



U.S. CHAMBER OF COMMERCE FOUNDATION

**Statement
of the
U.S. Chamber
of Commerce Foundation**

ON: *“What Can the Federal Government Learn from the Private Sector’s Successful Approach to Hiring Veterans?”*

TO: House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs

BY: Ross Cohen, Senior Director, Hiring Our Heroes, U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation

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The Foundation’s mission is to strengthen America’s long-term competitiveness by addressing developments that affect our nation, our economy, and the global business environment. USCCF presents a broad range of programs that promote a greater understanding of economic and public affairs issues.

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation (USCCF) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit affiliate of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce dedicated to strengthening America's long-term competitiveness by addressing developments that affect our nation, our economy, and the global business environment. USCCF presents a broad range of programs that promote a greater understanding of economic and public affairs issues.

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce is the world's largest business federation representing the interests of more than 3 million businesses of all sizes, sectors, and regions, as well as state and local chambers and industry associations. The Chamber is dedicated to promoting, protecting, and defending America's free enterprise system.

More than 96% of Chamber member companies have fewer than 100 employees, and many of the nation's largest companies are also active members. We are therefore cognizant not only of the challenges facing smaller businesses, but also those facing the business community at large.

Besides representing a cross-section of the American business community with respect to the number of employees, major classifications of American business—e.g., manufacturing, retailing, services, construction, wholesalers, and finance—are represented. The Chamber has membership in all 50 states.

The Chamber's international reach is substantial as well. We believe that global interdependence provides opportunities, not threats. In addition to the American Chambers of Commerce abroad, an increasing number of our members engage in the export and import of both goods and services and have ongoing investment activities. The Chamber favors strengthened international competitiveness and opposes artificial U.S. and foreign barriers to international business.

Positions on issues are developed by Chamber members serving on committees, subcommittees, councils, and task forces. Nearly 1,900 businesspeople participate in this process.

**BEFORE THE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS OF THE
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**“What Can the Federal Government Learn from the Private Sector’s
Successful Approach to Hiring Veterans?”**

**Testimony of Ross Cohen
Senior Director, Hiring Our Heroes, U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation**

Good morning, Chairman Miller, Ranking Member Michaud, and distinguished members of the Committee. My name is Ross Cohen and I am the senior director of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation’s Hiring Our Heroes program. Thank you for providing us with an opportunity to share our experience regarding successful approaches to hiring veterans and military spouses.

Since 2011, Hiring Our Heroes, a program of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, has worked aggressively to assist veterans, transitioning service members, and military spouses find meaningful employment opportunities. We knew from the beginning that our success hinged on two critical factors. First, local communities would be the cornerstone of any national program to reduce veterans’ unemployment. Second, we had to bring that local community together by working with a wide array of private and public sector partners. That community includes, but is not limited to, our partners in various federal agencies and local government, national and local businesses of all sizes, our vast network of local Chambers of Commerce, and other non-profit and private sector partners.

Over the last three years, we have seen significant improvement in the unemployment rates among veterans and military spouses. We are proud of the work that has been accomplished, but we have a long road ahead. With nearly 1.5 million service members set to transition in the next five years, as well as hundreds of thousands of military spouses, Hiring Our Heroes and our partners must be ready to answer that call and provide veterans and military spouses with the employment opportunities that they so richly deserve.

Background on Hiring Our Heroes

Hiring Our Heroes, a program of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, launched in March 2011 with a relatively simple mission: to assist veterans, transitioning service members, and military spouses in finding meaningful employment opportunities. Working with the U.S. Chamber of Commerce’s vast

network of state and local chambers and other strategic partners from the public, private, and nonprofit sectors, our goal was to create a movement across America in hundreds of communities where veterans and military families return every day.

Our initial efforts focused on hiring fairs throughout the United States. Since 2011, we have hosted more than 660 job fairs in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico. Thus far, more than 21,000 veterans and military spouses have been hired by employers - ready, able, and willing as a direct result of these hiring fairs.

Our hiring fairs also include employment workshops providing veterans and military spouses valuable job search skills like networking, writing their resume, and interviewing. Great companies like GE, University of Phoenix, and First Command, as well as non-profit partners like Goodwill Industries, have donated countless hours to providing expert training to more than 8,000 veterans and military spouses.

Recently, the Call of Duty Endowment (CODE) recognized Hiring Our Heroes for its hiring fairs and awarded it the first ever “Seal of Distinction”—an award program that highlights nonprofit organizations that have proven to be the most effective and efficient at placing veterans into high quality careers.

From our experience, the first step for employers is laying down the marker and making a commitment to hire veterans and military spouses. Together with Capital One, we launched the Hiring 500,000 Heroes campaign in March 2012 with a goal of securing half a million commitments to hire by the end of 2014. Once a business commits, we work with them to turn those commitments into hires. To date, more than 1,400 businesses of all sizes have committed to hire 361,000 veterans and military spouses and 247,000 hires have been confirmed.

Hiring Our Heroes also has developed a suite of online services to assist veterans and military spouses as they transition to the civilian sector. From our online Resume Engine built in partnership with Toyota, to eMentor and to Fast Track, our online tools are designed to make it easier for veterans to identify career opportunities and to put them in the best position to succeed. Best of all, these services are provided at no cost to the veteran, transitioning service member, or military spouse.

Finally, we must not forget the tremendous sacrifices faced by military spouses and the unique challenges they face when trying to search for and maintain a career.

The fact is that most military spouses can expect to move an average of eight times over a 20 year military career, often with little or no notice. Those with professional licenses (e.g., lawyers, health care professionals, and teachers) face

significant employment hurdles if their licenses are not portable from one state to another. And, since many military families need to be dual-income, these challenges can have a significant impact on long-term retention and military readiness.

With that in mind, Hiring Our Heroes established a Military Spouse Program at the beginning of 2012. Nearly a dozen of the nation's largest companies quickly answered the call, including USAA, La Quinta Inns & Suites, Toyota, and Verizon. We host job fairs and networking receptions exclusively for military spouses on military installations each year. The fairs include value-added content to help spouses plan a career, such as resume and interview workshops, networking, and professionalism presentations. We have also begun to maintain LinkedIn groups of all who attend our events and promote further career development events, local connections, and job postings.

Creating Private-Public Partnerships

Creating private-public partnerships has been and continues to be a critical component of our efforts. Over the last three years, Hiring Our Heroes has benefitted from its unique position to call upon a wide array of partners including those from the private, public, and non-profit sectors. These partnerships have helped us to create deep roots in local communities and impact hundreds of thousands of veterans and military spouses.

Not surprisingly, given the U.S. Chamber of Commerce's long standing work on behalf of American business, we started our efforts by reaching out to some of the nation's largest businesses to sit on our Veterans Employment Advisory Circle (VEAC) and a Military Spouse Employment Advisory Circle (MSEAC). Over the past three years, more than 35 of these businesses, representing nearly every segment of industry in America, have sat on the VEAC or MSEAC and provided critical guidance on our mission.

We have forged key partnerships with the White House's Joining Forces, the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs (VA), the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL), and several of the Department of Defense services. In 2013, we formed an agreement with the U.S. Army Installation Management Command (IMCOM), which led to a Fragmentary Order (FRAGO) to Transition Service Managers around the world. This FRAGO is intended to make soldiers aware of Hiring Our Heroes resources as they transition out of the Army.

More recently, we collaborated with VA to create a national "Guide to Hiring Veterans"—a new resource to point employers to the most valuable resources

available to assist them in the process of hiring and retaining veterans. Information available in the Guide includes: online job banks and military skills translators, VA benefits, Hiring our Heroes job fairs, American Job Centers, Veterans Gold Card, Official Wounded Warrior Programs, and more. We hope all interested employers will use this guide to learn more about this important issue and to connect with veterans for careers in our communities nationwide.

We also have created strong partnerships with other non-profits throughout the United States. From nonprofits, like the George W. Bush Institute, Blue Star Families, the Institute for Veterans and Military Families (IVMF), Got Your 6, and Points of Light, and Student Veterans of America, we are united in our singular focus of helping veterans and military spouses find meaningful employment opportunities.

The value of these partnerships becomes evident at our hiring fairs where the entire community comes together. Our network of state and local Chambers works hard to bring together the local business community and open up thousands of jobs to local veterans and military spouses. Local military officials, including Guard and Reserve components, frequently open up their facilities to host our events. The VA plays a critical role by making sure that veterans are aware of their benefits and enrolled in eBenefits. DOL and its representatives from American Job Centers also work to provide ongoing assistance in their local communities. The Employer Support of the Guard and Reserves (ESGR) provides invaluable resources in every state. Finally, many of our VSO partners bring out the established community of veteran leaders to support and promote our events.

Looking Forward

When Hiring Our Heroes launched in March 2011, the employment situation for veterans and military spouses was bleak. Post-9/11 veterans faced an unemployment rate greater than 12%, which was nearly 50% higher than the national unemployment rate. For veterans under 25, the unemployment rate was closer to 30%— a rate that was two times the unemployment rate faced by their civilian counterparts. One in four military spouses was unemployed.

There is no doubt that the situation has started to improve. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, veteran unemployment continues to fall in every segment of the veteran population. We have seen post-9/11 veteran unemployment drop to below 10% and unemployment for veterans under 25 is down ten points to approximately 20%. However, according to a 2012 Department of Defense report, one in four military spouses remain unemployed.

While these figures show improvement, we have a long way to go. The fact is that 800,000 veterans were unemployed at the beginning of 2013. We also will see unprecedented departures from active duty service in the next five years—up to 300,000 per year for the next five years, and that does not include spouses. At the same time, many federal jobs may be unavailable to veterans because of constrained budgets. The private sector will need to step up to the plate.

Moving Forward

Hiring Our Heroes is ready to answer the call and will step up its efforts in 2014. Not only will we host more than 200 hiring fairs across the country this year, we will focus our efforts by targeting communities with the greatest need. We will also host more fairs directly on military installations in hopes of reaching service members well before their transition from the military. And, we will continue to develop more innovative online resources to make it easier for businesses to connect with job-seeking veterans and military spouses. These tools will better prepare both employers and service members for the job search process.

We also will strengthen our public-private partnerships. Hiring Our Heroes plans to work more closely with the Department of Defense, VA, and Department of Labor to reach service members and spouses earlier in the transition process. By combining our efforts, we also can help businesses, veterans, and military spouses navigate through the clutter of all the resources available to them and identify the best tools available.

A good example of these more robust partnerships will occur in February 2014, where we will take part in a two-day Veterans Jobs Summit at Fort Bliss, Texas. Hosted in partnership with the VA, Department of Labor, Joining Forces, and the U.S. Army, the event will feature seminars and breakouts on the service member transition process, tools and best practices for employers looking to hire, and presentations from key military and governmental agencies. The summit will culminate on February 4th with a job fair for service members who are within 90 days of their transition date.

A similar event will occur at Fort McCoy, Wisconsin, in April during a three-week Army Reserve Training Exercise. Approximately 5,000 members of the United States Army Reserve from across the country will be participating in this exercise. We are working with national companies to attend the fair in order to share job opportunities from across the country. Our goal is to ensure each and every service member is equipped with all the tools necessary to know what opportunities exist, empowering them to make educated choices for their futures.

Conclusion

Over the last three years, Hiring Our Heroes has been proud to serve our veterans and military spouses in local communities throughout the United States and to do so with a wide array of private and public sector partners. While we have much to be proud of, there is much more to do. We must stay vigilant and provide transitioning service members, veterans, and military spouses with the meaningful employment opportunities they so richly deserve.

Hiring Our Heroes will continue to be at the forefront of this movement. We will remain the community catalyst bringing together our partners in our common mission. We will work together to achieve fundamental change in veteran and military spouse unemployment.

Chairman Miller, Ranking Member Michaud, and members of the Committee, I thank you again for the opportunity to testify and look forward to answering your questions.