

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

Case Study:

*Veterans Enterprise Training & Services Group
(VETS Group)*



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.



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Veterans Enterprise Training & Services Group (VETS Group)

1. Organizational Overview

History

The VETS Group was founded in 2004 as a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization by Joe Wynn to encourage and support entrepreneurial veterans, minorities, women, and persons with disabilities. Mr. Wynn, who continues to serve as President and Chief Executive Officer, looked at the need profile for these populations and saw a need for entrepreneurship training; information, advice, and advocacy regarding veterans working within the federal procurement process; and technical skill development to support improved employment outcomes. Although the support for small business development and the advocacy components continue, the VETS Group has shifted its focus largely to technical skills education to better prepare those veterans who have limited formal training or certifications to document their military experience, and have the commitment to learn. The organization's services are provided in a downtown DC location convenient to the DC Metro public transportation system, but the group is also considering acquiring a new location with free parking and additional space for new kinds of training that requires large equipment, as well as possibly day care and temporary housing for veterans coming from out of the area, as well as for those in transition from homelessness.

The VETS Group is designed to provide a range of services for veterans and their families, as well as non-veteran community members in need because of limited resources, unemployment, and other challenging life circumstances. The VETS Group's services are veteran-centric but not veteran exclusive, with only a few exceptions. Today, the major focus of the services provided by the VETS Group is assisting participants with finding employment, training or re-training, continuing education, and the requisite related services that support these efforts. Most notably, the VETS Group provides training and certification testing in information technology systems (IT), cyber-security, cell phone tower refitting, (tower climbing), pre-apprenticeship bus maintenance, and is looking toward establishing training in solar and other energy retrofits, as well as physical security. In support of future program development, the VETS Group's staff connects and networks with corporations and other non-profits in the area to gather information about near and long-term trends in employment and training programs to support the diverse needs of the populations that the VETS Group serves.

Additionally, the VETS Group offers education and mentoring in personal finance, resume-writing and other employment soft skills, job placement services, networking opportunities and referrals to employers, Small Business Administration (SBA) programs and support, small business development,

networking, and connections to other service providers in the community. The VETS Group maintains both a Board of Directors and an Advisory Board; the former directs the operations of the organization; both provide mentoring and guidance to support the organization's growth and impact; and the latter also advocates for veterans issues.

Mission Statement

The mission of the VETS Group is to serve military veterans and underserved adult populations in the Washington, DC metropolitan area with holistic services that support education, employment, small business development, and life success.

Organizational Structure

Management and Executive Staff include Joe Wynn, President and Chief Executive Officer, Rhonda Smith, Program Director, and Eddie Jones, Director of Veteran Services and Community Outreach. A small full- and part-time staff of approximately 15 people support the day-to-day operations of the organization including teaching classes, supporting administrative duties, and conducting military outreach, enrollment, networking, marketing, event planning, programming support, assisting veterans and others with finding and accessing resources, and care for the facilities and equipment.

Because the leadership team and staff is small, and the number of participants receiving services is growing, staff members contribute to multiple functions at the organization based on their areas of expertise and connections to the community. Each individual comes to the VETS Group with a broad spectrum of experiences, both in military service and in the private sector. By staffing the facility with veterans, there is a level of authenticity and trust that can develop between the staff and those they serve. A peer-to-peer service orientation has been shown to enhance transition for veterans into the community.

In order to access more resources, the leadership team seeks opportunities to partner with organizations and corporations that are also interested in serving veterans and that have facilities or human resources to share. These connections also bring greater recognition of the needs and challenges facing veterans, the skills and strengths that they bring to the workforce, the training and development of individuals that takes place at the VETS Group, and the potential benefits to employers who hire them.

Board of Directors

A board of seven members, mostly small business owners, community leaders, and veterans, is led by Joe Wynn who serves as board president, and has the responsibility to grow the networking opportunities for the organization, direct the overall functioning and plans for future growth, and maintain oversight of the organization's fiscal responsibilities.

Advisory Board

This board is comprised of individuals with extensive business and entrepreneurial expertise, and connections to other organizations, agencies, and businesses in the community. Their primary function is to mentor others as needed, especially veterans who are working to establish or grow their own businesses, and to advise the VETS Group leadership on current business and employment trends, funding opportunities, and strategic partnerships. They also participate in VETS Groups events, find guest speakers and support the exchange of information in the community. They publicize and market the services provided by the VETS Group, and work to identify and recruit others to support its work.

Programming

Since its founding, the VETS Group has developed a skillset of identifying gaps in the local workforce and providing training to veterans and community members to fill that need. Whether at their Washington facility or out in the field, the VETS Group provides a suite of training which creates job-ready veterans, often directly linking them with employers at the conclusion of their training. Veterans can use their GI Bill or Vocational Rehabilitation funding to pay for VETS Group services and testing.

The VETS Group facility in downtown Washington serves as an employment skills training facility, heavily focused in information technology programs, which are focused around CompTIA and Cisco. VETS Group leadership reports that they are the only veteran-centric Cisco Networking Academy on the East Coast. Veterans and community members may take the courses listed below after taking and passing a basic computer assessment, or taking an introduction to computers class if needed. VETS Group leadership proudly stated that their suite of training could take a participant from novice to certified technician, who is job-ready at the completion of their coursework:

- Administering and Maintaining Windows 7 (MTA/MCTS)
- IT Essentials (CompTIA A+)
- Cisco Certified Entry Network Technician (CCENT)
- Cisco Certified Network Associate (CCNA)

VETS Group is also a Certified Testing Center. This means that students can take classes, prepare for their certification and the test, and then take the exam all in one facility. They are qualified with Castle and Pearson VUE, two of the largest testing administrators and authorities in the country. While this training is offered to all members of the community, classes are predominantly comprised of veterans.

The Federal Department of Transportation (DOT), in conjunction with the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA), has provided grant funding for veterans only to participate in a pre-apprenticeship bus maintenance program known as TransitWorks. This program not only prepares students to learn bus maintenance, but also serves as an entrance to employment at WMATA and may provide a bridge to other kinds of jobs at the transit authority in Washington, DC, such as elevator and escalator maintenance, bus operator, and a variety of administrative jobs. One veteran who also completed the IT coursework was hired as a control room supervisor for WMATA.

The VETS Group also recruits and enrolls veterans in the Certified Tower Program, a series of courses that prepare individuals for employment as a Tower Technician or related jobs in the telecommunications industry. Before the boom in wireless communications, tower climbers were mostly construction workers with some training in how to work at extreme heights. As the communications field has grown and technology has changed, the need for a specialized workforce specifically trained to safely and efficiently climb 200+ foot towers and convert equipment from 3G to 4G has grown accordingly. Industry analysts estimate that over the next seven years, over 87,000 towers will be converted to 4G capacity. VETS Group leadership reported that, in the past, training and safety protocols used in construction were not adequate to protect workers in such extreme conditions and tower climbing became one of the most dangerous jobs in the United States. With training and equipment provided by VETS Group and in conjunction with the nation's largest cellular providers, safety has improved and a new job niche for a specialized work

force has emerged, which VETS Group graduates readily fill.

Veterans and community members may enroll in this course which, when successfully completed, certifies that they have met all federal and industry standards for training as a Tower Climber, as developed by the National Association of Tower Erectors (NATE) and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). This is a 5-week, forty-hour per week course. Within the program there is training leading to certification in Cardio-pulmonary Resuscitation (CPR), and OSHA safety certifications. Support from companies in this industry has allowed the VETS Group to enlist teachers and equipment for training, and successful graduates of this program have broad employment options, job security, and competitive compensation. The demand for Tower Climbers to convert cell phone towers to up-to-date specifications is greater than the available, trained and certified workforce, so the employment outlook is promising.

In addition to its traditional employment education programs, the VETS Group also provides self-employment (entrepreneurship) education, federal procurement training, employment assistance, financial literacy, and other supportive services primarily for veterans, people with disabilities and persons of limited means. They host events both at their facility and at the facilities of partners, such as networking events, small business informational events with state, local, and federal agencies, and educational events led by volunteers with pertinent expertise. The VETS Group has also worked through the Task Force for Veterans Entrepreneurship to host events and exhibit at conferences. By participating with the Task Force, the VETS Group has been able to provide oversight to the implementation of procurement process legislation designed to benefit veteran small business owners in DC and across the country. For example, the VETS Group hosts business card exchanges, provides information about procurement opportunities by maintaining a contact database and notification system, hosts the viewing of films and discussions about topics of interest to those preparing to enter the workplace or to develop a small business, and arranges discussions with leaders from corporations to better inform them about the benefits of hiring veterans. Finally, they reach out to veterans outside of the DC area with video conferencing and by hosting information sessions at military or Department of Defense facilities around the country.

Veteran Populations Served

VETS Group staff made it clear that their mission is best served by providing help to those who need it most, regardless of their life circumstances. Since the staff is comprised of veterans from different branches of service, different service eras, and serving at different ranks, they are able to relate to a wide range of veterans. The common denominator is that they serve veterans in need of support in order to overcome challenges to their future success in life and the workforce.

The VETS Group serves primarily Vietnam and post-9/11 veterans, although all veterans, their families, and non-veteran community members in need are all welcome. The only training program that is for veterans only is the WMATA bus maintenance program and this is based on the specifications of the DOT grant that funds the project. The majority of the veteran enrollees are E-1 through E-6 enlisted ranks, but officers are also welcome, and some do enroll. Veterans with disabilities are accommodated and encouraged to receive services. Women do not attend in the same numbers as men, but it was noted several times during the interviews that women veterans have had a very successful track record in the IT classes, but take the certification tests at a lower rate than men. Minorities make up a large segment of the community and are represented similarly in the programming.

While broadly, VETS Group seeks to open its programs to all veterans and community members in need, there are some enrollment criteria for specific programs. One program manager, for example, explained that for the IT programs, the organization conducts a Cisco computer assessment for placement purposes. Additionally, VETS Group would prefer candidates to have a GED or high school diploma, but would be willing to use junior instructors to assist anyone who does not have this credential. To date, no one has enrolled without a high school diploma or equivalent.

Funding Sources and Strategies

Corporate funding, in-kind donations such as pro bono expert instructors, mentors, materials, and equipment, federal funds offered through grants, and private donations make up the majority of the funding for programming that is not covered by tuition, which is paid either out-of-pocket or through VA (GI Bill or Vocational Rehabilitation) funding. Funding strategies include outreach and awareness activities in the community, leveraging current partners and board members' contacts, and follow-up with program graduates after they are employed. Each successfully-employed graduate represents an opportunity to connect with an employer who can see the benefits first hand of this kind of supportive training, and who may be more likely to support or mentor others enrolled in the program, donate, or employ others from the program in the future.

Staying ahead of the trends in employment and technology enables the VETS Group to plan courses that will be attractive to students and to make connections with the employers who will be looking for qualified applicants. The staff devotes time to researching these trends and reaching out to technology and industry leaders to forge relationships that help them support new programming. One example offered was the projected trend in installation of solar panels, which VETS Group would like to respond to through offering training to ensure that local employers come to the organization to seek a readily-accessible and qualified workforce.

2. Measurement and Data Supporting Effectiveness & Impact

Types of Data Routinely Collected

The VETS Group has been collecting data on how many students enroll in IT and other program classes since 2012, monitoring students as they progress through the program, and intervening if a student encounters challenges or threats to continued enrollment, if the student is willing to receive help.

Since 2012, when the current Program Director arrived as an employee, 148 veterans and non-veterans enrolled and graduated from the IT program. Upon graduation, however, for a variety of reasons not all students complete the certification testing process. Some eventually take the tests when it becomes evident that they need the certification for employment. Interviewees speculated that some graduates lacked the confidence to take the certification exams (women at a higher rate compared to men, according to the program director), that some felt that they could not afford them, although the VETS Group arranged for financial assistance, and that some may have procrastinated.

It was noted during the site visit that of all the veterans certified through the IT program since data was recorded, 60% were placed in jobs in the IT industry. Discussions indicated that there were many reasons for not placing 100% of their graduates and this information was kept in an anecdotal form. Everyone in the tower climbing program was reported to have access to a job if they wanted a job, because the

industry is severely understaffed and the certification and training provided at the VETS Group are recognized by employers as high quality. As described earlier, this field is growing and companies from all over the east coast are calling the VETS Group to find possible employees. It is the hope of the VETS Group to bring on a recently retired Colonel with excellent experience in the telecommunications field to support this program and possibly expand it. With more space, a new practice tower, and training in related jobs that do not require climbing, it is estimated that they could go from 15 to 60 trainees graduating each session.

VETS Group staff also records the outcomes of recruitment efforts. In 2013, there were many referrals, and staff members also attended job fairs, with approximately 75% of these, veteran-centric. They also visit Transition Offices (TAP), and use Recruit Military and Monster websites.

It also became evident in discussions that statistics regarding wages earned by graduates of the VETS Group classes served an important incentive for possible enrollees, and motivator for those currently in classes to continue to completion and certification. The program manager explained that Cisco can provide charts with expected wages based on levels of certification.

At this point in time at the VETS Group, additional data seemed to be based on institutional knowledge more than a database or tracking system. The program manager also reported how vital it is to stay in touch with graduates and employers after they are hired, and to market their graduates and courses via networking. By staying in touch with employers, the staff knows who may be hiring in the future, career progressions of their graduates, and can mentor recent hires experiencing difficulties to make sure they are successful. All of these activities are time consuming for a small staff.

Throughout the GWBI site visit, it was evident that the data collection process of outcome and impact data was being updated and was not yet fully implemented. It was also explained that with a small staff, each person had responsibility for a variety of tasks and that the group was still determining the best use of time and scarce human resources.

Data Analysis and Reporting

Because data collection processes are still being developed and implemented at the VETS Group, regular data analysis and reporting is informal and reported to the Executive staff and Board members as needed for trend monitoring, budgeting, and logistical planning only. The VETS Group has not undertaken a scientific evaluation of their impact as of 2014.

How data are used for getting to impact

Outcome data such as enrollment and graduation rates (which are reported to be close to or at 100%) are recorded to track students' progress through VETS Group programming. Data regarding impact such as employment status, the relationship of the job to the coursework, and length of employment and advancement, have been collected anecdotally. VETS Group is incentivized to stay in touch with recent graduates who have also been employed and to assist or mentor them through any early difficulties transitioning to employment in the public sector, as positive outcome data – formal or anecdotal – drives future impact through the ability to articulate the value of VETS Group programming to interested employers. If employers find the quality and preparedness of VETS Group's candidates to be dependably high, they are more likely to contact the Program Director when they have openings. The program director

explained:

“The two reasons why I stay in touch with [the newly employed graduates] are, one, if it’s not working I don’t want to know about it when you quit or when they fired you...So let’s stay in touch. I have a young lady right now who was hired. They’re paying her \$17 an hour, and they sponsored her for secret clearance. She hates it...my advice to her, ‘Don’t make a move. Don’t do anything. Stay there six months, because now you started. You’re going to look like a job-hopper.’...So now, I have to educate her...So if it gets to be too bad, I’ll educate the employer because I don’t have a problem doing that. The second reason why is because the students that I place this year, they’re going to hire my students next year because they’re going to be in a place to hire. If I don’t stay in touch with them, I won’t know that.”

VETS Group staff members also keep records describing what veterans are interested in learning, and then match this with information on available supportive services they might need while training as well as employment services that they may need in the future.

Formal Evaluation Activities (internal and external)

No formal evaluation activities were underway at the time of this visit.

3. Strategic Themes

Employment and Education

As described above, the mission of the VETS Group is to educate, prepare, and assist veterans and non-veterans in need, to enroll them in programs that will qualify them for employment, and mentor them as needed to create a positive and productive process and outcome for each individual. Throughout GWBI site visit, a recurrent theme was the need for support and a welcoming, personalized approach to transitioning individuals to employment. With small classes, an open door policy, and a small, mission-driven staff, most of whom are also veterans, the VETS Group is positioned to recognize common roadblocks, and to welcome individuals who are seeking help but who are still unsure about their capacity to follow through to graduation.

Mentoring and coordination of employment services by VETS Group staff was reported as a major activity and critical to supporting enrollees from their first visit to the facility through employment and for some, even after they are employed. Throughout this process, the VETS Group follows up with both employers and employees to support the veteran’s transition to the civilian workplace and perhaps a new field, and to continue to educate employers about simple accommodations that may make a veteran more productive.

In addition to working with the veterans themselves, VETS Group continually seeks to identify new opportunities within the labor market where there will be gaps in the workforce that its trainees can fill. As one staff member explained, “[We] try to look at the labor markets and what kind of opportunities are hot and create programs that will be producing available jobs for vets.” Upon identification of these gaps, VETS Group develops training to best position their clients to fill needed slots in the nation’s workforce. One example previously discussed was VETS Group’s provision of Tower Climber training to help

modernize the nation's cell phone infrastructure. Next on the horizon is a response to the need to modernize the nation's energy infrastructure: because of recent federal legislation encouraging energy efficiency and the move of all federal facilities to 20% off the energy grid, the VETS Group has determined that expertise in the retrofits and new energy systems is a good fit for veterans seeking employment. The organization is currently engaging with experts in the field who provide training programs in photovoltaic technologies, learning about industry standards, and potentially developing a strategy to prepare veterans to work in this field. A less innovative but equally relevant approach with regard to adept analysis of the local labor market, VETS Group is also considering a training program in physical security for enterprises such as the new casino in Baltimore, Maryland, and the MGM National Harbor Complex in Prince George's County, Maryland. VETS Group leadership believe that the demand for casino security is second only to that of nuclear power plants.

Relationship building with employers is also important to dispel misinformation about veterans. A staff member explained, "There is a conceptual view that vets are well cared for – in this community there is a sense that vets are taken care of well by DoD – why would vets be homeless, need healthcare, need education – why is a vet still unemployed?" The staff member went on to explain that sometimes supportive services to help them successfully complete a degree or a certification are lacking – not all have enough resources to make it through a program.

VETS Group President Joe Wynn explained that while there may be misinformation abounding about hiring veterans, many people already know about the strengths that veterans bring to the workplace. "There is a cost/benefit value here because people know at vets are taught to complete a mission and get it done well, on time." If there is concern about hiring a veteran and not knowing if post-traumatic stress is an issue for that person – the staff helps to educate employers by explaining how to help the veteran assimilate with simple accommodations, and that mental health challenges are highly prevalent in the general population, though not nearly as stigmatized as those found among veterans. Acknowledging the reality of PTS, TBI, anxiety, depression, and other challenges veterans face, VETS Group leaders note that these issues can be overcome, often with little accommodation, and that with a high density of military connected residents, the DC metropolitan area is culturally well-suited for integrating returning veterans and accommodating any potential challenges.

In order to support veteran hiring, the VETS Group reaches out to employers who advertise or claim in their own collateral that they support the employment of veterans to determine exactly how they accomplish this and to carry this message of veteran strength and ability of reintegration. It may be that the leaders at the very top of the organization believe in giving preference to veterans or in reaching out to engage veterans as employees, but this message does not filter down to middle managers who do most of the hiring of entry level or mid-level employees. The VETS Group believes that it is important to educate employers, but they also seek a balance in how they use scarce resources. They may save time and energy by working with those employers who have the track record that matches their messaging about hiring veterans.

Finally, long-term, the VETS Group seeks to expand its operation to become the first Veterans Training Academy, a multi-functional operation that prepares veterans in a wide range of fields, not just IT and telecommunications. This would involve investing in an additional property with greater training facilities, as well as potentially transitional housing to facilitate the training and employment of homeless veterans.

Transition to Civilian Life

As veterans transition from the military to civilian life, and especially as they seek employment in the private sector, they may have many needs. First and foremost, they need a paycheck to meet the needs that were met by the military before their transition. Although military life is demanding in many ways, the veteran has to become re-accustomed to planning for their own basic needs. Without a steady income, it is nearly impossible for a veteran to attend to all other pressing issues in their life. Although benefits may pay for coursework, veterans still may need help arranging for the right courses to make use of the experiences they already have, that they can get to while still holding down a job and caring for family members.

For veterans who do not find employment or who have health and/or substance abuse issues, family stressors, or who are alone, intermittent homelessness, lack of transportation, and access to a computer can stop them in their tracks. The VETS Group recognizes the need to meet veterans where ever they are in their trajectory toward civilian life. They help veterans with free access to a computer, referrals to other organizations, churches, and government resources for housing, food, and transportation. Some veterans need help as simple as learning the proper protocols of life in an office. Knowing how to dress, communicate, and address others when not in a military setting can present a subtle but important challenge to crossing the military–civilian divide.

An important issue for veterans desiring to work in the IT field is to have access to flexible coursework that makes the most of what they already know from their experiences in the military, but that fills in areas where they are inexperienced because of differences between the workplace training and military training. Many civilians working in IT prefer to enroll in “boot camps” for a just a weekend to prepare for certification tests, since many have direct experiences at work with the technology. However, many veterans may have worked in similar capacities or in situations that developed a talent for IT work, but not the direct experience necessary to prepare for certification. Therefore, a veteran-centric IT training setting, complete with easy access to testing, is important for veterans to compete in the marketplace.

The personal, peer-to-peer attention and guidance is also important to help veterans navigate the soft skills necessary for the workplace, as well as the confidence-building and security that having all services in one place can provide.

Social Connectedness

Others who enter with their basic needs met, often still need guidance in how to prepare for an interview, workplace etiquette, and how to plan their career. Veterans come to the civilian workplace with many skills and character strengths, but may need some help in how to parlay those strengths into tangible benefits to their employer and themselves. Because the staff members are also veterans, they get to know the participants, and they stay in touch with them once employed, they are able to help the veteran’s transition from the military culture to the private sector’s protocols. In this way, VETS Group helps to bridge the civilian-military divide through easing the transition into the workplace. They help veterans understand the new norms and cultures they are about to experience in the workplace so that they can better integrate.

Veteran Programming Differentiation

The needs of the veterans determine the differentiation of services rather than the programming itself, most of which is set according to industry standards for safety and quality, preparation for testing and the process of meeting certification standards. However, in discussing differences among various cohorts of veterans (age, gender, service era, disability status, etc.) the staff offered a few generalizations, emphasizing that they let the needs of each veteran drive the delivery of services. Staff found that the greatest need for support and education lie among the lower enlisted and youngest veterans – E1 to E6 and/or 20 to 24 years old – as well as minorities and women. Regarding the population the VETS Group serves, some older veterans and some officers have experience in the IT arena, and some may have college degrees, but lack the necessary IT certifications for employment, and thus seek services from the organization. Additionally, the high cost of living in the DC area is cited as a significant factor in heightening the challenges VETS Group clients face.

Within the population served, and the broader veteran population in the DC area, demographics are still dominated by veterans from the Vietnam and Korean conflicts, though the VETS Group serves all veterans in the same programming. As one staff member notes, “From our perspective, we really look at folks as just being veterans.” VETS Group staff members stated that in “DC proper”, many veterans seeking services are those who never understood their benefits and need support to identify and apply for these benefits – and help them get back on track or to achieve a measure of success beyond what they have already achieved, whereas in Northern Virginia one would be more likely to encounter more OEF and OIF veterans.

It was determined that some people need more time than others to complete courses and to get certified, and the VETS Group offers encouragement, help with finances, and other supports to get each student through. There is a Veterans Upward Bound program for those who would benefit, and the VETS Group staff members refer students to other organizations to receive services as needed.

Women Veteran Efforts

As described above, the VETS Group does not espouse segmenting services or the recipients of services based on categories but rather on the specific needs of the individual. The staff has learned to watch for signals indicating what kinds of services an individual is most likely to need and they are attentive to issues as they arise. Additionally, they are not bound by categories when placing individuals in employment situations. For example, they encourage women to pursue opportunities at WMATA even though there have been few women interested in bus maintenance, as they have helped them see this technical training as a bridge to other jobs with the organization.

A differentiator of note between female and male veterans, however, is that records show that although women have better grades in the IT and TransitWorks coursework than men, they are less likely to take their certification exams. Although several instructors offered that this was due to a lack of self-confidence, it was not clear what factors produced this outcome.

Media

The VETS Group makes efforts to communicate veterans’ success stories for several purposes. They reported that it is important to develop an understanding among employers about the positive attributes

veterans bring to an organization by publicizing data from companies that demonstrate how veterans outperform others. Because taking out their own ads in traditional marketing venues such as for-profit magazines and newspapers is expensive for a non-profit, they do not run such ads and must rely on media outlets' interest in reporting veteran success stories to get their message out. They also contribute to articles in GI JOBS magazine and US Veterans magazine to get the word out about hiring veterans and the services that they provide to facilitate employment. The staff posted information about the WMATA grant at two VA Centers and they were inundated with calls from veterans. LinkedIn has also been used with success. Mr. Wynn's ability to network with contacts with years of experience has helped connect with companies like Cisco and to get their help in publicizing the efforts of the VETS Group. One staff member summed up their approach to media and marketing by saying, "Marketing (here) is more about communications management."

Community Connectedness

Mr. Wynn estimated that at least 50% of the people who enter the facility require support beyond the need for training, and that must be managed in order for education and employment to be successful. Staff explained that for some participants who enter the VETS Group building, they are there first and foremost to find a safe space – a respite while they investigate their options. The staff does not turn anyone away, and as long as rules are followed, veterans and community members may use a computer, and get information about resources. Staff members often find that the unemployed or underemployed are hungry and need immediate assistance before they can take advantage of training. The staff refers those in need to resources in the community that best suit their needs, but they often rely on their own generosity to take care of the individual on the spot. Staff members may provide for any need – ranging from a sandwich, help affording transportation, or a book needed for a class – along with understanding and guidance to get the individual on a new trajectory, hopefully by taking advantage of veteran benefits that allow them to participate in the training offered at the VETS Group.

When necessary, the VETS Group works hard to connect their clients with other organizations in the community that offer the necessary resources. Mr. Wynn explained, "I talk to everyone – pastor, coach, employers, and other groups – non-profits. We need to collaborate and form some real alliances and get some synergy." He went on to explain that it is very important to access resources strategically. Although there are many organizations in the DC metropolitan area with resources, there must be coordination:

"Don't put a vet in supported housing without any sustainable income – employment – or they will be back next month for rent. Let's do this right – put them in temporary safe housing, get his health, substance abuse issue, etc., taken care of, ready to work, get the training, ready for a real job, then get the long-term housing."

The VETS Group also looks inward and determines what they can offer to support their primary mission of training, education and employment. They also reach out to educate the community through events, articles, and their network of contacts. For example, Mr. Wynn mentioned educating health care professionals about the needs of veterans, as many never ask patients if they are a veteran. Some veterans may need to drive to get to the training facility, but have no money and a car that breaks down. For many veterans, there are gaps in the supportive services that they can access for themselves and their families, such as daycare, in order to accomplish their training and education goals. This may not seem like a new problem to civilians, but newly transitioned veterans are leaving a system in which many of their needs

were provided for by the military. Living in a major metropolitan area like DC, the high cost of living can be shock for a returning veteran, and a veteran from another era who never accessed benefits or found a stable life will need supportive services to establish one. The VETS Group believes in doing whatever it takes to help veterans access multiple services for support while they are gaining the education they need to find employment.

Reintegration with Family

Reintegration with family is not a primary goal of the VETS Group, but all of those interviewed explained that educating veterans and helping them to find employment was a critical part of helping veterans who were having trouble at home. A repeated theme was the connectedness of all parts of a veteran's journey – without employment and the confidence that education brings, it is sometimes impossible to reintegrate with family. Therefore, the VETS Group takes what they describe as a holistic approach when mentoring and supporting a veteran. Coordination of services becomes critically important when a veteran needs access to multiple services at the same time in order to impact their future and the well-being of family members. Tuition help is not enough if transportation is an issue, or if the veteran is homeless. A veteran with a disability may need support from a family member caretaker, or a veteran who must care for a child or another member of their family may have difficulty attending class. In either case, family members may make the difference between the veteran being able to attend classes regularly or dropping out – and therefore becoming employable or remaining in their current situation. The VETS Group understands the interconnected nature of these issues and works to reduce barriers where possible.

Independent Sector Involvement

A large part of the VETS Group's activities involve the independent sector and developing and keeping strategic partnerships. Those interviewed reiterated the need to collaborate with others within the government, community and potential employers who have needs that can be met by well-prepared veterans.

4. Key Learnings and Reflections

Catalysts of Impact

Networking, peer-to-peer contact, and personal attention provided by the VETS Group makes it possible for almost all veterans who come to the VETS Group to succeed. Success usually comes in stages for veterans with many needs. First, informal counseling from the VETS Group staff keeps them motivated to complete their classes. Next, the staff teaches the soft skills necessary to complete a successful job search. Several of the staff members at the VETS Group have a broad network of colleagues and informal associations with professionals at other service organizations and businesses in the DC Metro area. They regularly match new graduates from their programs to the right person to help them find more stability in their lives by helping them find day care, housing, or transportation, or ultimately, an interview.

Next, the VETS Group is building a network of successful veterans in the workforce every time they place one of their graduates and stay in close contact with the veteran and the employer. The staff members at the VETS Group are veterans themselves which helps to establish a culture of one veteran helping another. As their graduates find employment and succeed, they become an additional resource as mentors, to give testimonials to Human Resource professionals or other business people interested in hiring veterans, and to hire veterans themselves when they rise to a position that allows for this.

Finally, the VETS Group maintains regular communications with employers for feedback on how well their program prepared VETS Group graduates, how the new hires are faring, to provide support for new hires, and to keep track of openings at the businesses.

One staff member described their strength as:

“Passion in the management here, and being central in DC, we are known in the community, we have a good understanding of what the vets need in the community, know how to use the VA systems – can talk to a vet and give him what he needs and [tell him or her] where the resources are.”

Perhaps the greatest strength of VETS Group is their active research of opportunities for veterans to receive training in fields in which there are more jobs than qualified applicants. They are investigating the possibility of adding a training program in renewable energy technologies to meet the need for specialists ready to make DoD installation upgrades. They are also working out the logistics necessary to accept a donation of a cell tower from Clark Construction so they can expand their tower certification training.

With a small staff, they find a balance between planning for expansion, managing current programs, networking in the community, and supporting each veteran and community member that comes to the VETS Group for new opportunities.

Barriers to Impact

Mr. Wynn described how the VETS Group is large enough to have an impact on the welfare of veterans in the DC area, but not large enough to be recognized by large corporations that they would like to partner with for additional resources, for example, SAIC, Lumina, or Blackstone. They use personal contacts to get their message heard, but they realize that they must improve their impact data collection and communication.

VETS Group leadership also discussed the need to collaborate with other organizations of similar size. Mr. Wynn posits that each small organization has different strengths and should be able to serve a veteran without the appearance of competition between organizations. It is inefficient for each organization to try to provide all the help a veteran needs, yet it is not easy to receive help from multiple sources.

The program director described the need for more space, and a location or multiple locations that would allow the VETS Group to reach a broader audience and expand the number of training programs offered. She would like to be able to better address the supportive services that many veterans need in order to thrive in training and the workplace such as child care, transportation, housing, responsive support and security for individuals suffering with post-traumatic stress, homelessness, or other situations that place them at-risk and that require an immediate response. She also described a need to better educate the community and employers that everything is not taken care of for veterans, and about how they can help veterans overcome obstacles and lead productive lives.

The staff described how the DC area is rich in non-profit organizations, supportive programs for veterans, and many people who want to work collaboratively to help others in need. This bounty can become

problematic when organizations are not incentivized by the design of grant requests for proposals to work together rather than in competition for grant funds or veterans to serve, or when veterans cannot receive resources from more than one source.

Ongoing Efforts to Enhance Impact

In support of its ongoing strategy of identifying potential employment avenues for its clients, the staff anticipates that the next big employment opportunity may be in the renewable energy industry. Congress has legislated that upgrades must be made to DoD facilities to make them more energy efficient. The VETS Group staff members are researching what kinds of jobs will be created, where, and the qualifications necessary for employment.

Today, three key staff members share the grant writing duties. In order to garner more support from corporations and other funders, the organization has discussed the need to have more data on both outcomes and impact. The VETS Group would benefit from a systematic collection of job placement data, retention of graduates in the field in which they received training, the retention of students through the completion of programs, and feedback from both veterans and employers using well-designed surveys, interviews, and focus groups. Once data is regularly collected, next steps would include a rigorous evaluation of the impact of the VETS Group's services for veterans compared to those with similar demographics, who do not receive their services. Although this would be costly and take substantial effort and time to complete, it would allow for a more compelling and efficient grant writing effort.

Finally, VETS Group leadership has a long history of advocacy on Capitol Hill and among the various federal agencies which serve veterans. One issue currently in contention is inconsistent compliance with the regulation that all government agencies must allocate 3% of all their procurement activities to veteran businesses. As such, VETS Group leaders are supporting the idea of an inter-agency task force to maintain accountability and help government agencies access veteran-run businesses.