

# INSIGHTS INFORMING THE CONCERNS OF POST- 9/11 VETERANS AND FAMILIES

*Case Study:*

*Hire Heroes USA*



SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY'S INSTITUTE FOR VETERANS AND MILITARY FAMILIES (IVMF) HAS BEEN CONTRACTED TO SUPPORT THE GEORGE W. BUSH INSTITUTE'S RESEARCH TO EFFECTIVELY SERVE AND EMPOWER OUR POST-9/11 VETERANS AND MILITARY FAMILIES.



# GEORGE W. BUSH INSTITUTE



## HIRE HEROES USA CASE STUDY

### 1. Organizational Overview

#### History

Hire Heroes USA (Hire Heroes or HHUSA), which is headquartered in Alpharetta, GA, is a national organization which provides personalized employment readiness training and limited job placement services to veterans and their spouses. The organization is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit. MedAssets President and Chief Executive Officer John A. Bardis developed the idea for the organization after meeting an Army veteran who had deep concerns about his future, particularly his employment prospects, in 2005. Mr. Bardis hired the man on the spot to work at MedAssets, and later decided to address his concern for the plight of unemployed veterans on a larger scale by founding Hire Heroes USA in 2007. In 2009, Mr. Bardis recruited the CEO and President, Brian Stann, to lead the organization and expand its reach. At the time, he was one of three full time employees. Since that time, the organization has grown to 42 full and part time employees across six locations nationwide, with an annual operating budget of \$3.9M. Hire Heroes USA has assisted over 7,000 veterans and their spouses in completing professional-quality resumes through virtual assistance online and in-person workshops on military installations.

#### Mission Statement

Hire Heroes USA's Mission Statement is as follows: "Hire Heroes USA is dedicated to creating job opportunities for US military veterans and their spouses through personalized employment training and corporate engagement. As a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, Hire Heroes USA's services are provided at no cost to the veteran."

#### Organizational Structure

Led by a President/CEO and COO, as well as Board of Directors, HHUSA has five offices plus a headquarters that serve all 50 states. HHUSA also has a Director of Finance and Administration, a Director of Veteran Programs and a recently hired Director of Corporate Relations and Communications, all at headquarters in Georgia. Field offices are located in California, Colorado, North Carolina, Texas and Washington State, and are each run by staff of 2-4 full time employees, usually led by a Senior Manager. Offices are often co-located with MedAssets locations and, in these cases, space is provided to HHUSA at no cost. Long-term, the organization aims to shift to a more decentralized, regionally-focused model, and to grow to 800 employees over the next several years. This would require significant increases in funding, as leadership described their operating model as "high touch, high trust," meaning that a significant amount of time is spent with each client, with some of that time being spent in establishing rapport and building

a trust relationship between the Hire Heroes USA Veteran Transition Specialist (VTS) and the client.

The organization has 42 paid staff, of which 37 are full-time employees and 5 are part-time and/or interns. Thirty employees are Veteran Transition Specialists, who work one-on-one with the clients and conduct live workshops. Many of the VTS's are veterans themselves – 80% by leadership estimates. In addition to paid staff, Hire Heroes USA does utilize volunteers to assist with outreach and other efforts.

### Programming

The broad theme of Hire Heroes USA's programming is to assist veterans and their spouses through transition, though strictly from an employment perspective. HHUSA Leadership credits their success to their narrow focus and personalized approach, saying that it allows them to be extremely effective in their mission.

Hire Heroes USA provides online/telephonic employment readiness assistance, including resume writing and interview preparation through one-on-one interaction with Veteran Transition Specialists. Veterans can register online to obtain assistance. Registrations are on a first-come, first-served basis; only an estimated 120 registrants are assigned to work with a VTS that week (capacity is calculated each week based on VTS availability due to workshop requirements, vacations, etc.). Registration is on a weekly basis and veterans are notified immediately if their registration has been accepted. Leadership estimates that the weekly average number of rejected registrants is 113. Hire Heroes USA tracks the rejections and works to give priority to veterans who have attempted to register more than once, so veterans are encouraged to keep registering if they are unsuccessful the first time. Specialists are assigned 10 cases per week and make contact by phone or Skype to begin the process. Specialists assist with translating military experience into civilian-friendly terminology, teach job search and application techniques, and establish LinkedIn accounts. The end result is a professional-quality resume and a suite of job seeking skills that can be used to obtain civilian employment.

In addition to online registration and virtual assistance, job-seekers can attend one of HHUSA's two-day workshops, held in-person on military bases and nearby locations. The two-day workshops deliver all the elements of the virtual experience in a live, focused format. The bulk of the live workshops are intended for wounded, ill or injured veterans, their spouses and caregivers. However, some workshops are offered to active duty military and their spouses, in an effort to encourage service members to begin their job search earlier in the transition process. These workshops begin with a short PowerPoint presentation, but the majority of time is spent working directly with each attendee on their personal materials.

In conjunction with the USO, Hire Heroes USA hosts Career Opportunity Days, which are non-traditional career fairs where a limited number of companies are matched with wounded, ill, and injured veterans and their spouses through Hire Heroes USA's process of personally identifying and translating industry needs with military background, previous experience, and desired geographical location. Potential employers are required to send representatives to conduct onsite interviews for open positions as well as provide information about employment opportunities for potential candidates. In order to make this matching process successful, companies are asked to submit the job requirements for open positions prior to attending. Service members, veterans, spouses, and caregivers are required to bring a resume. Career Opportunity Days are hosted free of charge for all service members, veterans, spouses, caregivers, and participating companies through partnership with the USO and Hire Heroes USA.

Hire Heroes USA hosts an online job posting board where employers can post openings on a monthly basis for a fee. The companies that post jobs to the job board are vetted by the Corporate Relations team in order to determine their commitment and capacity to hire veterans. Hire Heroes USA clients can review and apply for these postings. Additionally, HHUSA's Outreach and Matching team reviews postings on the job board and attempts to match qualified clients to opportunities.

Like many nonprofit organizations, Hire Heroes USA leverages volunteers. There is a formalized volunteer program, managed by a Volunteer Coordinator, who also leads the Outreach and Matching team. Volunteers are largely used to assist with fundraising and special events, and to assist with outreach to veterans who have been served by HHUSA, to check on employment status or to seek feedback on the quality of services.

All programming efforts make use of the Salesforce system, which is a licensed customer relationship management product that Hire Heroes USA uses to track veterans' data, progress through the process, employment status, etc. Veteran Transition Specialists are able to flag clients as priority clients due to financial need or other extenuating circumstances, and the system color codes clients to indicate how long it has been since a Specialist or a member of the Outreach Team has made contact.

### Veteran Populations Served

Hire Heroes USA largely serves the post-9/11 veteran population, though all veterans are eligible. Online registration and virtual transition assistance are open to veterans and active duty military and their spouses. Live workshops and career opportunity days largely serve the population of wounded, ill or injured veterans, their spouses and caregivers. The majority of Hire Heroes USA clients are the E-1 through E-6 enlisted ranks, though officers are welcome.

### Funding Sources and Strategies

Hire Heroes USA has a partnership with the USO and a grant from the Call of Duty Endowment (CODE), which are the organization's two main sources of funding. Funding from these two entities is a mix of restricted and unrestricted funds, and both funding streams have reporting requirements attached. USO funding is strictly for conducting workshops and associated travel and administrative expenses, while CODE funding has been used to open additional offices.

MedAssets, which has maintained a close relationship with Hire Heroes USA since its founding, also provides fundraising support and in-kind donations of office space, IT equipment such as wireless cards and computers, shared services such as IT support and other items. Hire Heroes USA also accepts cash and in-kind donations from private donors online through its website and by mail.

Finally, the organization obtains a limited amount of funding through charging for job postings on their online job board. The fees associated with the job board serves two purposes: first, to "disincentivize window-shopping"; that is, to discourage companies that just want another free job posting resource and aren't really interested in hiring veterans; and second, job board funding is sufficient to support the salaries of the Corporate Relations team.

## 2. Measurement and Data Supporting Effectiveness & Impact

### Types of Data Routinely Collected

Hire Heroes USA has a robust system of data collection which is reported on a performance dashboard at the organizational level, and at the personal level, select data is used for performance evaluation purposes. At the organizational level, HHUSA tracks an aggregate number of registrants (those who sign up online or for workshops), assessments (those who actually complete initial intake), completed resumes, follow-up contacts with veterans, hires, new employer partners, revenue raised by employer partners, number of veteran resumes presented to employer partners, social media metrics (number of followers across a number of platforms), as well cash flows by month.

The Hire Heroes USA Outreach & Matching Team identifies “confirmed hire” data, which is how many clients are able to successfully obtain employment after using Hire Heroes USA’s services. This small staff is dedicated to contacting veterans who either have or have not completed the program for the purposes of either reengaging them or collecting data to be used in decision-making and metrics. This team also sends out surveys to alumni, and as of the date of our visit, the average response rate was 16%. The organization tracks Dollars Donated/Confirmed Hires as a measure of efficiency, to get a sense of how much is spent to get a veteran hired. Hire Heroes USA had over 21 confirmed hires per week for 2014 as of the date of our visit, and spent \$3,034 per confirmed hire in 2013.

With regards to metrics for Veteran Transition Specialists, Hire Heroes USA tracks the number of Initial Assessments to the number of Online Registrants, again as a measure of efficiency. Another measure is the number of completed resumes, which is tracked on a weekly basis. These metrics are obtained via Salesforce.

Hire Heroes USA also collects demographic data from clients such as address, service branch, dates of entry and separation, rank and/or pay grade, deployments, primary military occupational specialty, active security clearances, education level, additional languages spoken and awards, such as whether the registrant received a Purple Heart.

### Data Analysis and Reporting

Hire Heroes USA uses the collected metrics and data for a number of different functions. First, accountability to funders is a priority. Funding from the USO requires annual reporting of certain metrics, such as the number of completed resumes per week, number of workshops executed and the number of attendees. Initial funding from CODE required that Hire Heroes USA submit to a financial review by a public accounting firm (Deloitte) to determine certain measures of financial stability and efficiency. Now, Hire Heroes USA reports the percentage of post-9/11 veterans, percentage of officers, and average salary, which necessitates reaching out to alumni once they’ve obtained employment. Hire Heroes USA also completes required tax filings and posts these filings publicly on their website.

Another use for collected data is to provide performance metrics for Veteran Transition Specialists. Again, the metrics discussed above such as number of completed resumes and the ratio of initial assessments to online registrants helps to establish performance standards per staff member and allows leadership to give bonuses to staff members who are in some cases doubling or tripling standards.

### How data are used for getting to impact

The robust systems of data collection mentioned above are used to establish a system of benchmarks of performance which then drives further impact. Based on historical organizational performance, these benchmarks have been established to create expectations for Veteran Transition Specialists which are used both to hold staff accountable and to enable the issuance of performance bonuses. Director of Veteran Programs James McGuire explains: “On average we get 10 vet registrants a week, conduct 8 initial assessments, which is that initial 15- or 20-minute conversation, and hopefully be able to knock out 5 or 6 resumes. On your performance review, I want to see an 80-percent success rate of initial assessments to ratio or initial assessments to registrants, and I've seen some of our folks have as high as like 92 percent of the folks that they reach out to they get a hold of because they're creative or they'll just keep calling them. And then if they hit that ratio, then I want to see 1.07 hires per week, but some of my best folks are getting as many as 4 hires in a week, which is great. And then we have a benchmark of doing at least 3.25 resumes per week, but then I have folks that are able to do 5 or 6 in a week. So these are things they're getting evaluated on to hold them accountable. We take all of the historical data and say, hey, this year in 2014 our goal is to hit 1,400 hires, and then as we grow we want to be able to hit 2,000, 3,000 in subsequent years.”

### Formal Evaluation Activities (internal and external)

As stated above, Hire Heroes USA has a formal process of collecting data, which is then used in their formal employee performance management process. Evaluations take place every 6 months (mid-year and year-end) and can result in incentives for the employee. Hire Heroes USA leadership expressed an interest in benchmarking against other nonprofit organizations with an employment focus.

## 3. Strategic Themes

### Employment and Education

The sole purpose of Hire Heroes USA's existence is to advance the employment situation of our nation's veterans and their spouses, which is accomplished both through work with veterans as well as work with employers. Working with veterans, Hire Heroes USA offers assistance with resume revision, interview skills, networking skills, and any other guidance one might need in helping to ease the transition into the civilian workforce.

It seems that one of the clear differentiators between Hire Heroes USA and other employment-focused organizations is HHUSA's highly personalized approach, as well as their strong focus on setting clear expectations for the employment path which lies ahead. While every VTS's approach may vary, the coaching process includes establishment of an understanding that a veteran may be entering civilian employment at a lower level and lower wage than he or she was getting in the military. Likewise, an expectation is set that the path to finding employment will likely be long and challenging – that resumes are often fed into large computerized databases and must be tailored specifically to job descriptions, and that while veteran preference may be communicated at a corporate level, that may not always translate to a hiring manager level. Specific hiring processes, like those for federal jobs through the USAJobs portal, are explained to interested veterans.

HHUSA Veteran Transition specialists also serve to boost the confidence of their veterans, however, and veterans are encouraged to recognize their value and to learn to sell themselves to hiring managers.

Veterans must overcome the military's culture of humility and learn to take credit for their accomplishments during the resume writing and interview process. HHUSA VTS Spencer Milo states that he needs to tell his veterans, "Stop worrying about what they may think of you or what you think they're thinking of you, and start realizing what you bring to the table and start informing them as to why you can help the organization." Regarding the role of the VTS, he states, "I would think we are more life coaches, some of us more than others, but they do need pep talks. We all do from time to time, and especially when you're coming out of a world that you've immersed yourself in."

### Independent Sector Involvement

While much of Hire heroes USA's programming is focused on the veterans it is training to be prepared to enter the workforce, HHUSA's corporate relations team exists to build collaborations with private sector companies to build demand for the labor supply the VTS's empower. To date, this effort has included a job board wherein participating companies are screened by the HHUSA corporate relations team to determine level of commitment to hiring veterans. In the future, HHUSA would like to expand to offering hands-on training modules to corporate HR departments to demonstrate the value of hiring veterans. In practice, the majority of HHUSA's veterans hired have come through the veterans' own efforts and not through the job board, so the corporate relations team has experimented with efforts to tweak the model, such as fielding a team to match job openings with qualified veterans in HHUSA's Salesforce database. Where it is easier for VTS's to solicit feedback from unsatisfied veterans and therefore improve their services, when a company does not hire a veteran served by HHUSA, it has proven challenging to understand what went wrong or how HHUSA needs to tailor its services differently. This partnership model with the private sector is continually evolving; as HHUSA, as HHUSA has successfully fulfilled the supply side of the hiring equation by training their veterans to be effective job seekers, they also strive to fulfill the demand side of the hiring equation through effective partnerships.

A different manifestation of corporate partnership is Hire Heroes USA's unique relationship with MedAssets. HHUSA is one of a handful of young national organizations that owes its existence to the generosity of a strong individual or corporate benefactor, in this case John Bardis and MedAssets. Where originally, the organization was entirely funded by Mr. Bardis and MedAssets, today it is financially independent (though he still provides regular donations). That said, HHUSA still benefits from free office space, IT equipment, internet, cell phones, phone lines, and IT personnel support as mentioned above. While HHUSA's director of Finance and Administration states that the organization would be able to survive today independent of its relationship with MedAssets, it was entirely dependent on the corporation in its early years. This highlights a unique model used by several other now nationally-prominent organizations in the veterans' space.

Finally, Hire Heroes USA's strategic partnership with the USO is cited as another critical element in the organization's success. After being identified over three years ago by the USO as a "best in class" organization for their employment work, Hire Heroes USA gained access to military bases across the country to host its two-day, in-person workshops, hosting 30 in that first year. In 2014, HHUSA will host 129 across the country, in addition to their online/telephonic assistance provided by VTS's. As identified with other organizations studied, access to military bases and the military population can be extremely difficult, so a relationship such as this with one of the few organizations which does have access is rare and highly valued.

## Transition to Civilian Life

While Hire Heroes USA has a sole focus on employment, the organization truly sees itself and its services as playing an integral role in enabling the successful transition of service members and veterans. Throughout the organization, leadership and staff demonstrated and articulated a holistic view of the transition process and identified employment (or lack thereof) as a preventive measure or catalyst for a host of other transition issues. Staff members noted the potential self-consciousness and vulnerability of transitioning service members during the job search process, unsure of their future, and the need to boost the veterans' self-confidence so that they could confidently apply for jobs and succeed in interviews, moving on to the next phases of their lives. Interestingly, multiple staff members used the term "ambassador" when describing their role and noted that the veterans they served were on a "journey".

These sentiments can best be summed up by the following comments by CEO Brian Stann: "When the transition fails, that's when veterans go off to dark places. When they go back home or they're out there alone, they leave, they're no longer in that recovery unit, their brothers and sisters are gone, they're on their own, they can't pay their bills, they don't have any responsibility anymore, their self-esteem goes down, and now we've got 22 veterans a day taking their own lives. I mean, it's unbelievable and then you've got substance abuse, alcoholism, and all these self-medicating ways to deal with the problems. A lot of those things go away when that transition is effective and you go from, 'Hey, here's my mission now' to 'Wow, I've got this whole new mountain to climb. I've got this new job,' — we all get excited for new opportunities. You get re-motivated, reinvigorated, and when you can create that for them and effectively have the transition, these other things go away. Their injuries no longer define them. Their combat deployments no longer define them. We run into a lot of veterans now that, you know, they haven't deployed in eight years but it's still all they talk about. It's what defines them. Every day they wear a different t-shirt about, 'Hey, I served so you should shut the F up,' and you know what I mean, this kind of thing. They haven't found anything else yet that they can grab onto. And there's nothing wrong with being proud of your service, that's great, but if the only thing that's going to define you is that you were a combat veteran, sometimes that can lead to a very narrow life in anger, that chip on your shoulder, and that effective transition can get rid of all of that and gain the perspective you need to live a great life. I mean, what we're ultimately trying to do is see these men and women through so they can live the American dream that they fought for."

## Social Connectedness

Hire Heroes USA's efforts to bridge the civilian-military divide occur on both sides – with their corporate stakeholders and with the veterans they are supporting. CEO Brian Stann described his extensive efforts to educate employers not only on the value of hiring veterans, but simply on understanding the military so that they can understand the life experiences and skill sets of the veterans they may be looking to hire. He describes a misperception that "It's not just storm the beach and run up the hill and scream at each other and have some fun, you know. And there's a lot of people who are just very unfamiliar with it or they watched movies like *The Hurt Locker* and they just have a completely skewed vision of what truly takes place." Rather, when speaking to corporate leadership, Mr. Stann describes the complex leadership environment of the military; the extensive planning processes required to execute operations; the high levels of responsibility placed on very junior members of the military; service members' willingness to make decisions in time constrained and high-pressure environments (which corporations note is lacking among their employees); and the ability to be good followers. While not advocating on behalf of a specific veteran for a specific job posting, Mr. Stann sees it as a core part of his mission to bridge this divide



between civilian employers' perceptions and the reality of the labor force that veterans represent.

On the other side of the divide, Hire Heroes USA Veteran Transition Specialists train their veterans to understand that the employment environment that they are about to walk into is culturally different from the military and they need to calibrate their expectations and behavior as such. They explain to veterans what stereotypes their new colleagues may have of them and give them strategies to break down these potential barriers – shake hands with your fellow employees, invite them to lunch, get to know them as people, “because then all of a sudden you’re not going to be the new veteran, the new Soldier or Marine or Sailor that they just brought on board. You’re going to be Tom.” It is made clear to the transitioning veterans that the responsibility to bridge the divide is a two-way street, and that the veterans themselves must make an intentional effort to integrate themselves into their new company and get to know their new colleagues or they will not be successful.

### Veteran Programming Differentiation

Among varying cohorts of veterans served, Veteran Transition Specialists have identified different sets of concerns or attitudes when entering the workforce. Veteran Transition Specialist Spencer Milo noted that more senior veterans – senior non-commissioned officers or senior officers – tend to have high expectations regarding the value that civilian employers will place on their military experience. These veterans expect that that they will be able to select employment opportunities at will, Milo says, whereas in reality they most often must learn to translate their skills and sell themselves just like the majority of other veterans in the market. In contrast, some veterans in this cohort are worried about their age, specifically that they will be judged unfairly by a younger hiring manager. Additionally, junior enlisted members have an opposite set of concerns surrounding their level of experience and education, and are often concerned about their lack of a college degree. Among military specialties, those with combat specialties rather than technical or logistical skillsets have greater difficulty translating their skills and experiences to civilian employers, though they have robust planning, analysis, and leadership skills to offer. Another cohort is veterans with disabilities. VTS's sometimes find that these veterans have spent a considerable amount of time during their recovery in an environment and culture where they have been treated in such a manner as to develop a sense of entitlement which needs to be addressed to help their employability. A final differentiator applying to all veteran cohorts is that many veterans joined military service either right out of high school or right out of college and therefore have no experience searching for or applying for jobs. Not only are these veterans transitioning into a new civilian culture, but they may be ending a 20-year career and entering an employment landscape which is completely foreign to them, which their civilian peers would have begun to learn to navigate when they were 18 years old.

Additionally, Hire Heroes USA's Veteran Transition Specialists have learned that certain employment opportunities are a better fit for veterans than others – and that these opportunities are the ones which mirror the military's career progression systems. Where veterans are used to entering an organization with a set of basic training, then progressing through the ranks of that organization by receiving advanced training at each step, corporations which offer an onboarding and training process, along with iterative training throughout a veteran's career tend to be a good fit for HHUSA's veterans. Likewise, where in the military a veteran would be welcomed to a new military post by a sponsor or sponsor family, helping him or her get acquainted to the new unit, veterans perform best in organizations with veteran affinity groups with similar processes to integrate them into the company. Finally, veterans tend to have a sense of service and pride, and tend to perform best in a team-oriented environment, so HHUSA tries to identify

opportunities which foster similar sentiments or opportunities, or at least help veterans understand when applying for job openings which may make them feel isolated or disconnected from a mission, that they should have that expectation moving forward.

Finally, one unique differentiator in serving veterans with regard to employment preparation (though this seems evident across service provision categories studied) is the need to develop trust with the veteran served. This issue arises particularly when deciding what type of candidates to hire, because the right Veteran Transition Specialist will be able to establish legitimacy with veterans where others cannot. CEO Brian Stann describes his thought process regarding hiring as such: “I can’t just grab a recent college grad who’s really, really smart and then put them on the phone or put them right next to a veteran, because you have to have some life to share with them. You have to have overcome some adversity...They have to have walked a mile in those shoes to have things to share with that veteran...I want people who have been through the wringer a little bit...so they can, you know, when they have a veteran who’s on the phone with them or sitting in front of them saying, like, hey, well, you know, these are some of my barriers to employment, I’ve got this traumatic brain injury, I’ve got this or that, they can share with them their own life experiences, because again it’s not just an instructor/student relationship, it’s an actual personal relationship to get this veteran who may have trust issues to trust them and believe in what they’re saying...Every time we do a workshop on a base, initially a lot of the veterans walk in and say, okay, you know, they’ve been to something like this before and they’re kind of doubtful. First class is over and they’re all a little surprised, well, wait a minute, nobody’s ever talked to us like that, nobody’s ever said it like that, and all of a sudden the buy-in starts to happen.”

### Media

Hire Heroes USA has a pro bono relationship with the advertising agency JWT, as well as WWE (World Wrestling Entertainment, Inc.), which shows HHUSA’s advertisements during their TV show, *Monday Night Raw*. CEO Brian Stann is a former UFC (Ultimate Fighting Championship) fighter, and used to get free marketing during his fights as well. In addition to their television marketing, HHUSA also has a social media presence, and leverages Stann’s UFC social media presence.

Due to HHUSA’s limited capacity to serve veterans, however, Chief Operating Officer Nate Smith articulated a need to balance marketing for the sake of building brand recognition, fundraising, and articulating the case for hiring veterans, with the problem of creating too much demand for their services which the organization cannot handle: “We have avoided marketing campaigns because we don’t want a slew of veterans coming to us that we can’t help. But at the same time, there needs to be awareness out there so people identify that you’re an organization they want to fund.”

### Community Connectedness

Hire Heroes USA prides itself on its sole focus on employment and does not intend to fit within such an integrated service network as some of the other organizations being studied as part of this effort. However, at times their Veteran Transition Specialists do identify transition issues among the veterans they work with, and HHUSA is working to develop a more robust system to handle these challenges as they arise. HHUSA recently developed a relationship with Hope for the Warriors, which deals with post-traumatic stress and financial distress, and is beginning a process for referrals. Additionally, HHUSA recently hired a recovery care coordinator to put together a “playbook” of organizations to refer their veterans to in case they have other needs outside of HHUSA’s employment focus. That said, CEO Brian

Stann emphasizes that, “We’re going to stay narrowly focused because a lot of times what happens with nonprofits and the reason they go out of business so quickly is they try to accomplish all these things and they’re not really that good at any of them...You know, we should also do this. We should help them with this...You know, look, guys, we’re Hire Heroes USA, let’s help them get jobs. Let’s be really good at this. Let’s become experts at this and that’s what we’re going to focus on because it cures a lot of these other problems.”

### Reintegration with Family

Regarding the issues of family, the only relevance to Hire Heroes USA’s work is the fact that spouses are also eligible for services according to HHUSA’s website and mission. However, spouses were not mentioned once throughout the visit – all discussion was focused on veterans.

### Women Veteran Efforts

When asked about the concerns of women veterans versus male veterans, it was clear that no particular focus or emphasis is placed on women as compared to any other demographic within HHUSA’s population served.

## 4. Key Learnings and Reflections

### Catalysts of Impact

A major strength of Hire Heroes USA is its use of Salesforce. Since its inception, HHUSA has been using the customer relations software, which has enabled a robust and thorough use of data throughout its programming, as well as enabled the maintenance of longer-term relationships with HHUSA’s veterans. Each veteran is coded based on their progress through HHUSA’s program and each contact with that veteran is recorded. Confirmed hires are recorded, and post-hire surveys are conducted to determine veteran satisfaction with services provided. This thorough use of data not only gives the organization the ability to articulate its impact to potential funders, but helps the organization calibrate its services based on negative feedback from veterans served, and creates a culture of accountability among staff members. Years of data has been used to calculate benchmarks for Veteran Transition Specialists against which performance is measured and bonus pay is offered for exceptional outcomes. This database empowers outreach specialists to follow-up with veterans months or years after services are provided, simply to check on the veteran and see if they need any further assistance. This powerful tool allows HHUSA to measure success, identify inefficiency, articulate need to funders, and set goals for the future, in a way that most other organizations we have seen are incapable of.

A second strength, cited by all in the organization as their major differentiator from any potential peer organizations, is their highly personalized approach. In the words of CEO Brian Stann, “The reason why no one else can match us in the numbers and the efficiencies is because they won’t put in the effort. When you’ve got a guy like Spencer Milo on the ground like we were just a day ago in D.C. helping veterans, and you have someone who has never written a resume before in their life and you’re willing to sit down next to that person for eight hours and go line by line breaking down the trust barriers, developing a relationship out of thin air, and pulling out the abilities to skills and the talents of that veteran and putting it on paper in a language that they can understand and an employer can understand, it turns a light bulb on in that veteran. All of a sudden the confidence starts to build slowly but surely. That’s important, but nobody else is willing to do it because it’s exhausting.” Both COO Nate Smith and Director of Finance

Allison Herbst described a time earlier in the organization's history before HHUSA instituted the weekly cap on registrations, and they both felt that the quality of service suffered. Each cited the decision to cap registrants and focus on quality over quantity as a major turning point in the success of the organization, and it is clear among all staff members that quality is a point of pride. Likewise, at the time of her interview, Director of Corporate Relations and Communications Kelly Dempsey had recently been hired from her position at the USO, where she was part of the decision to select HHUSA as a "best in class" organization; she cited this strong focus on quality as a major differentiating factor which played into that decision. This differentiating, trust-building process should be placed in the context of service provision not only as quality service, but quality veteran-specific service.

Finally, as described above, Hire Heroes USA has a unique perspective on human capital and is highly selective regarding who it is willing to hire to be a Veteran Transition Specialist, particularly due to the personal model of the services the organization provides to its veterans. CEO Brian Stann cited his desire for mature, seasoned employees who can relate to the struggles a transitioning service member looking for work may be enduring, and Manager of Veteran Programs James McGuire cited his practice of mandating that a 500-word essay be included in application materials as a demonstration of an applicant's commitment to the Hire Heroes USA mission. This commitment to hiring quality, committed employees is critical to ensuring the delivery of HHUSA's intended impact.

### Barriers to Impact

A common challenge for any high-quality organization in the veterans' space is how to build an effective communications strategy and brand which enables the organization to rise above the 46,000 others. This is particularly challenging in the employment space for an organization like Hire Heroes USA, as so many organizations of such varying levels of quality have such similar names (i.e. Hero2Hired, Hire a Hero, Operation Hire Our Heroes, Hire America's Heroes, etc.). Referencing the challenge of reaching the military community, Director of Corporate Relations and Communications Kelly Dempsey stated, "Do they even know that Hire Heroes exists? If they've had a poor experience with an organization that has a similar name, we don't want them confusing us with that organization that isn't able to provide the level of service that we're able to." This challenge – building the brand – was echoed by CEO Brian Stann and COO Nate Smith, but at this point in the organization's life cycle, it seems counter to the organization's interests to change the name. Likewise, as mentioned above, due to the limited capacity but high quality of the organization, the organization seeks to expand the brand (and therefore attract funders to build organizational capacity to serve more veterans). Doing so, however, also raises concerns about garnering too much attention, which would attract a large swathe of veterans whom HHUSA does not currently have the capacity to serve, and whom it therefore risks alienating.

A second challenge Hire Heroes USA faces relates to its corporate relations strategy. While the organization has established a job board and has several thousand vetted companies already involved, it admits that this board is not an effective tool for its veterans at this point. Organizational leadership, Veteran Transition Specialists, and the corporate relations team all expressed frustration at the notion that corporate leadership makes hiring commitments but that these do not filter down to those making hiring decisions, so veterans ultimately do not get hired. Additional frustration arises when HHUSA links veterans with opportunities, veterans do not get hired, and HHUSA rarely, if ever, gets feedback from the company as to what went wrong in the process or what they could do differently in the future.

A final challenge, articulated by COO Nate Smith, is talent retention. While HHUSA's hiring strategy seeks mature, seasoned individuals with life experience to match that of the veterans served, these mature individuals are also comfortable with responsibility and autonomy and capable of progressing in the organization. Unfortunately, at the organization's current size, there are not many opportunities for upward mobility. In COO Nate Smith's words, "We've got extremely ambitious and motivated people, and they want success now...They want to grow their impact, and we just don't have a good plan right now or career tracks for people in our internal organization. That's one of the things we have to develop to retain this top talent that is making us so effective...I don't need everyone to be a leader. I need people to sit down with ten veterans per week and get them jobs...It's like, 'All right. I need you to do this for a year-and-a-half to two years.' So that's our challenge." With future growth plans, there could be potential leadership opportunities on the horizon, but as of now, this will continue to be a challenge.

### Ongoing Efforts to Enhance Impact

At the organization's current size and scale, the next area of focus for improvement is the corporate relations team. Having (seemingly unsuccessfully) experimented with the model of culling their Salesforce database for veterans to match to job postings, HHUSA continues to search for ways to improve connections between the veterans it serves and the companies it partners with. It is clear that a culture of feedback and improvement pervades HHUSA, and there is a strong desire to spread this to the organization's relationships with its partner companies in order to improve services. Additionally, in the long-term, HHUSA would like to offer high-touch training for corporate HR departments akin to that which it provides for veterans, in order to break down stigmas and demonstrate the value of veterans. Finally, HHUSA understands that it needs to reform its pricing model for corporate partnerships, as it currently has a "one size fits all" model, which does not adequately capture potential revenue.

Hire Heroes USA has ambitious growth plans. The organization is able to track how many veterans it turns away every week and therefore knows exactly how many VTS's it would need to hire in order to meet current demand, so it brings this proposal to funders seeking to fill this need. In the long-term, however, Hire Heroes USA believes that it provides a service that is so valuable to transitioning service men and women that it could scale large enough to serve the entire transitioning population and replace the federal government's TAP contractor, which it believes is inefficient and lacks impact. CEO Brian Stann and COO Nate Smith both cited a staff size of 800 as the ideal staff size to be able to serve this population, with an annual budget of \$62M.