



**MY AMERICA:**  
NAVIGATING THE  
**POST-9/11**  
VETERAN LANDSCAPE

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THE BUSH INSTITUTE  
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Following the attacks of September 11, 2001, the United States entered into a global war on terror. In the years that followed, more than 2.5 million men and women served in America's military (more than two million of whom served in Iraq or Afghanistan, or both<sup>1</sup>). These men and women make up the post-9/11 veteran generation. They are leaders. They have served their country. And now they are navigating a new landscape as they transition back to civilian life. I am one of these veterans.

To know us is to know that we come from all across America and have had very different experiences. We have served in all branches of the military (37% of us have served in the Army, 23% in the Navy, 23% in the Air Force, 14% in the Marines, and 3% in the Coast Guard<sup>2</sup>) and represent the face of America (77% of us are white, 15% are African American, 12% are Hispanic, and 3% are Asian American). What may surprise many people is that 17% of us are women, a historically large number, and many of whom saw combat in Iraq or Afghanistan.

As we chart a course to the next phase of our lives, we rely on our service as a source of strength even as we realize it is the origin of many of the barriers we face. Many of us seek new careers, while others who have severe disabilities learn to live new lives with the challenges we face. We are grateful that the American people care deeply about us and that unlike the Vietnam generation, our post-service experience is defined by a web of public and private support with which I interact throughout my journey home. That web is often shaped by philanthropists and commentators, capable of influencing policymakers and public opinion.

As my military service comes to an end, I see a range of possibilities and a host of new challenges. Many of my peers will transition with relative ease to the civilian world. We've overcome a host of daunting obstacles throughout our military careers, developing a set of strengths and talents often unique to our population, so establishing new patterns, learning new systems, and determining the right education and the right profession to pursue are challenges we are eager to face head-on. However, some of us are unprepared for what's next, and we will rely more heavily on that web of support that our country and our fellow citizens have built for us. What we see before us is a maze of government benefits, a range of non-profit organizations promising to help us, and a series of challenges to overcome. What all of us hope for is to create a life that is as meaningful to us as our military service has been.

*This is the landscape of my post-9/11 America.*

1 Hosek JR, Martorell F. (2009) How have deployments during the war on terrorism affected reenlistment? RAND Corporation, MG-873, Santa Monica.

2 Defense Manpower Data Center. (n.d.). Active Duty Military Strength by Service. Retrieved January 7, 2014 from <https://www.dmdc.osd.mil/appj/dwp/reports.do?category=reports&subCat=milActDutReg>.

# EDUCATION

One of the first choices I have to make is whether to go to school or enter the workforce. If I have a family, I may have to do both simultaneously.

Many Americans may not realize that 99% of post-9/11 veterans have a high school degree (or equivalent) and 72% have spent at least some time taking college courses. If we have taken a college class, we are just as likely as our civilian counterparts to have a college degree (28%).<sup>3</sup> Many of us realize that education can help us attain specific employment goals. Like our civilian counterparts, many of us go back to school in order to spend a few years figuring out what we want to do. As of July 2013, more than 1 million veterans (or members of our families) have used the Post-9/11 GI Bill to go to school with \$30 billion in support from the Veterans Administration.

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Some of us who go back to school do not know where to start in picking a college or deciding what to study. We may not know what we want to do after graduation, but we do know that we will face marketing and recruitment efforts from non-profit and for-profit colleges that value our tuition benefits.

Thankfully, there are resources I can use if I need them. The Department of Veterans Affairs has created tools, such as CareerScope<sup>4</sup> and the GI Bill Comparison Tool,<sup>5</sup> which I can use to determine which school to attend and what career to pursue.<sup>6</sup> *U.S. News & World Report*<sup>7</sup> and *Military Times*<sup>8</sup> both publish lists of the “top” colleges for me and my fellow veterans. These lists have similar criteria: universities must be accredited; they must be a member of the Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges (SOC) Consortium of Schools<sup>9</sup>; they must be certified to receive GI Bill funding; and they must participate in the Yellow Ribbon Program,<sup>10</sup> a program that helps cover tuition costs beyond what the GI Bill offers.

Some of us have learned that our college experience can be greatly enhanced if our school has adopted policies that allow us to get credit for the advanced training we received in the military or transfer credits for classes we took at two-year institution while in the service. Schools that allow us to take a semester or two off to address a medical or family issue without requiring us to reapply for admission also make it a lot easier to complete a degree.

3 U.S. Census Bureau. (2011). American Community Survey, 2011

4 <http://www.benefits.va.gov/gibill/careerscope.asp>

5 <http://department-of-veterans-affairs.github.io/gi-bill-comparison-tool/>

6 [http://www.benefits.va.gov/gibill/choosing\\_a\\_school.asp](http://www.benefits.va.gov/gibill/choosing_a_school.asp)

7 U.S. News and World Report. (2014) Best Colleges for Veterans: National Universities. Retrieved May 18, 2014 from <http://colleges.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/best-colleges/rankings/national-universities/veterans>

8 Military Times. (2013, November). Best for Vets: Colleges 2014. Retrieved May 18, 2014 from <http://www.militarytimes.com/article/20131111/EDU04/311110003/Best-Vets-Colleges-2014>

9 Servicemembers Opportunity College Consortium. (2014) SOC Principles and Criteria. Retrieved May 18, 2014 from <http://www.soc.aascu.org/socconsortium/SOCPrinCriteria.html>

10 [http://www.benefits.va.gov/gibill/yellow\\_ribbon.asp](http://www.benefits.va.gov/gibill/yellow_ribbon.asp)

Similarly, we have a better college experience if the leadership of our university is committed to supporting us. Their commitment sends a signal to the rest of the campus that we are valued members of the community. That leadership is critical because we don't always feel like we fit in. Many of us believe that our professors (63%), administrators (63%), and non-veteran student peers (70%) don't understand the challenges we face.<sup>11</sup> This feeling of alienation can undermine our efforts to succeed. Certain additional resources can empower our success by helping us build a sense of community, such as a resource center or student veterans group<sup>12</sup> where we can meet other veterans (though many female veterans choose not to use these resources, and often don't even self-identify as veterans on campus). Some university leaders hold round table discussions with veterans' associations, which helps involve us in campus life.<sup>13</sup>

It can be difficult to navigate the maze of VA benefits, GI Bill paperwork, and registration policies on campus, so creating a single point of contact or a specific staff dedicated to supporting us is extremely helpful. This staff should have an easy-to-find website so we have easy access to needed resources.<sup>14</sup> Finally, if they are integrated into community support services such as health care, mental health, homelessness, or employment providers, such a staff can help us solve non-school related challenges. In extreme cases, clogged paperwork can lead to financial assistance being cut off. In some cases a tuition deferment plan can help smooth over glitches that might otherwise force us out of school or leave us homeless while we wait for the paperwork to be straightened out.<sup>15</sup> Most of us do not need additional help, but for those of who do, these kinds of resources can make the critical difference between our success and failure on campus.

A few years ago, the American Council on Education conducted a survey of 690 educational institutions to determine the status of veteran programming. The survey found several encouraging features of the education environment. This includes the fact that 62% of responding institutions provide programs for veterans and military service members and 71% indicate that doing so is part of their long-term strategic plan. What's more, 64% of responding institutions actively recruit veterans. This is an indication that they either see me as a value to the school or they value my GI Bill benefits (or both).<sup>16</sup> Interestingly, public four-year (74%) and two-year (59%) institutions are more likely to have veteran-focused programming than private not-for-profit institutions (51%).<sup>17</sup> Among those schools that have veteran or military programming, there is a broad range of services offered including education benefit counseling (87%); financial aid assistance counseling (67.2%); employment assistance (60.5%); academic advising (50.2%); veterans' orientation services (49.1%); and career planning/career services (44%).<sup>18</sup>

11 Institute for Veterans and Military Families. (2012). Survey of Student Veterans. Syracuse, NY: Institute for Veterans and Military Families.

12 <http://www.studentveterans.org>

13 American Council on Education. (2008). Serving Those Who Serve: Higher Education and America's Veterans. Retrieved From: <http://www.acenet.edu/news-room/Pages/Georgetown-Summit.aspx>

14 Ibid

15 Ibid

16 American Council on Education. (2008). From Soldier to Student II: Assessing Campus Programs for Veterans and Service Members. Retrieved From: <http://www.acenet.edu/news-room/Documents/From-Soldier-to-Student-II-Assessing-Campus-Programs.pdf>

17 Ibid

18 Ibid

Once we decide where to go to school, whether we graduate can depend on a range of factors. We tend to be non-traditional students, meaning we are older, have families, and go to school part-time in order to work while we get a degree. This can make our path to a degree more challenging. But while the overall graduation rate for my peers is not well understood, we tend to persist towards a degree at a rate similar to the traditional student population. A few years ago, a commonly-cited (but unconfirmed) statistic stated that 88% of veterans dropped out of college within their first year,<sup>19</sup> so Google and the Student Veterans of America launched the “Million Records Project” to learn the truth. This project, which analyzed the VA’s records of 898,895 veterans who used the GI Bill after 2002, showed that 51.7% of the survey’s sample had graduated.<sup>20</sup>

19 Sander, L. (2013, November) Push to Track Veterans’ College Success Gets a \$3.2-Million Boost From Google. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved May 18, 2014 from <http://chronicle.com/article/Push-to-Track-Veterans/142991/>

20 Cate, C.A. (2014). *Million Records Project: Research from Student Veterans of America*. Washington, DC: Student Veterans of America. Retrieved May 18, 2014 from [http://www.studentveterans.org/images/Reingold\\_Materials/mrp/download-materials/SVA\\_MillionRecordsProject\\_FullReport.pdf](http://www.studentveterans.org/images/Reingold_Materials/mrp/download-materials/SVA_MillionRecordsProject_FullReport.pdf)

# EMPLOYMENT

Regardless of whether we go to school after leaving the service, finding employment in the long run is our greatest concern and often our greatest challenge.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, unemployment for my veteran generation remains higher than that of our civilian counterparts, notably so for the youngest members of our cohort (with an unemployment rate above 15% for much of the last four years for veterans aged 20-24<sup>22</sup>), as well as for women and some minority groups.<sup>23</sup> Finding work is difficult for some veterans because some employers worry about hiring veterans with post-traumatic stress or hidden disabilities. And although it is illegal<sup>24</sup>, some employers are reluctant to hire members of the National Guard and Reserve out of fear that they will be deployed for long periods of time.

Before we leave the service many of us are optimistic about our job prospects. Unfortunately, once we leave the service this optimism can sometimes fade. In a survey conducted for Prudential and the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, 69% of active military “definitely” believed that they have the skills necessary to land their ideal job. This number dropped to 57% for veterans less than one year out of service, and dropped again to 46% for veterans who have been out of the military for between one and two years. It’s clear that the challenges we face take a toll on our outlook. And we aren’t just looking for something to pay the bills – 80% of us list our number one employment concern as finding a job that is meaningful to us. After that, our next greatest concern is finding a way to translate what we’ve done in the military into language that a civilian employer can understand (58%).<sup>25</sup>

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In searching for work, we use many different types of resources, including online resources (91%), newspapers (72%), online job boards (68%), and career fairs (61%). When asked, the vast majority of my peers and I say we would like “help” or “a lot of help” with networking, “closing” a job interview, targeting companies we want to work for, selling ourselves to a potential employer, writing an effective resume, writing a cover letter, preparing for a job interview, following up with interviewers, and researching companies we want to work for.<sup>26</sup>

21 Prudential Financial, Inc. (2012). Veterans’ Employment Challenges: Perceptions and experiences of transitioning from military to civilian life. Prudential Financial, Inc.

22 Institute for Veterans and Military Families. (2014, April). Monthly Employment Situation of Veterans April 2014. Syracuse, NY: Institute for Veterans and Military Families.

23 Institute for Veterans and Military Families. (2013, March). 2012 Annual Employment Situation of Veterans. Syracuse, NY: Institute for Veterans and Military Families.

24 <http://www.dol.gov/compliance/laws/comp-usera.htm>

25 Prudential Financial, Inc. (2012). Veterans’ Employment Challenges: Perceptions and experiences of transitioning from military to civilian life. Prudential Financial, Inc.

26 Ibid

While the challenges I face seem daunting, the sea of resources at my disposal can also seem dizzying at times. I sometimes don't know how or where to look. There are so many organizations that I can't tell which ones to use. The US Chamber of Commerce has an initiative called Hiring Our Heroes. But for those of us who aren't familiar with these organizations, how can we distinguish it from the constellation of other similar named efforts such as Hero2Hired, Hire a Hero, Hire Heroes USA, Operation Hire Our Heroes, and Hire America's Heroes?<sup>27</sup> For those of us who are used to the straightforward approach in the military, figuring out which resources match our needs can be so overwhelming and frustrating that some days we just give up.

Even if I want to remain in the same profession I had in the military, I may not have the industry-standard certifications needed to get a job. Some jobs, like being a truck driver, security guard, or paramedic, require a license from a state which requires a certain number of hours of training. I might have thousands of hours of experience driving a truck in combat, or I might have served as a Special Forces combat medic for years, but without the proper certification, I can't get a job in the civilian workforce. Other jobs in certain computer-based, technical, or operations management fields, require me to take expensive exams which I might not be able to afford. Fortunately, states are beginning to pass legislation or initiating programs<sup>28</sup> to reduce or eliminate barriers to licensing for some professions. Likewise, there are now some programs<sup>29</sup> funded by the private sector which allow me to gain the training I need to pass certification exams. As problems like these arise, the government, private sector, and not-for-profit organizations are teaming up to find solutions.

The private sector is taking the lead in helping veterans find work. Many large corporations, including Bank of America, Walmart, Home Depot, McDonalds, and Starbucks have pledged to hire tens or hundreds of thousands of veterans. Other private sector employers have joined coalitions that have made similar pledges. According to *The Washington Post*, America's employers have pledged to hire more than one million veterans.<sup>30</sup> Many employers may start out promising to hire veterans because they believe in helping those who served, but these companies quickly learn that there are compelling business reasons to hire veterans. On average, we make better employees, team members, and leaders than our civilian counterparts.<sup>31</sup>

Many companies are banding together to make it easier for veterans to find work. For example, there is the 100,000 Jobs Mission<sup>32</sup>, which today consists of 154 companies and has hired over 140,000 veterans. This group consists of some of the nation's leading corporations such as JPMorgan Chase, Amazon, General Motors, USAA, IBM, AT&T, and Accenture. Rather than having to go to 154 different websites, the coalition has one common webpage that helps me filter opportunities by job category, geographic region, and industry. I still have to go to each company's web page to apply for a job, but having them all in one location to learn general information about the company and the job simplifies my search.

27 Jaffe, Greg. (2014, April). Wanted: Heroes. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved May 18, 2014 from <http://www.washingtonpost.com/sf/national/2014/04/02/wanted-heroes/>

28 <http://www.veterans.ny.gov/content/experience-counts>

29 <http://vets.syr.edu/education/employment-programs/>

30 Jaffe, Greg. (2014, April). Wanted: Heroes. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved May 18, 2014 from <http://www.washingtonpost.com/sf/national/2014/04/02/wanted-heroes/>

31 Institute for Veterans and Military Families. (2012, March). *The Business Case for Hiring a Veteran: Beyond the Clichés*. Syracuse, NY: Institute for Veterans and Military Families.

32 <https://www.veteranjobsmisson.com/>

Other efforts have been undertaken by a range of private companies. For example, Blackstone, a large financial services firm, is now committed to hiring 50,000 veterans over the next five years. Meanwhile, the US Chamber of Commerce has built a coalition of 1,500 employers with the aim of helping 500,000 veterans find a job.<sup>33</sup> And the Get Skills to Work coalition<sup>34</sup>, consisting of General Electric, Boeing, Lockheed Martin, Alcoa, and other leading manufacturers that partner with educational institutions, wants to help veterans fill approximately 600,000 advanced manufacturing jobs by helping them gain the skills they need for a modern, manufacturing economy. These efforts are not acts of charity. They are a recognition that veterans make good employees, and an effort to bolster American competitiveness.

Companies help veterans find jobs in a variety of ways. Some companies belong to these coalitions, but still require me to apply for a job alongside everyone else. They simply have me note that I am a veteran at some point in the process so that they can track veteran hiring numbers. Other companies have general veteran/military postings which put me in touch with the firm's military recruiting team, who then help me navigate the firm, ask about my interests, recommend a career path, and identify specific opportunities for which I should apply.<sup>35</sup> Some firms have military and/or veteran leadership training programs<sup>36</sup> that rotate veterans through various sectors within the firm to develop and position us as future leaders.

My peers and I face unemployment rates that remain stubbornly high compared to our civilian counterparts, and we remain in need of additional training and resources to make us adept job seekers. We need time to redefine ourselves and our futures, and we could use mentorship throughout this process because we often don't understand what is available or where we should look for opportunities. Nonetheless, America's employers want to hire us and the government<sup>37</sup> and academia<sup>38</sup> are committed to giving the Nation's employers the tools they need to do so. There is hope that our employment numbers will improve and that the talent we can bring to the workforce will fully be leveraged by American industry.

33 <http://www.hiringourheroes.org/hiringourheroes>

34 <http://www.getskillstowork.org/>

35 <http://careers.accenture.com/us-en/jobs/Pages/jobdetails.aspx?lang=en&job=00209888&carsec=10003>

36 <http://www.ge.com/careers/culture/us-veterans/junior-officer-leadership-program>

37 White House Business Council. (2012) Guide to Hiring Veterans. White House Business Council. Retrieved from [http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/white\\_house\\_business\\_council\\_-\\_guide\\_to\\_hiring\\_veterans\\_0.pdf](http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/white_house_business_council_-_guide_to_hiring_veterans_0.pdf)

38 Institute for Veterans and Military Families. (2012, October). Veteran Employment Leading Practices: Tools for Engaging Talent. Syracuse, NY: Institute for Veterans and Military Families.

# GOVERNMENT

While I'm busy making major decisions about my future education and employment, the Nation provides extensive and robust systems of support for me and my peers, the largest of which resides in our government at the federal, state, and local levels.

The VA, for example, is the second-largest agency in terms of employees in the federal government (only the Department of Defense is bigger) and has an annual budget of over \$160 billion.<sup>39</sup> And the VA is only one source of support. The Departments of Defense (\$948M)<sup>40</sup>, Treasury (\$920M)<sup>41</sup>, Labor (\$266M)<sup>42</sup>, Housing and Urban Development (\$75M)<sup>43</sup>, Education (\$13M)<sup>44</sup>, and the Small Business Administration (\$9.5M)<sup>45</sup> all have or fund veteran-focused programs or benefits. A recent review found more than 1,300 federal and state policies, executive orders, and agency directives that impact veterans or their families.<sup>46</sup> Navigating this landscape of government services can be confusing and frustrating. The process begins a year before I leave the service when I become eligible for TAP, the Transition Assistance Program<sup>47</sup>, which gives me employment advice, helps me understand educational options, and teaches me how to start my own business. It also advises me on my VA benefits and other federal programs. While the government has designed a tool called the National Resource Directory<sup>48</sup> to attempt to bring all federal resources into one place, after the initial counseling in TAP, I'm often left to figure much of this out on my own.

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Most civilians assume the VA is the main, and perhaps only government agency, I interact with, and they likely also assume that the only real services available have to do with using VA hospitals<sup>49</sup> or the GI Bill. While these are important, they are far from the only resources available. For example, the VA has Vet Centers<sup>50</sup>, which are specialized post-traumatic stress clinics often located close to where I live (such as in a nearby strip mall). The VA also offers disability compensation and more members of my generation are applying for this than any previous generation. Applying for disability payments is often time consuming and laborious,<sup>51</sup> but for many of us applying

39 <http://www.va.gov/budget/products.asp>

40 Whittaker, J. (2013, April). Unemployment Compensation (Insurance) and Military Service. (CRS Report RS22440). Retrieved from Congressional Research Service website: <http://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/RS22440.pdf>

41 Ibid

42 <http://www.dol.gov/dol/budget/2014/PDF/CBJ-2014-V3-05.pdf>, p. 5

43 <http://portal.hud.gov/hudportal/documents/huddoc?id=CombBudget2013.pdf> p 4

44 <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/trio/vub/fundin.html>

45 [http://www.sba.gov/sites/default/files/files/1-508%20Compliant%20FY%202013%20CBJ%20FY%202011%20APR\(1\).pdf](http://www.sba.gov/sites/default/files/files/1-508%20Compliant%20FY%202013%20CBJ%20FY%202011%20APR(1).pdf) p 15

46 Institute for Veterans and Military Families. (2013, February). A National Veterans Strategy: The Economic, Social and Security Imperative. Syracuse, NY: Institute for Veterans and Military Families.

47 <http://jko.jten.mil/courses/tap/TGPS%20Standalone%20Training/start.html>

48 <https://www.ebenefits.va.gov/ebenefits/nrd>

49 <http://www.va.gov/health/>

50 <http://www.vetcenter.va.gov/>

51 Dao, James. (2013, April). VA Aims to Reduce Its Backlog of Claims. The New York Times. Retrieved May 18, 2014 from [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/20/us/veterans-affairs-aims-to-reduce-backlog-of-disability-claims.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/20/us/veterans-affairs-aims-to-reduce-backlog-of-disability-claims.html?_r=0)

for VA benefits offers us our first interaction with our Nation's oldest veterans' service organizations, such as the VFW, American Legion, or Disabled American Veterans. These organizations help us fill out our claims and track them through the process. Unique to my generation, post-9/11 veterans are eligible for five years of free health care<sup>52</sup> at the VA, regardless of disability status – 58% of my generation has used VA health care since 9/11.<sup>53</sup> There is a very loud debate about the quality of care available at the VA, and that debate has shaped and will continue to shape the care that is available to me. However, when surveyed, veterans report high patient satisfaction<sup>54</sup> – equal to or greater than that reported in private health care facilities.<sup>55</sup>

The VA provides many benefits.<sup>56</sup> Educational and training assistance, for example, are available through the post-9/11 GI Bill,<sup>57</sup> the Montgomery GI Bill,<sup>58</sup> and Vocational Rehabilitation<sup>59</sup> (which helps veterans with disabilities). Other programs include Supportive Services for Veteran Families<sup>60</sup>, which helps prevent homelessness.<sup>61</sup>

Other lesser-known federal initiatives provide significant support to me and my peers as well. The Department of Labor has an entire branch dedicated to veteran employment, providing grants to states<sup>62</sup> for veteran-specific staff in workforce development centers and grants to non-profits for veteran workforce investment<sup>63</sup> and homeless veteran rehousing and workforce retraining<sup>64</sup> initiatives. DOL-VETS<sup>65</sup>, as it is known, is also in charge of enforcing legislation<sup>66</sup> that prevents employers from discriminating against those who serve in the National Guard and Reserves. The Department of Education provides grants for schools to help veteran college students<sup>67</sup> and to other institutions with innovative veteran programming.<sup>68</sup> The Small Business Administration funds veteran entrepreneurship programming and veteran business development centers.<sup>69</sup> Finally, when I separate from the service, I become eligible for unemployment assistance. Most people don't know that the Department of Defense<sup>70</sup> and the Department of the Treasury<sup>71</sup> are the sources of this funding.

Broadly, the federal government is a major employer of veterans, but specifically the VA makes a significant effort to hire me and my peers. When applying for a federal job on USAJobs,<sup>72</sup> my application gets extra weight<sup>73</sup> because of my veteran status, especially in security-related positions.

52 <http://www.oefoif.va.gov/>

53 <http://www.publichealth.va.gov/epidemiology/reports/oefoifond/health-care-utilization/>

54 CFI Group. (2014). American Customer Satisfaction Index: Veterans Health Administration, Veterans Affairs; 2013 Customer Satisfaction Inpatient Survey. Retrieved From: <http://www.va.gov/health/docs/VA2013inpatientACSI.pdf>

55 Hicks, Josh. (2014, April). VA hospitals on par with private sector for patient satisfaction. The Washington Post. Retrieved October 3, 2014 from <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/federal-eye/wp/2014/04/17/va-hospitals-on-par-with-private-sector-for-patient-satisfaction>

56 <http://www.benefits.va.gov/>

57 [http://www.benefits.va.gov/gibill/post911\\_gibill.asp](http://www.benefits.va.gov/gibill/post911_gibill.asp)

58 [http://www.benefits.va.gov/gibill/montgomery\\_bill.asp](http://www.benefits.va.gov/gibill/montgomery_bill.asp)

59 <http://www.benefits.va.gov/voc rehab/>

60 <http://www.va.gov/homeless/ssvf.asp>

61 <http://www.va.gov/homeless/hud-vash.asp>

62 <http://www.dol.gov/vets/grants/state/jvsg.htm>

63 <http://www.dol.gov/vets/programs/vwip/main.htm>

64 <http://www.dol.gov/vets/programs/hvrp/main.htm>

65 <http://www.dol.gov/vets/index.htm>

66 <http://www.dol.gov/compliance/laws/comp-userra.htm>

67 <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/trio/vub/index.html>

68 <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/cevss/index.html>

69 <http://www.sba.gov/offices/headquarters/ovbd>

70 <http://militarypay.defense.gov/benefits/UCX.html>

71 Whittaker, J. (2013, April). Unemployment Compensation (Insurance) and Military Service. (CRS Report RS22440). Retrieved from Congressional Research Service website: <http://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/RS22440.pdf>

72 <http://www.fedshirevets.gov/>

73 <http://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/veterans-services/vet-guide/>

State and local governments provide their own array of benefits. Some states administer additional tuition assistance programs,<sup>74</sup> veterans' pensions,<sup>75</sup> one-time returning veterans' grants,<sup>76</sup> and reduced licensing fees (for hunting or drivers licenses or license plates, for example).<sup>77</sup> Many states oversee retirement homes and cemeteries for elderly and deceased veterans. Many states now provide guides to help me and my peers understand the programs and benefits available, and some states are much better than others at helping me and my peers. However, to be honest, only the savviest person could understand it all.

Many of us are only vaguely aware that such a vast government infrastructure exists for our benefit. However, if I tap into one government benefit, I am often referred to other government programs and services, and I am therefore more likely to interact with many elements of this web of support.

74 [http://www.isac.org/students/during-college/types-of-financial-aid/grants/illinois-veteran-grant-\(ivg\)-program.html](http://www.isac.org/students/during-college/types-of-financial-aid/grants/illinois-veteran-grant-(ivg)-program.html)

75 <http://www.mass.gov/veterans/benefits-and-services/chapter-115.html>

76 [https://veteransbonus.ohio.gov/odvs\\_web/](https://veteransbonus.ohio.gov/odvs_web/)

77 [http://www.txtag.org/faqs\\_veteran\\_discount.php](http://www.txtag.org/faqs_veteran_discount.php)

# NON-PROFITS

In the years that followed the 9/11 terrorist attacks, there has been deep and abiding public support for those of us who have served in America's armed forces. This support has taken many forms including yellow ribbons posted everywhere to care packages sent to us on the front lines. It has also led to the creation of a vast array of new non-profit organizations dedicated to supporting the troops and military veterans, and these organizations play an important supporting role in augmenting the role of government services.

By one estimate there are 46,000 non-profit organizations today that have at least some focus on supporting veterans and their families. The actual number is probably much higher because this estimate only counts organizations registered in the Guidestar database that used the words "veteran" or "military families" in their mission statement at that time. The estimate therefore does not count a large number of non-profits outside of Guidestar that focus on veterans and even more non-profit organizations that help veterans in the course of their work of helping a broader cross section of Americans, but don't explicitly name veterans in their mission.

**“By one estimate there are 46,000 non-profit organizations today that have at least some focus on supporting veterans and their families.”**

The range of services provided to veterans from non-profit organizations is stunning. Some organizations – such as the USO and the Wounded Warrior Project – are large, well known, and serve countless thousands of veterans. Other smaller organizations have a more local or regional impact. Some of the organizations provide veterans with the deed to a home free of charge (either by building a new home or refurbishing an existing one). Others focus on specific problems such as homelessness, substance abuse, or post-traumatic stress. And still others are dedicated to helping veterans find meaningful employment by helping us write our resumes, lending us a suit for an interview, or running job fairs. There are even organizations that can help us start our own businesses or expand a business we have already launched.

The range of organizations promising to help us with post-traumatic stress is amazing. There's therapeutic horsemanship, fly-fishing, mountain climbing, music lessons, art classes, bike rides, yoga, acupuncture, counseling, and countless other forms of therapy. If I have a disability, there are organizations that will retrofit my house, provide me with a Segway, service dog, adaptive vehicle, or help me find many other ways to navigate my new post-service life. There are also organizations which specialize in giving things away, such as free tickets to concerts or baseball games.

Then there are the organizations that pre-date 9/11, many of which have been around for decades and have done significant work in years past to help veterans reintegrate into civilian life. These organizations have broad name recognition, but many have struggled to remain relevant to my veteran generation. These Veterans' Service

Organizations (VSOs) are typically the organizations that help my generation understand what government benefits we are eligible for and how to apply for them, and they often advocate to Congress to pass new laws, such as the post-9/11 GI Bill.

Unfortunately, while the proliferation of new non-profits and the large outpouring of public support for veterans is appreciated, sometimes there are so many organizations that it is hard for me and my peers to determine which organizations can help us. What's more, we know that there are some fraudulent organizations which harms us directly and can discourage Americans from supporting organizations which may legitimately provide critical services.

After surveying national experts and thought leaders in the veterans' field about how effective existing these non-profits are,<sup>78</sup> I can see that there is a consensus that there is much room for improvement. Of the 130 responding thought leaders, a large majority (72%) gave a negative or neutral response when asked if the non-profit sector has been effective in serving veterans. Nearly every responding thought leader (91%) gave a negative or neutral response when asked if the veteran-focused non-profit sector has a coordinated and strategic approach to helping veterans. And 88% gave a negative or neutral response when asked if the non-profit sector was appropriately transparent in regards to outcomes. And 82% gave a negative or neutral response when asked if veteran funding is targeted to the most pressing needs.

On the bright side, 92% of the responding thought leaders agreed or strongly agreed that the veteran non-profit community is positioned to play an important and strategic role in advancing my post-service life and that of my family. While not a scientific survey of all the individuals who mold public opinion on veterans' issues, the survey is an indication that the non-profit sector is well positioned but has a lot of work to do to ensure that it serves veterans well.

As I look across the landscape, several insights become clear to me. First, there is in fact a sea of goodwill for veterans and their families. Second, that good-will could dissipate unless the non-profit sector takes advantage of the opportunity to think more strategically and hold themselves accountable for results. And finally, my experience tells me that there is a particular need for serving veterans as they transition out of the military, before they form habits or make choices that prove to be detrimental to their long-term wellbeing. If non-profits refine their strategic thinking now and adopt measures to become more effective, they can seize the opportunity to set this generation of veterans on a stable long-term trajectory.

78 George W. Bush Institute & Institute for Veterans and Military Families. (2013). Survey of Thought Leaders. Syracuse, NY: Institute for Veterans and Military Families.

# PHILANTHROPY

Non-profits that support veterans are themselves supported by a community of philanthropic, grant-making organizations. Even if they never know my name, and if I never know theirs, these organizations – often large charitable foundations – can shape my future and the future of my fellow veterans. Americans are tremendously generous people. The National Philanthropic Trust has estimated that Americans gave approximately \$316 billion to charity in 2012.<sup>79</sup> It is difficult to determine how much of that charity ultimately ended up benefiting me and my fellow military veterans, but I can get a sense of the amount of financial resources available by looking at areas where hard data is widely available on veteran-specific giving.

Two such areas are grants given to veteran causes and donations made to organizations easily identifiable as serving veterans. Surveying<sup>80</sup> veteran-related grant making by private foundations,<sup>81</sup> I can see that between 2001 and 2013, more than \$800 million was given out through 14,000 grants. Most of these grants were for \$10,000 or less, but some were for millions of dollars. And I can also see that in 2011, Americans gave more than \$1.6 billion to readily identifiable veteran organizations. The Center for Public Integrity has estimated that such gifts have more than doubled since 2001, when Americans gave approximately \$600 million to such organizations.<sup>82</sup> These figures are substantial, but nonetheless likely reflect just a portion of the funds available each year for veteran issues.

These and other funds serve as the life-blood of many veteran focused non-profit organizations, but unfortunately often the money dedicated to veteran causes isn't aligned with the most pressing needs of veterans.<sup>83</sup> Part of the problem is that philanthropic foundations themselves do not operate as a cohesive community. Grants are not coordinated and typically there is not a larger, strategic objective for giving out a specific grant. There also isn't a common standard for measuring results. Other charitable arenas have large institutional players that can essentially set community standards for determining grants and ensuring that funds are used effectively. There isn't such an institutional player in the veterans' space. However, the Council on Foundations and Philanthropy Round table publish reports on veteran philanthropy<sup>84</sup> and host philanthropic practice events.<sup>85</sup> These efforts could lead to better coordination.

Another reason why grants to veteran-focused non-profits are not always aligned to need is that most philanthropic organizations are located in large urban areas, while most veterans live in the suburbs and in rural areas.<sup>86</sup> The result is that often philanthropic organizations don't fully understand the issues veterans face because they don't do business in the communities where veterans are trying to build new civilian lives. Additionally, many foundations have specific charters which restrict their capability or likelihood to give to our

79 National Philanthropic Trust. (2014). Charitable Giving Statistics. National Philanthropic Trust. Retrieved from <http://www.nptrust.org/philanthropic-resources/charitable-giving-statistics/>

80 George W. Bush Institute & Institute for Veterans and Military Families. (2013). Survey of Thought Leaders. Syracuse, NY: Institute for Veterans and Military Families.

81 This study only reviewed gifts in the Foundation Center Online Plus Database and did not account for gifts from corporate foundations

82 Garland, C. & Knochel, C. (2013, September). Some charities claiming to support veterans spend heavily on overhead instead. The Center for Public Integrity. Retrieved from <http://www.publicintegrity.org/2013/09/06/13330/some-charities-claiming-support-veterans-spend-heavily-overhead-instead>

83 Copeland, J. & Sutherland, D. (2010). Sea of Goodwill: Matching Donor to the Need. Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Warrior and Family Support. Washington, DC: Department of Defense. Retrieved from [http://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/WarriorFamilySupport/SOGW\\_donor\\_to\\_need.pdf](http://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/WarriorFamilySupport/SOGW_donor_to_need.pdf)

84 Meyer, T. (2013). Serving Those Who Served: A Wise Giver's Guide to Assisting Veterans and Military Families. Washington, DC: The Philanthropy Round table. Retrieved from [http://www.philanthropyroundtable.org/file\\_uploads/Serving\\_Those\\_Who\\_Served.pdf](http://www.philanthropyroundtable.org/file_uploads/Serving_Those_Who_Served.pdf)

85 [http://www.philanthropyroundtable.org/events/serving\\_those\\_who\\_served](http://www.philanthropyroundtable.org/events/serving_those_who_served)

86 Cohen, R. (2013, April 10). Helping Today's Veterans: The Role for Philanthropy. Nonprofit Quarterly. Retrieved from <http://www.nonprofitquarterly.org/philanthropy/22112-helping-today-s-veterans-the-role-for-philanthropy.html>

population. Unless the original grantor was a veteran or had a connection to the military, it is less likely that the foundation is able to support causes other than those for which the foundation was originally designed.<sup>87</sup>

Philanthropy plays an important role in driving policy development and in shaping the national debate over veterans' issues. Improving the effectiveness of their grants, ensuring they fully understand the situation veterans face at a personal level, and revising their charters so that they can adapt to changing needs will enable philanthropic organizations to better improve the lives of our Nation's veterans.

**“Philanthropy plays an important role in driving policy development and in shaping the national debate over veterans’ issues.”**

87 Ibid

# MEDIA

While there are tens of millions of veterans in America, less than 1% of the total population of the country served in the United States military in the years following 9/11, resulting in a significant gap in understanding the issues veterans face today. This civilian-military divide, between those who have served since 9/11 and their immediate family members and those who have not served and have no direct connection to a service member, poses a significant problem for resolving issues veterans face.

“While there are tens of millions of veterans in America, less than 1% of the total population of the country served in the United States military in the years following 9/11.”

While the American media is capable of conveying broad sums of information about complex topics, unfortunately its coverage of veterans’ issues fails to present a comprehensive view of the landscape veterans and their families face. As an element which shapes this landscape, the media often falls short of its potential to support us.

Generally, the media-driven narrative has been one of extremes. I am either a hero (unstoppable and iconic) or a victim (broken, ready to crack under post-traumatic stress, unemployed, homeless, or suicidal).<sup>88</sup> For the vast majority of my peers, neither characterization is accurate. What the media often fails to do is present a nuanced picture that would allow the American people to understand the challenges we face, which in turn would enable to them to help us solve those problems together.

This nuanced role begins by avoiding covering just the extremes, but searching for stories of local veterans with stories that viewers can connect with, relate to, and understand. Second, the media could do stories that explain what life is like inside the military and how the skills learned there can translate in the civilian world. Too often, when the media does this it focuses on broad categories such as leadership or “commitment to service”. In truth, there are countless skills – from mastering technological systems, executing complex logistical operations, conducting financial analysis, and so on – that are directly applicable to civilian jobs. Telling these stories would help civilians understand us and get employers to hire us.

The media’s health coverage could also be improved. Reporting tends to focus solely on waiting lists and backlogs at VA facilities or on advances in athletics-related prosthetics. Many of these stories are important contributions to the debate over veterans’ issues and tell stories of triumph over devastating injuries. But if the media produced stories that demonstrated prosthetics facilitating veterans’ return to work, more Americans might understand that it’s not just about being able to run again – rather, a veteran with disabilities might be more likely to get hired. Similarly, more nuanced and in-depth reporting on post-traumatic stress and traumatic brain injury (TBI) could increase understanding, reduce stigma, and consequently make veterans more likely to get hired by an employer who would otherwise have been hesitant to do so. The media also focuses on veteran suicide but rarely informs the public that the lack of social supports which may lead to veteran suicide (and thus a possible way they could support suicide prevention).

<sup>88</sup> George W. Bush Presidential Center and the Institute for Veterans and Military Families. Insights Informing the Concerns of Post-9/11 Veterans and Families: A Review of Media Reporting and Focus. Syracuse, NY: Institute for Veterans and Military Families.

By shaping public opinion, the media can influence policy makers in Washington. And with fewer veterans in Congress than generations before us,<sup>89</sup> one of the only ways that our leaders learn about me and my peers is through the media. Newsletters like the Early Bird Brief<sup>90</sup> and ScoutComms<sup>91</sup> aggregate and disseminate reporting on defense and veterans' issues to key leaders in the White House, Congress, the VA, the Department of Defense, and other federal agencies. Coverage of veterans' issues can therefore shape policy, so it is absolutely critical that media coverage not only be accurate but that it also paints a comprehensive picture. Otherwise, policymakers may develop new policies to address a problem in the news rather than direct resources to more important problems that receive less news coverage. What's more, even when the media covers a critical issue, if policymakers get an incorrect or incomplete view of the issue they may develop a policy that won't solve the underlying problem.

My peers and I are often disconnected from most Americans, but our Nation's media has the power to carry our stories into every American household and into the halls of power. A better informed media could help policymakers get a full and accurate picture of veteran issues and thereby develop more impactful policies.

89 Blake, Aaron. (2013, November). The long decline of veterans in Congress — in 4 charts. The Washington Post. Retrieved May 18, 2014 from <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/the-fix/wp/2013/11/11/the-long-decline-of-veterans-in-congress-in-4-charts/>

90 <http://www.defensenews.com/article/20131101/DEFREG02/311010013/The-New-Early-Bird-Brief-Now-Available>

91 <http://scoutcommsusa.com>

# COMMUNITY

This network of resources that shapes my post-9/11 America has many members that can determine my educational, employment, and wellness outcomes. The most influential conversations about supporting me and my peers often happen in places like Washington, D.C., and New York City. These are critical, and it is important for the President, cabinet secretaries, CEOs, university presidents, and foundation executives to be committed to supporting me and my peers. It's important to have a national network of schools to serve veterans and a national network of employers seeking to hire us. It is important for government agencies to have a vibrant and dynamic national network of facilities and services for veterans. But what matters to me most is that these national efforts are represented in my community.

A national consortium of schools is only important if *my school* is a member and that my school has a resource center and a properly trained staff. A national coalition of employers only matters if those employers *in my town* participate in their corporation's veterans' hiring initiatives. My impressions of government services are shaped by those provided locally – one negative interaction *at my local VA medical center* may sour my opinion of the entire Department and make me less likely to engage with any of the department's other programs or apply for any other benefits.

“My transition happens where I live, work, and pray. The landscape I navigate is the community I live in. The characters in my story are my neighbors, my doctors, my teachers, my boss, my pastor, and my family.”

To be most effective, all of these actors should be tied together into an integrated web of services, support, and resources, such that should I need assistance, each actor can either provide for my needs or help me navigate to one who can. For example, it's important for my community college or university to understand which employers are interested in hiring veterans and help me tailor my education towards those fields. If I'm in a workforce development program and my case worker identifies that substance use is preventing my employment, he or she should know who to call at the VA to enroll me in the right treatment program. If I'm seeking care at the VA for post-traumatic stress, my counselor should know about alternative therapies provided by local non-profit organizations. If I'm working with a local non-profit to get me into stable housing, their staff should know who provides financial literacy training to make sure I can keep paying the rent and don't end up back on the street. All of these organizations should have media contacts to tell my story to the public – to help them understand both my struggles and my strengths, and to help my neighbors better understand me. And the local foundations should be seeding best practices, encouraging collaboration, and providing leadership for the community.

My transition happens where I live, work, and pray. The landscape I navigate is the community I live in. The characters in my story are my neighbors, my doctors, my teachers, my boss, my pastor, and my family. When I fall down, these are the people who pick me up. When I have victories, these are the people who cheer me on. After 9/11, these are the people I signed up to defend. And in the years and decades ahead, these are the people and the community I want to serve. I am a post-9/11 Veteran. This is my landscape. This is my America.

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