively hired federal positions. In some cases, qualified veterans may be directly appointed to positions that would otherwise be competitively hired.⁶⁷ This is an important way in which the public sector has taken the lead as a major employer of young veterans. Post-9/11 veterans are almost twice as likely to work in the public sector in 2011 as non-veterans (27 percent to 14 percent).⁶⁸ In addition, 14 percent of employed Post-9/11 veterans work for the federal government, compared with 2 percent for non-veterans.⁶⁹ These Federal Hiring

⁶⁶ See "Employment for Veterans: Trends and Programs" Table 1

⁶⁷ See "Employment for Veterans: Trends and Programs" Table 2 (Employment-Related Programs, Benefits and Services for Veterans)

⁶⁸ "Employment Situation of Veterans News Release." *Bureau of Labor Statistics*, March 20, 2012. <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/vet.htm>.

⁶⁹ See "Employment Situation of Veterans News Release" Table 5.

Preferences show the level of commitment made by the public sector to hire veterans and demonstrates where young veterans should begin to look for work when they enter the civilian workforce.

The second largest non-discretionary item in the VA budget is the programs for veterans with service-connected disabilities, specifically the Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E). At 949 million dollars, the VR&E is the second largest entitlement program administered through the VA.⁷⁰ This entitlement provides counseling to assist veterans with disabilities suffered during military service and helps these veterans identify employment opportunities and provide support and training to find employment.⁷¹ To receive this disability benefit, veterans must demonstrate they have an employment handicap that prevents or hinders them from acquiring a civilian job.⁷²

What is unique about the Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment benefits is the tailoring of support to a particular veteran's needs and the integral part the federal government plays in providing employment to these disabled veterans. Disabled veterans can choose short-term help such as resume assistance or long-term services such as job skill training.⁷³ This specified training is important for these young veterans because not all service-related disabilities are the same. Some veterans need more specialized care, and the VR&E aims to provide that. This is important largely because many disabled veterans cannot fill the primary occupations Post-9/11 veterans typically work in. According to the Monthly Labor Review in 2006, the top three occupations for Post-9/11 veterans were in order 1) protective services (police/security) 2) construction and 3)

⁷⁰ Ibid

⁷¹ See "Employment for Veterans: Trends and Programs" Page 6.

⁷² See "Employment for Veterans: Trends and Programs" Page 14.

⁷³ See "Employment for Veterans: Trends and Programs" Page 14.

transportation and material moving.⁷⁴ All three of these occupations require significant physical activity and manual labor, which may be difficult or impossible for some disabled veterans. This highlights the need for providing specialized attention to disabled veterans because of the difficulty or impossibility of serving in occupations that require a large degree of physical ability.

In addition, the government plays an active role in providing not only the training, but also the actual job opportunities for disabled veterans. According to 2011 Bureau of Labor Statistic data, one in three employed disabled veterans worked in the public sector compared to one in five employed veterans with no disabilities.⁷⁵ This is critical because it shows the national priority the government has placed on all veterans, especially disabled ones. Like veterans who receive preference for competitively hired federal positions, disabled veterans are eligible for an even higher preference, giving them great opportunities if they can work around their disability to work at a full time job.

Discretionary VA Spending (Medical Care)

While the Post-9/11 GI Bill has provided excellent opportunities for young veterans to pursue their higher education goals, it is not the only the program for young veterans that the VA administers. The first thing people often think of when they hear “VA” is the VA’s network of 1,700 hospitals, clinics, living centers. and other facilities that provide care for veterans. Veterans’ healthcare is administered through the Veterans Health Administration, which serves 8.3 million veterans each year and is the nation’s

⁷⁴ Walker, James A. “Employment Characteristics of Gulf War-era II Veterans in 2006: a Visual Essay.” *Monthly Labor Review* 131, no. 5 (May 2008): Page 8, Graph no. 10

⁷⁵ “Employment Situation of Veterans News Release.” *Bureau of Labor Statistics*, March 20, 2012. <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/vet.htm>.

largest integrated health care system.⁷⁶ Of the 140 billion dollar VA budget, 76 billion dollars goes toward entitlement programs such as the GI Bill and 64 billion is allocated to discretionary spending.⁷⁷ Medical care is the single biggest driver of the discretionary budget—accounting for 55 billion dollars. Some of the major parts of VA healthcare include funding for mental health programs, construction of new medical facilities and research in addition to the funding of direct medical care.⁷⁸ The following table⁷⁹ from the VA gives a breakdown of where the discretionary funding is allocated.

Discretionary Funding by Appropriation	
(\$ in millions)	
Medical Care	\$55,672
Medical and Prosthetic Research	583
Veterans Benefits Administration	2,164
National Cemetery Administration	258
General Administration	417
Information Technology	3,327
Construction/Grants	1,271
Office of Inspector General	113
Loan Administration Funds	159
Total Discretionary	\$63,964

Although providing direct medical care to veterans is one of the VA’s most essential missions, the funding of its medical care programs is not guaranteed due to the discretionary nature of the way that Congress funds VA medical care. Each budget cycle, the VA must submit a budget to Congress and have the funds appropriated to it through

⁷⁶ Number retrieved from Homepage of the Department of Veterans Affairs

⁷⁷ See “VA 2013 Budget Fast Facts”

⁷⁸ “VA Announces Budget Request for 2012.” U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. <http://www.va.gov/opa/pressrel/pressrelease.cfm?id=2054> (accessed February 22, 2013).

⁷⁹ See “VA 2013 Budget Fast Facts”

the normal appropriation process. Consequently, VA funding is often subjected to the same belt tightening as other governmental organizations. For example, in 2004, VA Secretary Anthony Principi said the VA budget was 1.2 billion less than the amount that he had requested.⁸⁰ The VA has been affected by the general trend of downsizing government that has left the agency struggling to keep up the level of care necessary to veterans. This is compounded by the fact that more veterans are returning from service in need of expensive medical care to treat or recover from injuries they sustain. At the same time as the surge of Post-9/11 veterans is entering the VA medical system, the Vietnam era veterans are aging and requiring more health care.

The VA claims process burdens veterans' employment opportunities immensely. Since veterans are coming back more frequently and have to file claims for VA health care, the system is currently backlogged with unprocessed benefit claims. According to Washington State Veteran Services Administrator Steven Gill, currently the national average to process a VA benefit claim is 9 months.⁸¹ This is important because the VA only has a finite number of claims adjudicators and dollars for medical benefits. The backlog in claims processing delays the point at which veterans can fully understand how much medical coverage they will receive. This is especially critical for young veterans who are having PTSD symptoms. According to Gill, 20 to 30 percent of younger veterans are coming back from military service with PTSD.⁸² As discussed in the previous chapter, PTSD carries a lot of employer stigma so having young veterans diagnosed and properly treated increases the rate in which young veterans can rejoin the civilian

⁸⁰ See "Treatment of Veterans" pg. 980

⁸¹ Steve Gill. Phone Interview. Phone, January 14, 2013.

⁸² Ibid

workforce. In addition, veterans cannot fully begin their educational opportunities without having their claims approved, so having a delayed claims process sets young veterans back further.

Prominent National Organizations

While the VA provides a lot of necessary support for our veterans, many non-profit organizations have begun to step up to provide services for and promote awareness of our Post-9/11 veterans. The emergence of these prominent national organizations highlights not only the special challenge of young veterans but also the desire for independent, third parties to utilize the positive national sentiment for young veterans. Two of the most prominent national initiatives, The Wounded Warrior Project and Joining Forces, have both effectively utilized media exposure and fundraising as ways to provide young veterans with access to additional programs for employment related issues.

The most prominent national organization dedicated to young veterans is the Wounded Warrior Project. Founded in 2002, the Wounded Warrior Project (WWP) focuses on three main objectives: 1) media awareness, 2) aiding injured service member and 3) providing unique programs to help them rejoin civilian life.⁸³ In just over a decade, WWP has become the dominant non-profit in terms of fundraising. According to 2011-year end figures, the group raised just under 124 million dollars for the year and provides 90 million dollars worth of programming for young veterans.⁸⁴ These programs,

⁸³ "Mission ." Wounded Warrior Project. <http://www.woundedwarriorproject.org/mission.aspx> (accessed February 23, 2013).

⁸⁴ Wounded Warrior Project. *Statement of Activities Year End 2011*, September 30, 2011. <http://www.woundedwarriorproject.org/media/161829/fy-2011-wwp-audited-financial-statements.pdf>.

such as combat stress and family support, have helped young veterans develop new coping strategies to help them successfully transition from military service back into civilian life. WWP also focuses on economic empowerment and has from October 2011 to March 2012 placed 226 young veterans from their Transition Training Academy into civilian jobs.⁸⁵ These programs help supplement the VA by providing additional services to more veterans, which only helps young veterans who have a different profile from the previous veterans before them.

The most significant way the Wounded Warrior Project has helped young veterans is by bringing the problems vets face to the attention of the public. In 2011, WWP spent nearly 20 million dollars on media campaigns and advertizing, showing a sizable commitment to showcasing the unique profile of the struggles of a young veteran.⁸⁶ WWP creates unique opportunities to publicize the need to help veterans to a larger audience. For example, WWP teamed up with the apparel company Under Armour to outfit college football teams with veteran tribute uniforms for special games each season. This is one example of the ways in which WWP publicizes the need to help our young veterans through creative ways that appeal to younger people. By engaging the public and capitalizing on national popularity of veterans it creates opportunities to involve the business community, which in turn helps employment opportunities for veterans in the future.

In December 2010, President Obama approved the report “Strengthening our Military Families: Meeting America’s Commitment” and called for government wide

⁸⁵ See “Wounded Warrior Project: How we Serve”

⁸⁶ See “*Statement of Activities Year End 2011*, September 30, 2011.

collaboration to improve the lives of military families. Joining Forces is that comprehensive national initiative led by First Lady Michelle Obama and Dr. Jill Biden to mobilize all sectors to give service members and their families support.⁸⁷ The primary goal of the Joining Forces initiative is to raise awareness of the unique challenges that military families face. Joining Forces highlights the concrete goals of employment, education and wellness as areas in which an initiative of increased awareness can help military families. Specific to employment, the Joining Forces website provides a comprehensive list of services such as the Veteran Job Bank and Veteran Recruiting Services where any veteran visiting the site can be directed to avenues that can help them obtain employment.⁸⁸ While it's still too early to see how effective this awareness has been, highlighting the issues on a national level brings increased attention to these important policy issues.

In summary, this chapter breaks down the various national opportunities available to young, unemployed veterans. While difficulties such as VA claims processing have helped delay many veterans' return to the civilian workforce, non-discretionary GI Bills and disability benefits help young veterans adjust to the civilian society once they return from duty. Meanwhile, the VA struggles with operating within the constraints of a large bureaucracy—constraints of understaffed, overwhelmed claims offices that do not adequately keep pace with the increase in number of medical benefit claims filed by veterans. This leads to veterans waiting for benefits and in turn waiting longer for financial support necessary before securing employment. The presence of national non-

⁸⁷ "About Joining Forces | The White House." Accessed February 26, 2013.
<http://www.whitehouse.gov/joiningforces/about>.

⁸⁸ See "Joining Forces | Resources"

profits highlights the need for increased awareness and begins to address the problem of lack of coordination amongst the various parties interested in veteran issues by providing different platforms for people to become better informed about the unique struggles a young veteran faces. And while the national level programs provide a backbone of important and necessary benefits, each veteran ultimately returns to live in their home state and make a new life in a local community. The next chapter looks at state level programs and challenges to providing greater employment opportunities for young veterans in the communities where they decide to live.

Chapter 3: State Level Programs and Challenges

While federal programs administered through the VA and prominent non-profits provide veterans with much needed benefits, many veterans face difficulties finding jobs back home. Each individual state has its own Department of Veterans Affairs or a similar body that addresses veterans' issues on the state level. Why the need for state level VA programs? Essentially, because all veterans come home, the state VA's largely serve as middlemen between the young veterans and the federal VA. Each state has unique challenges to serving their young veteran population that state level VA programs aim to address. This chapter focuses on the structure of state Department of Veteran Affairs and how they work with and differ from the Federal VA. To provide a greater understanding of how state VA's differ, this chapter will focus on three states, Virginia, Ohio and Oregon. This chapter will conclude by analyzing the reasons why certain states have higher young veteran unemployment rates and discuss the importance of government jobs and state preferences that help young veterans find work.

Before this chapter examines the differences between the federal VA and state level VAs, it is necessary to establish the rationale for focusing on these three individual states. Virginia and Ohio will be analyzed and compared because the two states have large, similarly sized veteran populations but have very different unemployment rates. Virginia's low veteran unemployment rate will be compared with Ohio's high unemployment rate as we analyze the importance of government jobs for young veterans.

We will also look at Oregon. According to CPS 2011 Annual Averages compiled by the U.S. Congress Joint Economic Committee, Post-9/11 veterans living in Oregon

had the highest Post-9/11 unemployment rate in the country.⁸⁹ Oregon will then be compared to Washington, which has a lower young veteran unemployment rate compared to Oregon. These two states will be compared not so much because they are geographic neighbors but rather because they have two drastically different military presences in their respective states. Oregon will be discussed in this chapter and compared with Washington after Washington's profile is discussed separately in the following chapter. Washington merits its own chapter due to the innovative way the state attempts to combat young veteran issues. Instead of attempting to explain the differences of every single state level VA program, this thesis focuses on four states that highlight unique problems young veterans face in finding employment.

While every state provides its own state level VA programs, this thesis will focus on the VA programs in the four states identified above. By focusing on 4 states instead of 50, more meaningful comparisons can be made that draw distinctions between the problems faced at various state level VA's. In addition most states have similar benefits and programs, the most prominent being working under the Federal VA to help veterans file and receive benefits. When analyzing the 4 state-level VA mission statements and/or stated goals, a major priority of each was assisting veterans in obtaining their federal VA benefits.⁹⁰ According to the Virginia Department of Veterans Services 2012 Annual Report, the Department filed 27,279 disability compensation claims.⁹¹ Since we know

⁸⁹ The United States Congress Joint Economic Committee, *Memorial Day 2012: Combating High Unemployment Among Young Veterans, United States Senate and House of Representatives, 112th Congress (2012)*.

⁹⁰ Consulted the VA, OH, OR and WA State Veteran's Services websites. Each individual mission statement or stated goals section will be cited when each individual state is discussed further in the chapter.

⁹¹ Paul Galanti. *Commissioner's Fiscal Year 2012 Annual Report*. Virginia Department of Veterans Services, December 1, 2012.

from previous chapters the difficulty and time it takes to file these claims, the states serve an important role in counseling veterans on how the process works and how long they may need to wait to receive benefits. This added specialized help from government workers in a state makes it easier for veteran residents of said state to receive the federal benefits they are entitled to.

Virginia

Virginia has a large young veteran population with a low young veteran unemployment rate. According to the Current Population Survey (CPS) 2011 Annual Averages, Virginia has approximately 430,000 veterans in the labor force, 117,000 of which are Post-9/11 veterans.⁹² This ranks Virginia 9th in the nation in terms of total number of veterans in the labor force, but the 4th largest in terms of post-9/11 veterans in the labor force. Despite a large veteran population, Virginia has a low young veteran unemployment rate of 6.2 percent.⁹³ Since it is a large state with low young veteran unemployment, it is important to look into what Virginia does at the state level for its veterans, what factors contribute to its low unemployment rate, and then determine if those factors are linked to why it has the fourth largest post-9/11 veteran population.

The Virginia Department of Veterans Services (VDVS) is a state level organization that is divided into six sections that deliver various services to veterans in Virginia. These various sections include benefits, veterans education, care centers, veterans cemeteries, the Virginia War Memorial and the Virginia Wounded Warrior

⁹²See “Memorial Day 2012” Chart

⁹³ See “Memorial Day 2012” Chart

Program.⁹⁴ The three sections directly relevant to Post-9/11 veterans are the benefits, veteran education, and Virginia Wounded Warrior Program. The organization is headed by a Commissioner who is appointed by the Governor who oversees the heads of the different sections of the VDVS.⁹⁵ From the Department's website and 2012 Annual Report, we see that Virginia has been very successful at the state level in providing support for the veterans living in the state.

Benefits Services

The Benefits Services section of the Virginia Department of Veterans Services helps veterans navigate through the lengthy and tedious process of obtaining federal and state benefits. The stated mission is to "assist Virginia's veterans and their dependents in obtaining benefits to which they are entitled under federal, state and local laws."⁹⁶ Claims agents in one of the 22 field offices across the state help veterans over the phone or in person and help them through the laborious process of filing a federal VA benefit claim.⁹⁷ These benefits include but are not limited to federal VA healthcare and GI Bill benefits to state disability and death benefits.⁹⁸ In addition to the 22 field offices, VDVS also coordinates with 63 satellite offices that include federal, state and local government agencies as well as private organizations such as American Legion which allows veterans

⁹⁴ "About VDVS ." Virginia Department of Veterans Services. <http://www.dvs.virginia.gov/aboutus.shtml> (accessed April 10, 2013).

⁹⁵ See "Commissioner's Fiscal Year 2012 Annual Report" DVS Organizational Chart pg. 13

⁹⁶ See "Commissioner's Fiscal Year 2012 Annual Report" pg. 21

⁹⁷ See "Commissioner's Fiscal Year 2012 Annual Report" pg. 22

⁹⁸ Ibid

easier access to claims agents at no added cost to the VDVS because the organizations offer the space free of charge.⁹⁹

When it comes to filing and approving claims, Virginia is doing a very good job. Over the past three years, the VDVS has seen its percentage of claims approved rise from 70% to 77%.¹⁰⁰ In total, Virginia veterans received 1.68 billion dollars in benefit compensation during the federal fiscal year of 2010.¹⁰¹ The Benefits Services section is critical because the process is very labor intensive. While a representative may spend an hour interviewing a veteran, that representative often spends countless additional hours gathering the proper records and completing the supporting documents.¹⁰² Having a representative who knows how to document a strong benefit claim provides critically important help to veterans who may not know exactly what to say or put into a claim. This is important for young veterans in particular because as more come back with physical and mental disabilities from extended tours of duty, the job search cannot begin until necessary additional healthcare can be secured. Since young veterans face more obstacles than their non-veteran counterparts, additional time spent waiting during the benefits review process only puts greater distance between veterans and non-veterans in terms of employment opportunities.

Education

The State Approving Agency for Veterans Education and Training (Education and Training Section) works directly with Virginia schools and businesses to help Virginia

⁹⁹ Ibid

¹⁰⁰ See “*Commissioner’s Fiscal Year 2012 Annual Report*” pg. 21

¹⁰¹ See “*Commissioner’s Fiscal Year 2012 Annual Report*” pg. 10

¹⁰² Virginia Department of Veterans Services. “VA Approval of Veterans Disability Claims up Seven Percent in FY11.,” February 15, 2012.

veterans enroll in educational and job training programs. The mission statement for this section of the VDVS calls for access to post-secondary education opportunities for veterans and eligible family members.¹⁰³ This state level agency operates under the federal VA by reviewing and evaluating educational and training programs offered by educational institutions and businesses and allows veterans to enroll in approved programs and receive financial assistance from the Federal VA.¹⁰⁴ The Education and Training Section has eight full-time employees who oversee and approve the educational and job training programs.

The Educational and Training Section of the VDVS helps young veterans by finding thousands of different work or educational opportunities for veterans within the state. In 2012, there were 1,017 educational and training institutions supported by this section.¹⁰⁵ In 2011, Virginia had 38,883 young veterans utilize the Post-9/11 GI Bill ranking the state 4th in the nation in terms of Post-9/11 GI Bill benefit utilization¹⁰⁶ These statistics show that the high utilization rate of Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits and large number of programs approved by the state make it more likely that young veterans in Virginia are receiving more benefits than young veterans in other states. This likely contributes to its relatively low veteran unemployment rate because 1) veterans do not contribute to the unemployment rate when they are in school and 2) The Great Recession placed a greater premium on post-secondary education for people seeking work. Because

¹⁰³ See “*Commissioner’s Fiscal Year 2012 Annual Report*” pg. 27

¹⁰⁴ Ibid

¹⁰⁵ Ibid

¹⁰⁶ *Veteran Benefits Administration 2011 Annual Benefits Report*. US Department of Veterans Affairs, 2011.

young veterans in Virginia have greater access to these programs and benefits, they stand a better chance of finding and keeping a job.

Virginia Wounded Warrior Program

The Virginia Wounded Warrior Program (VWWP) is a statewide program that provides direct assistance to veterans suffering from PTSD or other war related mental injuries. This Virginia state program is different from the national non-profit Wounded Warrior Project. The VWWP is a legislatively mandated program that works with veterans and their families whose lives have been affected by military related brain injuries.¹⁰⁷ The program offers an extensive network of local, federal and state partnerships that assist the veterans who develop difficult to treat psychological conditions while serving. The program has five regional offices across the state to provide comprehensive help for veterans seeking behavioral healthcare, employment, housing support and many other benefits unique to the psychologically wounded veteran.¹⁰⁸

The VWWP has greatly increased the number of veterans it serves the past three years. From 2010 to 2012, VWWP has gone from serving 1,650 veterans and their families to now serving 5,283.¹⁰⁹ This upward trend in number of veterans and families served also correlates with the fact that the majority of veterans served by VWWP are

¹⁰⁷ "About Us." We Are Virginia Veterans. <http://wearevirginiaveterans.org/About-Us.aspx> (accessed April 14, 2013).

¹⁰⁸ Virginia Wounded Warrior Program. *2012 Year in Review*. Virginia Department of Veterans Services, January 31, 2013.

¹⁰⁹ See "*Commissioner's Fiscal Year 2012 Annual Report*" pg. 23

Post-9/11 veterans.¹¹⁰ This is predictable because high percentages of PTSD and other mental disabilities are a unique characteristic of the profile of a young veteran. By having a state agency actively dedicated to serving the psychological health of returning veterans, Virginia has created another pathway for young veterans to successfully assimilate into the civilian workforce. The fact that the VWWP serves the families of the veterans is also important. Most families and spouses of these young veterans do not have the training to handle PTSD and other mental disabilities young veterans experience.¹¹¹ Integrating families into this program helps young military families overcome the hardships associated with these mental illnesses and can make integration back into civilian life easier.

Ohio

Ohio has a large veteran population but unlike Virginia it has a high young veteran unemployment rate. Ohio has approximately 438,000 veterans in the labor force, 50,000 of which are post-9/11 veterans.¹¹² This makes Ohio the 6th largest in terms of total veterans in labor force, but 12th largest in post-9/11 veteran labor force activity. Ohio has a very high 19.4 young veteran unemployment rate, which is one of the highest in the country.¹¹³ An important question to consider is whether Ohio's high young veteran unemployment numbers contribute to the low number of Post-9/11 veterans in the

¹¹⁰ See "2012 year in Review" pg. 8. Pie chart that shows OEF/OIF (Post-9/11 veterans) are most served group under this program.

¹¹¹ "Watch Now: Need to Know, Fri., June 22, 2012: Nursing Wounded Veterans | Need To Know | PBS Video." *PBS.org*. Accessed November 29, 2012. <http://video.pbs.org/video/2249220067>. This documentary highlights a young military couple struggling to deal with the complications of PTSD and how it affects their relationship and their family.

¹¹² See "Memorial Day 2012" Chart

¹¹³ See "Memorial Day 2012" Chart

state or whether or not there is something unique to the state economic picture that contributes to high young veteran unemployment.

The Ohio Department of Veterans Services (ODVS) is a Cabinet-level agency in charge of overseeing veterans' related issues in the state. The stated mission of the ODVS is to "actively identify, connect with, and advocate for veterans and their families."¹¹⁴ The ODVS is structured very much like the VDVA. However, ODVS also administers a state "Ohio Veterans Bonus", which the state pays young veterans anywhere from 100 to 1,000 dollars a month if they reside in Ohio and served in Iraq or Afghanistan.¹¹⁵

Benefits Services

The Ohio equivalent of the field offices for the Virginia Benefits Services section are the County Veterans Services Offices (CVSO) located in each of Ohio's eighty-eight counties.¹¹⁶ These offices prepare the claims for the federal VA so veterans can receive benefits.¹¹⁷ The sheer number of offices (88 compared to Virginia's 22) makes it easier for a veteran in Ohio to access the help necessary to file a labor-intensive VA claim. This also allows for more one-on-one attention, which is often helpful in the claims filing as well as career planning process because the more specialized the help, the more personalized the help can be.

In spite of its large number of CVSOs providing one-on-one help to veterans with their claims, Ohio benefit services efforts have not been very successful. The ODVS cites

¹¹⁴ Thomas N. Moe. *Annual Report Fiscal Year 2012*. Ohio Department of Veterans Services, 2012.

¹¹⁵ See "Annual Report Fiscal Year 2012" pg. 7

¹¹⁶ See "Annual Report Fiscal Year 2012" pg. 4

¹¹⁷ "Homepage." Cuyahoga County Veterans Service Commission. <http://vsc.cuyahogacounty.us> (accessed April 14, 2013).

a 2006 Institute for Defense Analyses study in which Ohio ranked last in the nation in the per capita dollar amount that veterans in the state received in compensation from the VA.¹¹⁸ While the officers at the CVSOs may be filing claims, veterans in Ohio are not receiving as much in claim awards as other states. VA statistics bear this out, and according to the 2011 Veterans Benefits Administration Annual Report, Ohio has approximately 44,000 more veterans living in its state than Virginia, but receives 31 million dollars less a month in disability compensation costs.¹¹⁹ If veterans in Ohio are receiving less in benefits, it is reasonable to conclude that this could be a hindrance to full employment if certain disabilities are not fully covered through their VA benefits.

Education

Like Virginia, Ohio has a state level approval agency (SAA) charged with evaluating and approving academic programs in the state that can receive funds through the GI Bill.¹²⁰ This agency approves the programs and then follows up to make sure the organizations comply with the policies set by the SAA. In addition to the approval of veteran friendly academic programs, Ohio has taken bold steps to promise Ohio veterans robust in-state tuition benefits in the form of the Ohio “GI Promise.” This promise allows for college credit for certain military training and experience, in-state tuition for all veterans regardless of home state and increased scholarship opportunities.¹²¹ These benefits are quite sizeable and reflect an effort by the state to recruit young veterans to study in Ohio.

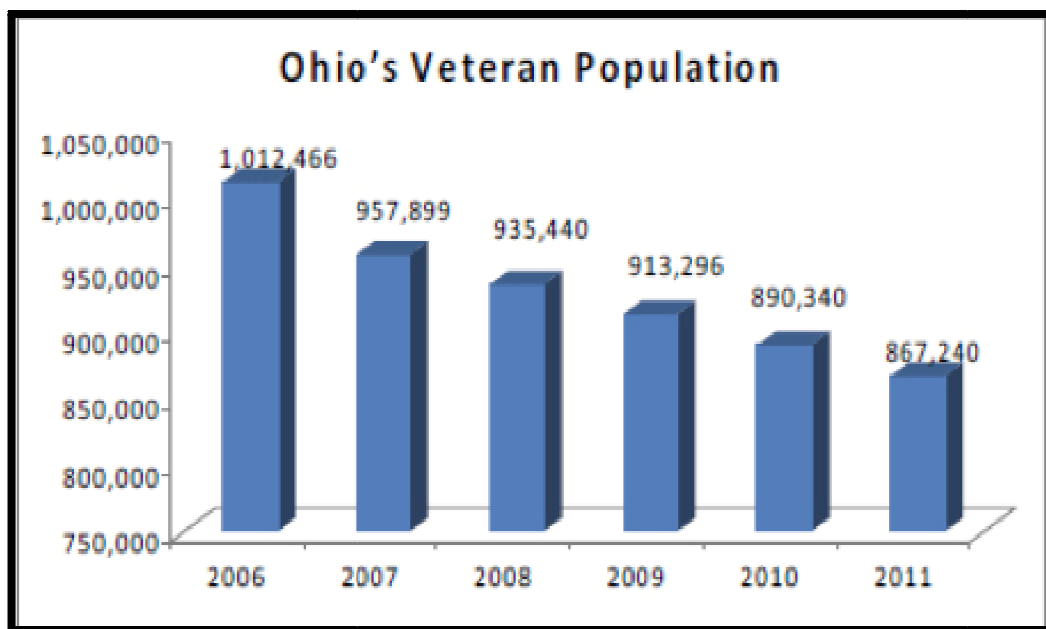
¹¹⁸ See “*Annual Report Fiscal Year 2012*” pg. 12

¹¹⁹ See “*Veteran Benefits Administration 2011 Annual Benefits Report.*” Pg. E39 and E50.

¹²⁰ See “*Annual Report Fiscal Year 2012*” pg. 11

¹²¹ “Education Opportunities for Veterans.” Accessed April 15, 2013.
<https://www.ohiohighered.org/veterans>.

As the following graph illustrates¹²², Ohio’s veteran population has been decreasing steadily over the past 5 years, indicating that the veteran population is older and less willing to settle in the state long-term—a problem for a state trying to improve the opportunities for young veterans living in the state.



Virginia v. Ohio: Why the Drastic Difference in Unemployment Rates?

Despite a robust commitment to ensuring that veterans in Ohio receive excellent benefits, the state has little control over one critically important factor related to young veteran unemployment—the prevalence of government jobs. As discussed in the previous chapter, 27 percent of Post-9/11 veterans work in the public sector, twice as much as non-veterans. In addition, the government (Federal, State and Local) employs a

¹²² See “*Annual Report Fiscal Year 2012*” pg. 11. Numbers represented on top of the descending bar graphs are exact. (Ex. 2011 total=867 thousand 240 veterans)

larger percentage of Post-9/11 veterans than any other economic sector.¹²³ Simply put, since veterans receive Federal Hiring Preferences, it is easier for veterans to obtain employment through the government than any other sector.

So how can two states with similar populations, separated by only by West Virginia have such drastically different young veteran unemployment rates? The answer lies in the number of government jobs in each state. According to 2011 Gallup Daily tracking polls, Virginia had 23.6 percent government workers, the 4th highest in the country while Ohio has 13.6 percent government workers, the 10th lowest.¹²⁴ Census data verifies that the Gallup Poll is indeed quite accurate. According to the latest data, Virginia has an estimated 793,717 government workers, which equates to 20.6 percent of the Virginia population.¹²⁵ In comparison, Ohio has an estimated 694,336 government workers, equating to 13 percent of the total state population.¹²⁶ As a result, even though Ohio has approximately 3 million more people than Virginia, it has 100,000 thousand fewer government jobs.

For unemployed young veterans looking for employment, this fact matters because veterans receive special hiring preferences for federal employment. These hiring preferences manifest themselves in two ways: disabled (which are scored on a 10-point scale) and non-disabled (which are scored on a 5-point scale).¹²⁷ These points are added

¹²³ See “Employment Situation of Veterans News Release” Table 5.

¹²⁴ Morales, Lymari. "Hawaii, Alaska, D.C. Lead in Gov't Jobs." Gallup.com .
<http://www.gallup.com/poll/152606/hawaii-alaska-lead-gov-jobs.aspx#2> (accessed April 11, 2013).

¹²⁵ Bureau, U. S. Census. “American FactFinder – Results for Virginia.” Accessed April 16, 2013.
<http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?src=bkmk>.

¹²⁶ See “American FactFinder-Results for Ohio”

¹²⁷ “Vet Guide.” *U.S. Office of Personnel Management*. Accessed April 10, 2013.
<http://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/veterans-services/vet-guide>.

onto a job application for an agency that uses a numerical rating system. This gives veterans a leg up on their civilian counterparts for federal jobs, and provides veterans with a way to make up for potential shortfalls in other aspects of their application. In addition to preferences for federal government jobs, many states (such as Oregon and Washington) give veteran preferences for state level government jobs, which increase the number of jobs available for preferential hiring advantages.

Why do veterans receive hiring preferences for government positions?

Traditionally, Congress has recognized their sacrifice and has enacted laws that prevent veterans from being penalized for their service. The veteran's preference attempts to recognize the economic difficulties veteran's face when returning from war and attempts to restore a favorable competitive position for veterans seeking government employment.¹²⁸ By making the veterans preference law, veterans enjoy a competitive advantage over equally qualified non-veterans. Veterans' preferences explain why the federal government employs a disproportionate number of young veterans, because the preference makes it is easier for veterans to obtain government.

Another important factor to consider when comparing Ohio and Virginia's vastly different unemployment rates is the loss of manufacturing jobs and the Great Recession. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 11.3 percent of Post-9/11 veterans work in manufacturing, placing it as the third most prevalent industry for young veterans to work in behind government and business services.¹²⁹ The Great Recession hit the manufacturing industry particularly hard in Ohio, and from 2007 to 2009 the state lost

¹²⁸ See "Vet Guide."

¹²⁹ See "Employment Situation of Veterans News Release" Table 5.

171,000 thousand manufacturing jobs, and the state lost one-third of its manufacturing jobs over the past decade.¹³⁰ Despite these losses, 15.7 percent of people in Ohio still work in manufacturing, signaling the critical importance it plays in the state's economy.¹³¹ This is contrasted with the fact that only 7.9 percent of people in Virginia work in manufacturing.¹³² This relatively low percentage of people working in manufacturing is important because the US Congress Joint Economic Committee found that in both Ohio and Virginia, people in manufacturing experienced the largest job loss numbers over the recession.¹³³ As a result, while manufacturing losses were felt in both states, it affected Ohio more because of the heavy reliance on the industry to fuel their economy.

It is also essential to note that Virginia's proximity to Washington D.C. factors into the state's relatively low young veteran unemployment rate. With large federal government agencies sprinkled throughout northern Virginia cities such as Alexandria and Arlington, many of the copious government jobs associated with nation's capital contribute directly to the Virginia economy. The proximity to the nation's capital provides many opportunities for Virginia young veterans both in terms of direct employment as well as employment in industries that directly benefit from the big government presence in the state. The VDVS "Jobs for Virginia Veterans" website, which serves as an online job bank for veterans in the state, lists many jobs in the sectors of manufacturing, agriculture and other industries that benefit from government contracts

¹³⁰ Tami Luhby. "Ohio Manufacturing: Good Times Are Back (sort Of)." *CNNMoney*. Accessed April 16, 2013. http://money.cnn.com/2012/03/02/news/economy/ohio_manufacturing/index.htm.

¹³¹ See "American FactFinder-Results for Ohio"

¹³² See "American FactFinder-Results for Virginia"

¹³³ *Economic Overview and Outlook: Virginia and Ohio*. US Congress Joint Economic Committee, April 2013.

and subsidies.¹³⁴ Clearly, because the state is adjacent to the nation's capital young veterans have more employment opportunities than are available to young veterans in Ohio.

Oregon

Oregon offers a useful point of contrast to the young veteran unemployment rates in Virginia and Ohio because at 24.1 percent, it has the highest young veteran unemployment rate.¹³⁵ To put it into perspective, Oregon has the same number of unemployed Post-9/11 veterans as the state of Oklahoma, but has 22,000 less Post-9/11 veterans in its state labor force.¹³⁶ Why is Oregon's young veteran unemployment level so high? This section examines the specific challenges Oregon faces in reducing its young veteran unemployment rate. This foundation is necessary for when it comes time to analyze reasons why despite being geographic neighbors, Oregon and Washington have different levels of young veterans unemployment.

A major structural problem that contributes to Oregon's high young veteran unemployment rate is the fact that there are no active military bases located in the state.¹³⁷ In other states with active military bases, these bases act as centers for veteran reintegration services.¹³⁸ Since veterans return sporadically and are spread throughout the state, providing veterans services is much more difficult without an active military base.

¹³⁴ "Jobs for Virginia Veterans." Virginia Department of Veterans Services. www.mdatechlinux.info/jobberbase/ (accessed April 24, 2013).

¹³⁵ See "Memorial Day 2012" Chart

¹³⁶ See "Memorial Day 2012" Chart

¹³⁷ *Final Report*. Oregon Legislative Task Force on Veterans Reintegration, October 2010.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

This problem of not having active military bases as centers for veteran reintegration services is exacerbated by the fact that it is not mandatory for all veterans to have their discharge papers sent to the Oregon Department of Veterans Affairs (ODVA).¹³⁹ Since it is optional, many veterans are thus invisible to the department until they identify themselves as veterans. Because of this, the Legislative Task Force on Oregon Veteran Reintegration estimates only 24 percent of Oregon's veterans are receiving federal VA benefits.¹⁴⁰ If only 1 in every 4 veterans living in Oregon have federal VA benefits, it is easy to see how veterans living in the state can be economically burdened, which in turn, perpetuates unemployment.

In addition to these structural problems, the Great Recession hit Oregon particularly hard. In January 2008, Oregon had historically low unemployment numbers—the state average was 5.3 percent, and not a single county had an unemployment rate above 8.2 percent.¹⁴¹ However, two years later in January 2010, the unemployment had climbed to 11 percent and only three counties had unemployment rates *below* 8.2 percent.¹⁴² In addition, the state has eliminated many government jobs. In the full year from September 2010 to 2011, the state shed almost 8,000 government jobs.¹⁴³ As was true for Virginia and Ohio, the prevalence of government jobs matters because veteran preferences make it more likely that veterans will work for the

¹³⁹ See "Final Report" pg. 9

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ "Oregon's Recession Timeline." Oregon Labor Market Information System. www.qualityinfo.org/olmisj/OlmisZine?zineid=00000011 (accessed April 14, 2013).

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Richard Read. "Oregon Unemployment Still 9.6 Percent as Local Governments Cut Jobs, Counteracting Private Sector Hiring." *The Oregonian - OregonLive.com*. Accessed April 16, 2013. http://www.oregonlive.com/business/index.ssf/2011/10/oregon_unemployment_still_stuc.html.

government than any other sector. In addition, at just over 3 million people, Oregon has a small population compared to Ohio and Virginia, so a loss of 8,000 government jobs has a greater impact in the smaller state.

As we move to a discussion about what Washington state is doing to address its own unique young veteran unemployment situation, we must consider the profiles of these three states as a foundation for the analysis of how individual states deal with their own veterans issues. While the federal VA provides the majority of the benefits, state VA programs are often middlemen between the veteran and the federal VA. These state level VA programs provide the extra level of help veterans need when they return home. What we discover is that the state level VAs may be very similar in structure, but each must respond and adapt to circumstances unique to their own states. We now turn to a place in the northwest corner of the map, but central in my heart. Washington.

Chapter 4: Washington State

After discussing and comparing the state-level VA programs of Virginia and Ohio and introducing Oregon's struggles with assisting young veterans in finding employment, this chapter analyzes the state-level VA program in Washington. Washington deserves an in depth analysis because it has unique state level programs that contribute to its overall effectiveness in helping the veterans who live in the state. In addition to unique state level benefits and programs, Washington's programs are particularly effective because the state has a noticeable veteran presence that influences the state economy and way of life. This chapter explores and analyzes the role of Washington's military presence and allows us to see how important a robust military infrastructure is to young veteran reintegration. The comparison of Washington and Oregon is interesting because of the state's political and geographic similarities, but more useful in analyzing the importance of military infrastructure and its role to help curb young veteran unemployment.

This chapter examines the effectiveness of the Washington Department of Veterans Affairs (WDVA) and the specific and unique programs it offers veterans. This section will focus on two additional programs, the multi-agency Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) and the Veterans Conservation Corps (VCC) which are "first of their kind" programs in the nation. After analyzing these programs, this chapter will examine how Washington's robust military presence helps the economy of the state and provides young veteran employment opportunities, both of which contribute to Washington's relatively low young veteran unemployment rate.

Washington

According to the 2011 Current Population Survey (CPS) data, Washington has approximately 339,000 veterans in the labor force, 69,000 of which are Post-9/11 veterans.¹⁴⁴ This ranks Washington 11th in terms of total veterans in the labor force but 7th in terms of Post-9/11 veterans in the labor force. Looking at the same CPS 2011 averages we see that Washington has a young veteran unemployment rate of 13.9%, 10 percentage points lower than its neighbor to the south Oregon.¹⁴⁵ While Washington's young veteran unemployment rate does appear high, it is the lowest amongst the continental US states that border the Pacific Ocean (California and Oregon).¹⁴⁶

The Washington State Department of Veterans Affairs (WDVA) is a state level organization divided into three sections that deliver various services to veterans in Washington. These three sections are Administrative Service, Veterans Homes and Veterans Services.¹⁴⁷ The section that is directly relevant and will be analyzed is the veterans services department, which oversees and works directly with providing and aligning veterans with educational and health benefits provided by both the state and the federal government. The Governor appoints the director who heads the WDVA.¹⁴⁸ From interviews and reports from the Department, we see that Washington has several departments and programs that are effective at providing benefits for young veterans.

¹⁴⁴ The United States Congress Joint Economic Committee, *Memorial Day 2012: Combating High Unemployment Among Young Veterans*, United States Senate and House of Representatives, 112th Congress (2012).

¹⁴⁵ See "Memorial Day 2012" Chart

¹⁴⁶ Ibid

¹⁴⁷ "About WDVA." WA State Department of Veterans Affairs . http://www.dva.wa.gov/about_us.html (accessed April 21, 2013).

¹⁴⁸ Ibid

Veterans Services

The Veterans Services section of the WDVA assists veterans through six major program areas designed to provide benefits to veterans more efficiently. Washington State Veteran Services Administrator Steven Gill offered a more detailed background of the interworking of the program during a phone interview in January. According to Gill, the Veteran Services section consists of 45 employees who cover the six major program areas.¹⁴⁹ Gill identified the claims and benefits services and the collaboration with the state Employment and Securities Department for unemployment as well as the PTSD Department as two key areas that aid young veterans. Gill mentioned the overlap between the various agencies as an intended consequence of the multi-agency Memorandum of Understanding that will be discussed in more detail later in the chapter.

When it comes to claims and benefits, Washington does some things well, but also faces some difficult challenges. On the positive side, the WDVA provides many state level benefits to compensate for the delays veterans experience in waiting to receive their federal VA benefits. One of these benefits is the Veterans Innovation Program (VIP), which provides Washington veterans who are experiencing financial hardship with an emergency \$1,000 dollar one-time grant as well as assistance in obtaining licenses or job certifications that make finding employment easier.¹⁵⁰ Veterans often utilize this program as a supplement before their Federal VA benefits start, which is important because as we discussed in previous chapters, waiting for a VA claim to clear is a lengthy process.

¹⁴⁹ Steve Gill. Phone Interview. Phone, January 14, 2013.

¹⁵⁰ "Program Overview." Washington State Department Of Veterans Affairs. www.dva.wa.gov/PDF%20files/WDVAprogramoverview.pdf (accessed April 22, 2013).

In addition to compensation, the state also provides priority inclusion for young veterans into a Washington state basic health plan that ensures there are no gaps in health care while veterans wait for their VA benefits.¹⁵¹ The Department works to identify veterans who are on Medicaid and facilitates their access to VA healthcare. Gill mentioned that this particular program is important because 1) veterans can get more specialized care under the VA plan and 2) it saves the state money because the VA is funded through federal taxes.¹⁵² This has saved the state 30 million dollars in the past 8 years—which helps the state budget shortfall, currently at 1.3 billion dollars.¹⁵³

To help veterans meet their long term needs, the Veterans Services Department files benefit claims through their 95 Service Officers who are submitting claims through the WDVA Field Service Network.¹⁵⁴ In fiscal year 2009-2010, this network submitted 17,038 claims were submitted to the VA, making the network responsible for 80% of the claims submitted to the federal VA Regional Office in Seattle.¹⁵⁵ Like many states, Washington struggles with how to deal with the delay in approving claims. Gill said that a major portion of the claims backlog results from Post-9/11 veterans entering the VA system at the same time that Vietnam-era veterans are aging and requiring more benefits.¹⁵⁶ Since each claim has to be assessed and judged individually, the process is fact intensive and takes a long time. This is certainly the case in Seattle, where the

¹⁵¹ Simpson, J.M.. "How the State's Department of Veterans Affairs leads the nation." Northwest Military. www.northwestmilitary.com/news/veterans/2013/03/How-the-States-Department-of-Veterans-Affairs-leads-the-nation/ (accessed April 23, 2013).

¹⁵² See "Steve Gill. Phone Interview"

¹⁵³ "Medicaid Forecast Reveals Swelling Budget Shortfall for State." *Tacoma News Tribune*. Accessed April 26, 2013. <http://www.thenewstribune.com//2013/03/14/2514304/caseload-forecast-reveals-swelling.html?storylink=fb>.

¹⁵⁴ See "About WDVA"

¹⁵⁵ Ibid

¹⁵⁶ See "Steve Gill. Phone Interview"

average wait time for the VA to respond to a claim is 333 days.¹⁵⁷ While the state has little control over how quickly the VA processes claims, the state's short term health and economic benefits provide necessary support before veterans receive their federal VA benefits and can fully get back on their feet.

Employment Securities and PTSD Departments

The Veterans Services section works collaboratively with several state agencies to provide benefits for veterans in the state. The two programs most directly related to young veteran unemployment are the Employment Securities Department's Veteran program and the PTSD Program. The Employment Securities Department of Washington works directly with WorkSource Washington (a state level job search program) and receives federal funds to support a veteran specialist in each state WorkSource office.¹⁵⁸ These veteran specialists are responsible for promoting the hiring of recently discharged veterans, especially veterans who face significant barriers to getting hired, such as disabled veterans.¹⁵⁹ They also work with local businesses, military, and other state agencies to help recruit potential veteran candidates to fill vacancies across the state. Every veteran specialist has served in the military, which according to Gill provides an extra level of trust and comfort with the veterans seeking help.¹⁶⁰ Gill praised the work of this program as an effective and useful way to help veterans find stable employment in the state.

¹⁵⁷ Shane Shifflett. "Map: Where Is the Veterans' Backlog the Worst?" *Center for Investigative Reporting*. Accessed April 26, 2013. <http://vivid-leaf-2293.herokuapp.com/e/pending-claims/timeline/15778463/>.

¹⁵⁸ "Services for veterans." Employment Security Department of Washington. www.esd.wa.gov/newsandinformation/factsheets/FS-0006.pdf (accessed April 24, 2013).

¹⁵⁹ Ibid

¹⁶⁰ See "Steve Gill. Phone Interview"

The PTSD Program is a branch of WDVA that maintains a unique outpatient counseling program designed to provide services to veterans who return from military service with PTSD and require special treatment. The services are confidential and free to any veteran diagnosed with PTSD related to their military service.¹⁶¹ Washington Conservation Corps (WCC) Veteran Project Coordinator Stephanie Jackson said the PTSD program is important because there is a stigma associated with PTSD that can cause employers to be concerned about a potential veteran who might “freak out” at work.¹⁶² According to Jackson, state organizations are working with the PTSD Department on training employees to notice symptoms and in turn train veterans to know where they can turn if they are having a bad day.¹⁶³ This again highlights the importance of Washington organizations working together collaboratively to help veterans adapt better to civilian life.

Multi-Agency Memorandum of Understanding

Gill identified the multi-agency Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) as a critically important part of the state’s efforts to provide services for the veteran population. The MOU is an agreement between the WDVA and other state and federal agencies that collaborate on veterans’ issues to provide the highest quality services for the veterans living in the state.¹⁶⁴ The MOU is also significant because it is the first of its kind—no other state has this type of agreement in place. This often means that different agencies can share and coordinate services as with WorkSource and Veterans Services

¹⁶¹ "PTSD Counseling Services." WA State Department of Veterans Affairs .
http://www.dva.wa.gov/ptsd_counseling.html (accessed April 26, 2013).

¹⁶² Stephanie Jackson. Interview. Washington Department of Ecology, January 11, 2013.

¹⁶³ Ibid

¹⁶⁴ See “Steve Gill. Phone Interview”

that both have transition points at Joint-Base Lewis-McCord in Lakewood.¹⁶⁵ One of the results of the MOU is “Family Activity Days” in which various organizations bring information about claims assistance, federal VA enrollment, job placement and other financial assistance to veteran families.¹⁶⁶

According to Gill, the most important feature of the MOU is the mandate for the organizations to work together to provide critical services. By requiring organizations to work together, the member agencies form better relationships that help them provide better services and reduce bureaucratic delays.¹⁶⁷ While there is no direct data on the effectiveness of the MOU to improve the delivery of veterans services, it appears that having this agreement in place makes the agencies more aware of veterans’ issues and better equipped to address each individual veteran’s needs. To Gill this is the crux of the MOU: “It is critical that we work together so veterans do not fall through the cracks”.¹⁶⁸

Veteran Conservation Corps

Another Washington program, the Veteran’s Conservation Corps (VCC), helps veterans find training and jobs restoring and protecting Washington’s natural resources.¹⁶⁹ The first of its kind in the nation, the VCC is an AmeriCorps program in which veterans work on habitat restoration and cleanup projects for minimum wage as they transition back into the civilian workforce. The idea behind VCC is to provide another opportunity for veterans to work in a civilian setting as well as obtain certain job certifications such as Red Cross and FEMA certifications that can help them obtain

¹⁶⁵ See “Steve Gill. Phone Interview”

¹⁶⁶ See “How the State's Department of Veterans Affairs leads the nation.”

¹⁶⁷ Ibid

¹⁶⁸ Ibid

¹⁶⁹ “Veterans Conservation Corps.” WA State Department of Veterans Affairs. http://www.dva.wa.gov/vet_conservation_corps.html (accessed April 26, 2013).

permanent jobs.¹⁷⁰ The VCC also has more than 40 representatives at state colleges helping young veterans move through the higher education system to aid in their adjustment from military life to civilian life.¹⁷¹ In addition to the professional, environmental and educational help VCC offers, veterans who have served in combat often find working in habitat restoration outdoors therapeutic.¹⁷² By offering training and employment to young veterans all while protecting the environment—VCC simultaneously accomplishes 2 important policy objectives.

Despite its obvious benefits, the VCC program faces some challenges. WCC Veteran Project Coordinator Stephanie Jackson remarked that while having veterans working on conservation projects provides some short-term help, the minimum wage it pays is not a livable one.¹⁷³ Additionally, since many veterans receive GI Bill Education Benefits, the education reward provided by AmeriCorps is not as strong an incentive as it would be for a nonmilitary person because the GI Bill benefits are equal, if not greater than AmeriCorps educational benefits. Despite these difficulties, Jackson and the WCC (a state level AmeriCorps program with a more civilian focus) work directly with the VCC to provide as many benefits as they can. WCC offers its participating veterans interview and resume help and pays for job shadowing in a field of their choice.¹⁷⁴ The conservation training also provides great training for disaster relief—which was evident when WCC sent two veteran crews to New Jersey to help in the aftermath of Hurricane

¹⁷⁰ See “Stephanie Jackson. Interview”

¹⁷¹ See “Veterans Conservation Corps.”

¹⁷² “SoundCorps Program Gives Veterans Environmental Mission for Puget Sound.” *Tacoma News Tribune*. Accessed October 26, 2012. <http://www.thenewstribune.com//2011/11/12/1902817/veterans-restore-habitat.html?storylink=fb>.

¹⁷³ See “Stephanie Jackson. Interview”

¹⁷⁴ Ibid

Sandy.¹⁷⁵ The crews performed well because of their military and disaster training, making them well received by everyone who was affected by Hurricane Sandy.¹⁷⁶

Washington's Military Presence

After analyzing Washington's unique and effective state-level programs, we turn to explore reasons why Washington has a lower young veteran unemployment rate than Oregon. As was discussed in the previous chapter, Oregon has no active duty military bases. This lack of military infrastructure makes it difficult for the state of Oregon to identify veterans moving back to Oregon because military bases often serve as key reintegration points for veterans returning to civilian life. In contrast, Washington has nine military bases located throughout the state. Washington's military bases represent all three of the major armed services branches and are located in six different counties. As of 2003, which was the last time the Office of Financial Management published this data, 83,344 people lived on the military bases.¹⁷⁷ This section will explore not only how these bases serve as reintegration points but also how they contribute significantly to economic activity throughout the state.

Joint Base Lewis-McChord (JBLM) is one of the premiere military installations on the West Coast.¹⁷⁸ JBLM provides installation support to more than 40,000 active military personnel and approximately 15,000 civilian workers.¹⁷⁹ The base is a joint

¹⁷⁵ *National Service Works for America: Hurricane Sandy Response*, 2012.
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WZUpwLAFMKY&feature=youtube_gdata_player.

¹⁷⁶ See "Stephanie Jackson. Interview"

¹⁷⁷ Dr. Paul Sommers. *Economic Impacts of the Military Bases in Washington*. Washington Office of Financial Management, July 2004.

¹⁷⁸ "About JBLM." Joint Base Lewis-McChord. <http://www.lewis.army.mil/about.html> (accessed April 25, 2013).

¹⁷⁹ Ibid

Army (Formerly Ft. Lewis) and Air Force (Formerly McChord Air Force Base) base and is the largest military installation in the state. At the base, WDVA and the Employment Security Department have a veterans specialist who works with service members *before* they are discharged.¹⁸⁰ This additional state program is known as the Warrior Transition Battalion (WTB)—a partnership with military bases and state programs where claims work and career counseling are done on site.¹⁸¹ This reintegration program extends to all branches of the military and includes servicemen and women who were injured in combat.¹⁸²

Having reintegration programs at the largest base in the state is very important. This is the clearest contrast between Oregon and Washington's young veteran unemployment situation. Just the presence of JBLM already is enough to have more services than Oregon; but when you consider the concentrated effort to begin the reintegration process before discharge we see why young veterans in Washington have an advantage in finding employment. In Oregon's case, state veteran officials hope that veterans will self-report so they then can begin reintegration efforts. In Washington's case, not only do state veteran officials have the discharge report, but they can begin the bureaucratic steps related to applying for claims, which we've learned take an extraordinary amount of time to process. By getting a head start on reintegration, Washington acts proactively to employ young veterans. Reintegration programs are hugely important, and by having pre-integration programs at major military bases young

¹⁸⁰ See "Program Overview"

¹⁸¹ Ibid

¹⁸² See "Services for veterans."

veterans in Washington get ahead before the game begins, while young veterans in Oregon are perpetually playing catch-up.

In addition to reintegration centers, the military bases themselves serve as economic engines that lead to employment opportunities. In Island, Kitsap, and Pierce counties, large portions of each county’s economic activity are linked to the military bases. The following chart illustrates this point¹⁸³.

County	% of Economic Activity from Military Bases	Population Rank (out of 39)
Island	88	15th
Kitsap	54	7th
Pierce	30	2nd

In Pierce County alone (where JBLM is located) there are 34,624 jobs situated directly at the base.¹⁸⁴ This chart also shows us that even in populated counties the military bases drive the local economy. Because the bases are such a big contributors to the local economy, it is logical to conclude that they provide lots of jobs. In addition, the Washington State Office of Finance and Management (OFM) analyzed the total economic impact of all the bases throughout the state by using an input-output calculation that applies the multiplier impacts of the payrolls from the jobs at the bases to the purchases made through defense contracts and other business purchases. What OFM found was that the estimated total labor earnings impact of the military bases was 7.24

¹⁸³ Data for chart compiled from “*Economic Impacts of the Military Bases in Washington*” and county profiles from the Office of Financial Management.

¹⁸⁴ See “*Economic Impacts of the Military Bases in Washington*” Tables 2.1

billion dollars.¹⁸⁵ By having military bases as such a large part of the state economy, they provide employment opportunities to young veterans in Washington that aren't available to Oregon veterans, making it likely that the presence of many military bases contributes directly to the discrepancy between young veteran unemployment rates in Oregon and Washington.

In this chapter we have analyzed the effective and unique state programs in Washington and shown how they help young veterans find employment, job training and short-term financial support. We also see how the military infrastructure in Washington helps the state economically by providing more labor opportunities as well as providing reintegration benefits before service members are discharged. As we begin to end this story of the unemployed young veterans, we look to see how the programs in Washington might be applied to other states or the federal VA. As this story comes to an end, we also look to see what state programs work well and what programs can serve as models for other states looking to bring down young veteran unemployment rates. We know the profile, the current opportunities, and now the individual state level challenges and opportunities. We must look now to what can be done, within the parameters of the ever-confusing reality of federalism, to properly address the issue of young veteran unemployment.

¹⁸⁵ See *“Economic Impacts of the Military Bases in Washington”*

Chapter 5—Opportunities: What more can be done?

From what we've learned, we can paint a pretty accurate portrait of the life of the young veteran. A wartime era of more than a decade leads to prolong deployment and increased time overseas. The extended time leads to multiple deployments that increase the chance of tremendous physical and mental strain during combat as well as severe physical and mental disabilities when vets return. The prolong deployments lead to fewer opportunities for education and training and so they fall behind. When veterans return home these obstacles present themselves during reintegration. If veterans apply for benefits, they must endure a lengthy VA claims process that on average takes 9 months.¹⁸⁶ Independent of benefits, they must find work—only to return home to a slow economy and stagnant growth in industries that traditionally employ them, government and construction. With all of these obstacles it is easy to see why young veterans struggle to reintegrate, it is easy to see how they become unemployed.

This thesis provided evidence to help us focus on the challenges young veterans face when they reintegrate into civilian life. With this evidence we see how at little fault of their own, young vets are at a severe disadvantage when compared to their civilian counterparts when it comes to obtaining employment. In Chapter one we learned that young veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars have higher unemployment rates compared to their non-military counterparts. This chapter explored how multiple deployments and higher percentages of physical disabilities contribute to the uniqueness of the young veteran's challenge to obtain employment. In addition, this chapter

¹⁸⁶ See "Under Obama, VA's Problems Get Worse."

provided educational attainment information that helps us understand why young veterans have larger unemployment rates compared to their civilian counterparts.

Chapter two examined the generous benefits to returning veterans such as GI Bill educational benefits, disability rehabilitation and general health care available through the Federal VA and other non-profits and analyzed their effectiveness. Despite the long list of individual benefits provided by the VA, young veterans often have to endure very long waiting periods before the VA can process and grant their benefits. With over 800,000 veterans waiting on average 9 months for their claims to be adjudicated—increased obstacles are placed in the way of obtaining full civilian employment. Started in part to address gaps in veteran awareness, national non-profits such as the Wounded Warrior Project and Joining Forces have raised public awareness of the young veterans and their struggles to reintegrate as an important policy problem and a national moral responsibility.

Chapter three identified selected state level veterans programs and challenges related to young veteran unemployment by examining three individual states with different economic profiles that contribute to either low young veteran unemployment rates (Virginia) or high ones (Ohio and Oregon). The specific conditions in Virginia, Ohio and Oregon help explain the many variables that contribute to the mosaic that is the problem of young veteran unemployment. Virginia is ideal for a young veteran. Its proximity to the nation's capital yields a high percentage of government jobs where veterans receive hiring preferences and an active state veterans services department that connects veterans with their VA benefits. The result is a low young veteran unemployment rate and a disproportionately high young veteran population. Ohio, on the

other hand, has a low prevalence of government jobs and saw its manufacturing industry crippled by the Great Recession. These two states were compared to show how the prevalence of government jobs and a stronger state economy can lead two states that have fairly similar state level benefits to have drastically different young veteran unemployment rates. In addition we found that Oregon's lack of military installations hampered the state's ability to provide a robust reintegration program for young veterans who return home to the state.

The discussion about Oregon's lack of military installations transitions seamlessly into Chapter four, where the state of Washington's unique and innovative programs designed to help young veterans merited its own discussion. Washington has innovative programs such as a multi-agency Memorandum of Understanding and the Veteran Conservation Corps that are first in the nation programs aimed to provide greater support and opportunities for young veterans returning home. Interviews with two state employees provided first hand accounts of the specific programs and challenges that the state faces. In addition, analysis of the robust military presence in the state helped explain why Washington has a lower young veteran unemployment rate than its neighbor to the south. Washington's major military bases serve as key reintegration points for veterans and provide unique economic opportunities that Oregon lacks because there are no major military installations in the state.

A final question that must be addressed is: What can be done? The key first step in the answer is to understand the complexity and diversity of the issues that any given young veteran faces upon reintegration into civilian life. As discussed in Chapter one, young veterans' profiles are unique because they face obstacles such as mental illness,

physical disabilities, low educational attainment and a shrinking base of government and manufacturing jobs that veterans from previous eras did not face as frequently. While the profile is certainly unique, the individual stories and struggles are even more unique. Each veteran's struggle is inherently different, and as was explained in the previous chapters, the obstacles to reintegration are as numerous as they are challenging. Because of this complexity and nuance, there is no single policy remedy that can solve all of the problems that perpetuate young veteran unemployment. However, as the evidence demonstrates, there are several things that can be done to begin to combat the problems that perpetuate young veteran unemployment.

I recommend focusing on three concrete problem areas that most directly affect the number of employment opportunities young veterans have. First, there must be more coordination amongst organizations whose mission is to help veterans. Substantial effort needs to be made to provide a more efficient way for veterans to receive the benefits that are owed to them. Second, more military programs and facilities lead to more opportunities for states to be creative in the way they expand the number of resources available to young veterans. This leads to inequality amongst state veterans benefits, but also allows states to think creatively about ways to combat the problem. Lastly, an effort to educate workplaces across America on the effects of PTSD will increase civilian awareness and lead to breaking down PTSD stigma and in turn, provide veterans with more educational opportunities.

The VA has to figure out a long-term solution to reduce the number of backlogged claims. As mentioned in Chapter two, of the more than 800,000 veterans who are waiting to have their claims processed by the VA, nearly 245,000 of them have been

waiting for more than a year. These benefits include GI Bill benefits as well as medical care for disabled veterans that help them adjust more easily to civilian life. Having to wait long periods of time for these benefits is more than just an inconvenient delay—for some veterans it is literally physically crippling.

Take the example of Mickel Withers of Georgia. Withers served on a bomb-detection team in Iraq in 2005 and 2006. He was diagnosed with PTSD in 2008 and started receiving disability compensation of \$3,000 dollars per month.¹⁸⁷ However, in May 2013 he received only a \$100 dollars in disability compensation because the VA determined that he was receiving two types of payments because they thought he was still enrolled in the National Guard and, the VA does not allow receiving two types of payments.¹⁸⁸ The VA's mistake ultimately led Withers to seek emergency housing assistance from a veterans group to pay rent and file for bankruptcy to avoid debt collectors while he worked to have the VA correct its mistake. Withers' example shows us how bureaucratic red tape and errors combined with a lack of coordination among government agencies can hobble young veteran efforts to successfully reintegrate into civilian life.

Because Iraq and Afghanistan veterans require benefits at the same time as aging Vietnam era veterans require more benefits, the problem of backlogged claims will only worsen unless the VA can find a way to approve claims at a faster rate. The VA recently invested \$537 million dollars in a new computer system to begin to automate and quicken

¹⁸⁷ Dao, James. "Veterans Wait for U.S. Aid Amid Growing Backlog of Claims." *The New York Times*, September 27, 2012, sec. U.S. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/28/us/veterans-wait-for-us-aid-amid-growing-backlog-of-claims.html>.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid

some of the claims processing.¹⁸⁹ If the VA can successfully automate its claims processing and reduce the number of mistakes in its benefit decisions, the VA will be able to improve its claims process, thus reducing the number of backlogged claims and making more accurate claims decisions.

Another important fact to take into account is that, all veterans, regardless of where they were stationed, ultimately return home. This fact illustrates the critical role that the state-level veteran programs play in veteran reintegration. While many of the necessary benefits are provided through the federal VA, it is often the state level programs that are charged with connecting individual veterans with those benefits. Moreover, states often provide benefits such as additional health and education benefits or direct cash rewards for serving, like the Ohio Veterans Bonus.

Since the states handle the brunt of the reintegration efforts, it is vital that states think of creative ways to handle veterans' issues. The first in the nation Veteran Conservation Corps of Washington is a good example of this creativity in action. Washington has a long history of environmental stewardship—it was the first state to create a Department of Ecology, which preceded the establishment of the federal Environmental Protection Agency.¹⁹⁰ As the department built its reputation, it became the model used by many other states. The VCC provides veterans with short-term opportunities for employment and job training while preserving the environment. Just like the Department of Ecology was a model for the country, the VCC can serve as a model short-term job training opportunity for young veterans and shows how a state can

¹⁸⁹ See “Under Obama, VA’s Problems Get Worse.”

¹⁹⁰ Maria McLeod. *Historically Speaking*. Washington Department of Ecology, July 2005.

take a unique priority of theirs and address the needs of the young veterans living in their state.

This creative thinking is not limited to solving state level problems, but federal ones as well. An innovative way to help solve the unique disparities revealed by Washington and Oregon example would be to implement a pilot program that requires all veterans from states with little military infrastructure to report to reintegration training at states with robust military presence to establish a more level playing field for veterans across the country. A Memorandum of Understanding between state VA's could allow for Oregon vets to receive training and resources in Washington and then allow for that veteran to return to Oregon with training and skills they would not have received. In addition, a mandate to work together would therefore allow Oregon to better identify the veterans living in their state if they work with Washington to get the discharge papers of veterans moving to Oregon.

We also need to have more public and private sector employers be educated on the realities of PTSD. According to Stephanie Jackson, employers are worried about “the freak-out” and are hesitant to hire veterans.¹⁹¹ Jackson said her organization had a state employee host a workshop on how to deal with employees who have PTSD and that having the issue discussed out in the open contributed to breaking down the stigma of PTSD. By having someone—possibly a young veteran— educate employers on PTSD will help employers better understand the realities of PTSD and create more employment opportunities for young veterans as they return home.

¹⁹¹ See “Stephanie Jackson. Interview”

Thankfully the situation is getting better. Unemployment rates for young veterans have been slowly falling since 2010. Using statistics from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the Post-9/11 veteran jobless rate fell from 12.1 to 9.9 percent from 2011 to 2012.¹⁹² By February of this year (2013), the unemployment rate was down to 9.4 percent.¹⁹³ While these numbers are in part the byproduct of an improving economy helping everyone, they also clearly show that many policies aimed to bring down young veteran unemployment are working. These numbers are encouraging and suggest that successful programs should be supported and continued.

Through the hundreds of hours spent researching this topic, I kept coming across quotes from veterans and service members that echoed a common refrain—“you never leave anyone behind”. When young veterans return from battle overseas, they often find that the battle to reintegrate is immensely challenging. There is hope for the young veteran. Data shows that as veterans get older their unemployment rates come down as they close the educational and experience gap with their nonmilitary counterparts and take advantage of veterans preferences for employment. While challenges clearly remain, the long-term picture for our newest heroes looks bright. By promoting reform of the VA claims process, advocating for state level creative programs to help more veterans, and increasing public awareness to young veterans’ issues such as PTSD, we can begin move forward in meaningful ways to help curb young veteran unemployment. The more we work to help our veterans the more we can fulfill their own sacred vow—“you never leave anyone behind”.

¹⁹² Gregg Zoroya. “Veterans’ Jobless Rate Falls but Remains High.” Accessed April 29, 2013. <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2013/01/06/vets-jobless-rate-drops/1812667/>.

¹⁹³ Ibid

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