

what's next

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE BUSH INSTITUTE



EMPOWERING VETERANS TO
SUCCESSFULLY REENTER CIVILIAN LIFE



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MILITARY SERVICE INITIATIVE

SERVING *OUR* WARRIORS

By COL MIGUEL HOWE, USA, RET.

More than 21 million of our fellow citizens now carry the title of “veteran.” Since 2001, almost three million of those veterans have deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan, and over a million have deployed more than once.

Most of them will transition smoothly into civilian life. Yet too many veterans and military families face challenges with finding meaningful employment, earning a college degree, securing housing, and being treated for physical and mental health problems.

With the right support and policies, virtually all veterans and military families can continue to lead and serve in meaningful ways.

The beginning of a new administration presents an opportunity to take a fresh look at the strategies, policies, programs, and resources that can empower them to successfully re-enter civilian life.

These recommendations especially can help the Trump administration address their needs:

WHITE HOUSE LEADERSHIP

The administration can improve upon important previous efforts by continuing as convener-in-chief and helping forge public-private partnerships that serve veterans and their families.

At the same time, our new president should appoint a senior staff position at the White House who concentrates on veteran and military family issues and not relegate this issue solely to Cabinet agencies. The appointee could drive strategy and policy, while working across agencies on issues like ensuring adequate resources and untangling bureaucratic challenges that veterans face when leaving military service.

This member of the White House staff should have access, authority, and the responsibility to work across both the National Security Council and Domestic Policy Council. After all, veteran issues extend across almost the entire government.

NATIONAL STRATEGY AND VETERAN OUTCOMES

The first responsibility of this position should be to author a national veteran's strategy. The strategy could provide a unified voice by providing a common vision for veteran outcomes, services, and resources, especially across federal agencies. The roadmap particularly should promote collaboration with private, non-profit, and philanthropic organizations that work with veterans.

The primary goal should be to drive services for veterans that lead to positive results. The strategy also should inculcate a culture of accountability and measurement for not only the government, but also for non-profits and funders that serve veterans.

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VETERAN TRANSITION SUPPORT

Non-profits that serve veterans, known as Veteran Serving Non-Profits, are an important resource for veteran and military families. Philanthropies provide VSNPs resources, but their largest provider is the U.S. government.

To make better use of these investments, current Veterans Administration funding under the Support Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) program should be re-purposed from solely focusing on homelessness to more broadly supporting community-based networks that empower “MyVA” communities. Grants should be awarded to the top candidates in every community.

By working with community organizations, the funds can drive down the homelessness numbers for veterans while providing them services that keep them off the streets for life.

Among the other ways of helping veterans make a transition to civilian life, Washington should make sure that the Post-9/11 GI bill is financially sustainable. Also, the VA and Pentagon need technology upgrades that allow their systems to better talk to each other. Once that happens, they can make sure veterans don't fall through the cracks when seeking services.

ADDRESSING PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS

The invisible wounds of war, such as traumatic brain injury and post-traumatic stress, have emerged as the signature wounds of this conflict. Our nation has an obligation to meet these needs.

Only 12 million of 21 million veterans, however, are eligible for VA health care. Of that number, only six million veterans have sought care at the VA. More than 72% of all veterans seek health care through the private sector.

To make the federal system work better for veterans, an effective reform and restructuring of the VA is essential. This work would include re-authorizing the Veterans Choice Act so veterans continue to have options and access to high quality care, even if they cannot access a VA hospital or Vet-Center. Reforming the VA also would mean empowering senior VA leadership to hold employees accountable for incompetence or misconduct.

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Equally important, the Trump administration should work towards full parity in benefits and compensation between physical and mental health concerns. The Mental Health Parity Act of 2008 attempts to prevent health insurers from providing less favorable benefits for mental health needs than for treatment for such physical needs as surgery. The challenge is making sure that aim is fully implemented.

Similarly, full implementation of the 21st century CURES Act would help veterans address their invisible wounds of war. Specifically, veterans would benefit from full funding of the legislation's \$1.5 billion BRAIN initiative and \$1.5 billion Precision Medicine Initiative. They also would gain from accelerated development and delivery of treatments and cures, along with a reduction in barriers to collaborative research.

Finally, better data collection and an identification of best practices in mental health care would improve the nation's capacity to deliver mental health care. Philanthropies especially could help with evidence-based strategies through devoting funds to capture and analyze relevant data.

SUPPORT FOR FAMILIES AND CAREGIVERS

The military has placed great emphasis on supporting military families during their time of service, and that same level of support is now required to help families as they separate from the military. They particularly need the same level of support after an extended period of war.

The support should include making sure federal resources help spouses and caregivers as well as veterans. As an example, families and caregivers need their own supportive services as they care for veterans with physical and mental wounds, including their invisible wounds. As another example, spouses need help with work force development, employment, and career opportunities.

In each of these cases, non-profit organizations also can provide an important bridge. This challenge is not just one for the government.

To his credit, Donald Trump has made veterans issues a key focus of his incoming administration. He can help veterans by continuing to focus on such critical issues as access to health care, transition to civilian employment and careers, overcoming homelessness, and preventing suicides.

A long-term, comprehensive focus through these five initiatives would maximize the full weight of the federal government as well as private, non-profit, and philanthropic organizations. In return, this will lead to effective services and positive outcomes for veterans and their families. Most importantly, it will improve their quality of life and enable them to lead our businesses, communities, and country for decades to come.

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