

**VETERANS SERVING VETERANS:  
THE IMPACT OF AMERICA'S  
BUSINESSES ON VETERAN  
EMPLOYMENT AND OPPORTUNITY**

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**HEARING**

BEFORE THE

**COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS**

**U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**ONE HUNDRED EIGHTEENTH CONGRESS**

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**TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 7, 2023**

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS,  
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,  
*Washington, D.C.*

The committee met, pursuant to notice, at 10:30 a.m., in room 360, Cannon House Office Building, Hon. Mike Bost (chairman of the committee) presiding.

Present: Representatives Bost, Bergman, Rosendale, Miller-Meeks, Murphy, Franklin, Van Orden, Luttrell, Ciscomani, Crane, Self, Kiggans, Takano, Brownley, Levin, Pappas, Mrvan, Cherfilus-McCormick, Deluzio, McGarvey, Ramirez, Landsman, and Budzinski.

**OPENING STATEMENT OF MIKE BOST, CHAIRMAN**

The CHAIRMAN. Good morning. The committee will come to order.

First off, I want to welcome our witnesses to today's hearing. Today we will recognize the positive impact the veteran community continues to have on the United States economy, which is a fitting tribute, as just last week, we celebrated National Veteran-Owned Small Business Week.

Now, our veterans have sacrificed for the protection of this great Nation by serving in uniform, and we owe them and their families a debt that we could never fully repay. We as a Nation can put meaning behind "Thank you for your service" by doing our part to ensure that veterans have access to the American dream after they hang up their uniforms, which is exactly what we will be discussing today.

The purpose of this hearing is to acknowledge the important role American businesses and veteran-owned small businesses have in empowering veterans and creating economic opportunity. Thousands of companies, both big and small, have had great success in hiring veterans over the past decade.

As most of you know, before I came to Congress, I ran a family owned trucking business. During that time, I had the pleasure of knowing, as a young man, even my father and grandfather, we hired people from the Second World War that worked for us for most their lives, from Korean that worked for us for most their lives, Vietnam that worked most their lives, and we will continue that—my brother continues that tradition today. When we had vet-

erans apply for the positions, let me tell you, our company, I always made sure to give them the opportunity to thrive, as did my grandfather and father, because as a veteran myself, I knew the servant leader's heart ingrained in the veteran does not all of a sudden go away once they no longer wear the uniform.

Research by the Institute of Veterans and Military Families show that veterans possess exceptional team-building skills and are highly trusted by colleagues in the workplace. We have seen this firsthand, the way our veterans hire—a way a veteran hire can benefit in any business. Veteran-owned businesses have only strengthened the American economy. Over 3 million Americans are employed by 321,000 veteran-owned businesses in the United States. Together, these companies contribute \$926 billion to the economy. That is an incredible investment, and the industry's veterans manage to span from tech companies to construction, agriculture, defense, and more.

Over 74 percent of businesses are founded by a veteran rather than being purchased or inherited. Making sure veterans can start a business and succeed as owners has long been a priority of our committee, and it is a personal priority of mine as well since I have been in Congress.

Now, without veterans in the workforce, America would not be a world leader in innovation and economic growth. We are so grateful to have some of those corporations who hire veterans and personal veterans who own small business here with us today, including one from my own hometown. I want to thank you for your service and for your continued to serve your community after you have left the service to build the economy.

I am eager to hear from our witnesses on the importance of hiring veterans and how we can increase opportunities for veterans during their transition to civilian life. I am also eager to hear how we can make it easier for companies and small businesses to be in a position to hire veterans. This means enacting pro-growth policies that are often at odds with the economy and the economic decisions that are made by the Biden administration at this time, and that we have been stifling that innovation.

With that, I want to take—or recognize Ranking Member Takano for his opening statement.

#### **OPENING STATEMENT OF MARK TAKANO, RANKING MEMBER**

Mr. TAKANO. Well, thank you, Chairman Bost, and thank you for holding this hearing on the impact of America's businesses on veteran employment and opportunity.

Before we begin, it is impossible to discuss employment without addressing recent news in the automotive industry. I would like to take a moment to congratulate the United Auto Workers (UAW) on a truly groundbreaking agreement with Ford, Stellantis, and General Motors. Thousands of veterans are members of the UAW, and in the words of President Biden when he visited the picket line, "You deserve what you have earned, and you have earned a hell of a lot more than you are getting paid now."

The agreement reached last week is a massive win for the UAW, American workers, veterans, and the entire United States. Unions are good for America and unions are good for veterans.

Now to the topic at hand. The Biden economy has pulled this country from what some believed was an inevitable recession. Unemployment is down, wages are up, spending is up, and inflation has cooled since the months immediately after the pandemic. Does that mean everything is perfect? Also, in the words of President Biden, come on, man.

No, more work is needed. We need to raise wages for veterans in the workplace to reflect the wage gains of the 1 percent and company executives. Strengthen employment protection so Guard and Reserve members do not have to worry if their jobs will exist when they return from serving their country. Ensure that opportunities for veterans of all backgrounds are fair. Simplify the process for veterans to translate their skills in the military into the marketplace, and make it easier for veterans to start their own businesses.

Chairman Bost, you and I have served together on this committee for more than 8 years now. Can you believe that? Eight years, oh, my God. I want to thank you for introducing our resolution honoring this week as Veteran Employment Week. While we may have our differences from time to time, and while there are certain issues on we will never see eye to eye, one thing I have appreciated about working with you is that, whenever possible, we have done our best to find common ground. I think we can both agree that the goals I have outlined are worth pursuing in this committee.

Today we have the opportunity to talk about some of this country's largest employers, along with some veteran small business owners, and some from your own district. Veterans, on average, earn more than their civilian counterparts. I hope we can learn why veterans' wages are not growing as fast as nonveterans. I hope we can also learn what employers think of diversity initiatives. I believe we are at our best when we harness the power of our diversity to spur creativity and innovation. However, we know that some in Congress have decried diversity goals and initiatives, so I look forward to hearing if employers feel the same way.

Further, I want to learn more about how employers treat Guard and Reserve members when their requirements to our Nation's defense conflicts with their employee responsibilities. In preparing for this hearing, our staff attempted to find a large employer of veterans that does not use forced arbitration agreements. However, call after call yielded proof that forced arbitration agreements are rampant in the workplace, forcing servicemembers to choose between employment and upholding their duty to our Nation, something I find truly shameful.

In our Economic Opportunity (EO) subcommittee hearing earlier this year, it was asked, how common are forced arbitration agreements for servicemembers? It turns out extremely common. I hope our witnesses before us can explain how exactly their company uses forced arbitration and what that means for Guard and Reserve members.

We have the chance to make real change in employment rights for servicemembers, and I hope this serves as a wake-up call. It is time to ban forced arbitration agreements for Guard and Reserve

members, and I look forward to engaging with our witnesses this afternoon.

Thank you, Chairman Bost, and I yield back.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Ranking Member Takano. Now I will introduce the first panel of witnesses.

First we have Mr. Tommy Jones. He is a senior director of military and veterans affairs at Walmart. We also have Eric Eversole, president of Hiring Our Heroes; Mr. Michael McCoy, who leads veterans recruitment at Verizon; and Ms. Erin Izen, senior director of workforce programs at Home Depot.

Right now, I would like the witnesses, if you would, please stand and raise your right hand.

[Witnesses sworn.]

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you. Thank you, you may sit down. Let the record reflect that all witnesses answered in the affirmative.

Mr. Jones, you are now recognized for 5 minutes for your opening statement.

#### **STATEMENT OF TOMMY JONES**

Mr. JONES. Chairman Bost, Ranking Member Takano, and esteemed members of the House Committee of Veterans' Affairs, I am honored to join you today as an Army veteran and the leader of Walmart's military programs. I am grateful for your leadership and partnership in honoring our Nation's veterans and for the opportunity to share the work we are doing to support military families and create opportunities for veterans and military spouses.

At Walmart supporting those who serve has been ingrained in our DNA from since the very beginning. Our founder, Sam Walton, served in the United States Army in World War II, and his values continue to define our company. We are immensely grateful for our Nation's veterans and the values they bring. Our goal is to support veterans and military families during and after their service.

Over a decade ago, we announced our Veterans Welcome Home Commitment to hire 250,000 veterans by 2020. Since then, we have hired more than 533,000 veterans and military spouses and promoted nearly 64,000 to roles of greater responsibility and higher pay.

Building on this success, we launched Find a Future in June 2020. This tool guides military related prospects through an audit of their current skills, experience, and education. It helps them explore a wide range of future possibilities, including employment, education, entrepreneurship, and provides a roadmap to achieve their goals. After more than 3-1/2 million engagements with members of the military community with Find a Future, we are expanding that platform to serve associates in our own community.

Our Career Fellowship Program, in partnership with the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and Hiring Our Heroes initiatives offers hiring summit and fellowship opportunities to veterans and their families.

Support for our servicemembers comes in many forms. Our Military Family Promise guarantees a job at a nearby Walmart store or Sam's Club for all military personnel and including military spouses employed by the company who must Permanent Change of Station (PCS) due to military orders. Additionally, we provide free

counseling sessions, coaching, and digital wellness tools to help our associates manage stress, build resilience, and access the care they need.

Walmart has established key relationships with organizations focused on supporting those who have served, including with Merging Vets and Players which provides veterans a new team to assist with transition, personal development, and a sense of belonging. Another is Sheep Dog Impact Assistance, which offers veterans opportunities for physical activities, peer-to-peer training, and volunteer opportunities for continued service.

Once associates are hired at Walmart, they have access to one of the world's largest learning ecosystems, including Walmart Academy and Live Better U. These programs have helped thousands of associates build their skills that they desire through training and education offerings.

As a founding member of the Coalition of Veteran-Owned Businesses, Walmart supports veteran-owned business across the U.S. Our annual Open Call Event provides entrepreneurs the opportunity to meet Walmart and potentially get their products on our shelves or online. In fact, we spent \$1.2 billion with veteran-owned suppliers in Fiscal Year 2023.

To strengthen our support of veterans in their community, Walmart and Walmart Foundation have invested \$44 million since 2011 in job training, education, and community-based initiatives. Our aim is to build a skill-based talent marketplace that recognizes the skills veterans bring, unlock opportunities, and accelerate the economic mobility in the civilian sector. To that end, we have supported organizations like Hire Heroes USA and Institute for Veterans and Military Families (IVMF) at Syracuse University as well as The Manufacturing Institute.

As we look to the future, we recognize the potential to address remaining barriers to successful transition from military service to civilian life. Collaboration and a shared vision will be critical and crucial in achieving this. We remain dedicated to the work and look forward to evolving and growing our approach to best serve veterans and military families.

Thank you for the opportunity to share how Walmart is supporting military and veteran communities through employment, education, entrepreneurship, well-being programs, and our philanthropic efforts. I extend my deepest respect and gratitude to my fellow veterans for their sacrifice and service, and I am here to answer any questions that you may have. Thank you.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF TOMMY JONES APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Mr. Jones. The written statement of Mr. Jones will be entered into the hearing record.

Mr. Eversole, you are now recognized for 5 minutes for your opening remarks.

#### **STATEMENT OF ERIC EVERSOLE**

Mr. EVERSOLE. Good morning, Chairman Bost, Ranking Member Takano, and distinguished members of this committee. My name is Eric Eversole and I am the president of Hiring Our Heroes and a

vice president at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. I am also a retired Navy captain.

As many of you know, Hiring Our Heroes was created when there was a national crisis in veteran unemployment. In 2011, we had hundreds of thousands of servicemembers, many of them who were young, returning home from war zones, and they were finding an awful job market. Working with the Chamber's vast network of state and local chambers, Hiring Our Heroes led a national coalition of companies who were committed to making veteran hiring a priority. I am honored to be on the panel today with several of those companies.

Thanks to these companies and our collective efforts, much has changed over the last decade. Veteran unemployment is at a record low. For vets in each category across the unemployment spectrum, their unemployment rates are lower than their civilian counterparts.

We have seen a shift, a paradigm shift, in how servicemembers transition from the military. Gone are the days where they simply were sent home to fend for themselves, where many would spend months, if not years, trying to find meaningful careers.

Our country has been investing in their futures by ensuring that they have the right tools and resources prior to their transition, and it is working. Events like our Career Summits, which provide training and networking opportunities as well as connections to military ready employers, are an important part of this pretransition work.

We have seen unprecedented success from our Fellows Program, the largest Department of Defense (DOD) SkillBridge Program in the country, which provides internships to transitioning servicemembers with one of more than 700 companies across the country. That program's impact is clear and unequivocal. This year alone, we will host more than 2,400 active duty fellows; 85 percent of those fellows will receive job offers within 90 days, and the average starting salary is more than \$110,000. Our data also shows, our internal data shows, that it will help recruit the next generation of all volunteers.

While some may question the need for these programs, given the labor market and the military's current recruiting challenges, that would be a tremendous mistake. The best way to recruit the next generation of all volunteers is to ensure that the current generation not only survives, but thrives in their civilian career opportunities. These programs accomplish that.

One last very important note. Much like our country faced a national crisis with veteran unemployment in 2011, we are facing a similar crisis with military spouses today. The inability of military spouses to find and maintain careers is forcing too many military families to rely upon a single source of income and is creating economic peril for those families, both in the near term and in the long term. It is causing servicemembers to choose between serving their country and leaving.

Much like we did in 2011, we must come together as a Nation and make military spouse employment a top priority. We believe that the Military Spouse Career Accelerator Program, which was recently enacted as part of last year's National Defense Authoriza-

tion Act, is an important step in that direction. As some of you may know, that is a pilot program that provides military spouses with a 12-week internship opportunities with host companies across the country, and DOD pays a stipend for those military spouses to participate in that program. While the program has only been going on for 10 months now, we have hosted more than 400 military spouses in those internships. Much like the Fellows Program and SkillBridge, we are seeing an 80-plus percent offer rate and average salaries of approximately \$70,000.

These programs work and they are a step in the right direction, and we are certainly looking forward to continuing these efforts for military spouses.

Once again, Chairman Bost and Ranking Member Takano and the members of this committee, thank you for today's opportunity, and I look forward to answering your questions.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF ERIC EVERSELE APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Mr. Eversole.

Mr. McCoy, you are now recognized for 5 minutes.

#### STATEMENT OF MICHAEL MCCOY

Mr. MCCOY. Chairman Bost, Ranking Member Takano, and distinguished members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on behalf of Verizon and the over 8,200 veterans and more than 500 military spouses we are privileged to employ. I am honored to be here.

My name is Michael McCoy, and I am the head of military affairs at Verizon. I am a proud third generation servicemember, serving as an officer in the Army National Guard since 2011. Serving our veterans is not just a job for me, it is my passion.

Military service is an honor, but it presents unique challenges. For example, I was deployed when my wife was 6 months pregnant and returned home when my son was 8 months old.

The military is also all encompassing and becomes part of your identity. Military service cannot last forever. Few understand the magnitude of transition from military to civilian life. Verizon strives to make it as frictionless as possible. Today, I would like to share with you how we recruit and support veterans. At Verizon we believe that veterans make our company better.

In addition to providing for our national defense, the U.S. military is the greatest job training program in the world. It cultivates individuals who are disciplined, skilled, thrive under pressure, making them ideal for a hypercompetitive communications industry. Military service imparts both hard and soft skills that translate into a variety of critical jobs at Verizon. We recruit pilots to fly drones for disaster response and engineers to build our best in class networks and protect them from attacks. For all of these reasons, we enthusiastically recruit, retain, and engage the military community.

Verizon is proud to be recognized for this. We have been named the number one military-friendly company in the U.S. three times. We have also been ranked number one by Best for Vets and received numerous employer support and Guard and Reserve awards.

Verizon relies on a three-pronged approach: recruit, retain, support. To attract separating servicemembers we host a web page for veterans and military spouses that provides information on needed skills and open positions within the company.

Verizon also works with the Department of Defense programs such as SkillBridge and the Transition Assistance Program, TAP. Through SkillBridge, we provide separating military personnel with civilian work experience through internships and training during their last 180 days of service. Regarding the TAP program, we are working to expand our relationships with TAP centers, but we believe that TAP may be underresourced and there is an opportunity to expand their impact. For example, enabling virtual classes in addition to those in person would allow employers to reach more potential hires.

Another valuable recruitment program is the Hiring Our Heroes Corporate Fellowship Program offered through HOH, which gives Verizon access to a broad pool of military talent. Through our partnership with the DOD and the U.S. Chamber, we have trained 215 servicemembers and hired 183. Ninety percent of these participants are still with Verizon today.

Finally, we have strong partnerships with other career readiness veteran-serving organizations, namely 50 Strong and FourBlock. With over 100 VA-recognized veteran organizations, the amount of information can be overwhelming. Guidance and coordination from the VA could help filter what is most relevant.

At Verizon, we believe that retaining our veteran employees is just as important as recruiting them. We do everything we can to ensure they are valued and supported. To give veterans a continued sense of camaraderie and the opportunity to serve others, we established an internal employee resource group called Veterans and Advocates Leading the Organization Responsibly (VALOR). This gives veterans a forum for support and career guidance. It also hosts volunteer projects that provide thousands of hours of veteran-focused community service annually. This includes raising awareness for the Affordable Connectivity Program, ACP, which provides eligible veterans with broadband service, a program we urge Congress to continue funding.

In addition, we help veterans register and track changes for earned benefits. For example, this year we partnered with the VA's communications team to inform our veterans of the passage of the The Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics (PACT) Act.

Finally, for our employees in the National Guard Reserves, like myself, we provide a generous military leave policy, including gap pay for up to 36 months.

In closing, I would like to thank you for holding this hearing. As the committee considers ways to advance opportunities for veterans, Verizon stands ready to work with you and support the men and women who have bravely served our country. I am happy to answer any questions you might have.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF MICHAEL MCCOY APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Mr. McCoy.

Ms. Izen, you are recognized for 5 minutes.



**STATEMENT OF ERIN IZEN**

Ms. IZEN. Chairman Bost, Ranking Member Takano, and distinguished members of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

As a military spouse and mother of U.S. Marines who have separated from service, this topic is very close to my heart. With me today is Haley Weaver, the other apron in the room, who leads our Military Relations team, and she is also a military spouse.

I am the senior director of Workforce Programs for the Home Depot, the world's largest home improvement retailer. Founded in 1979, The Home Depot operates more than 2,300 retail stores, distribution centers, and corporate facilities with over 470,000 associates. We take pride in taking care of these associates. One example is the investment of approximately \$1 billion in annualized compensation increases for our frontline hourly associates announced earlier this year. Of those 470,000, tens of thousands are veterans, National Guards, Reserves, and military spouses. You can often recognize them in the stores by the celebration badges on their aprons.

We find that veterans acclimate well to our culture of service and inverted pyramid leadership approach and bring to our ranks tenured leadership, adaptability, resilience, and collaboration. Last year alone, we hired over 14,000 veterans. When veterans put on an apron, they also receive a military-specific onboarding class, a veteran new hire coach, access to veteran-specific resources and benefits, and an invitation to participate in our Military Appreciation Resource Group.

Our partnership with the Department of Defense's SkillBridge Program has allowed us to host over 150 transitioning servicemembers since 2019. During their time with us, we provide hands-on experience for what it is like to work in corporate America, and each fellow has a host team and veteran mentor to learn from. Graduates of our program have gone on to become cybersecurity analysts, software engineers, project managers, and are even senior leaders in our stores and distribution centers.

Programs like SkillBridge and Hiring Our Heroes provide invaluable access to top-tier talent emerging from the military. It is critical that the DOD and the military commands continue to support important transition programs to bridge the life from active duty to civilian careers.

Recognizing that less than 7 percent of the U.S. population has served in the military, we developed training courses and reference guides for all hiring managers, HR professionals, and talent acquisition associates to ensure they know the value veterans bring to the company and can understand their unique capabilities.

Furthermore, we have a range of policies supporting our military-affiliated associates and fostering their long-term career growth. To stand by our National Guard, Active Duty, and Reserve associates, we recently enhanced our military leave of absence (LOA) policy. This update includes a substantial full pay benefit for up to 7 consecutive days, complementing our existing supplemental pay policy, ensuring that associates who temporarily step away from their role at Home Depot receive the financial support that they deserve while serving our Nation. We also offer international

LOA for spouses following their servicemember on an international deployment.

To further support these military spouse associates, in 2020, we created the military spouse job transfer policy. This program guarantees a job offer at one of our stores or supply chain locations when they relocate under their spouse's orders. With available positions across thousands of U.S. locations, we can provide a stable career across their moves.

Looking outside our own hiring, we provide transition support for all veterans. This summer, we launched Mission Transition online. Created by veterans and for veterans, this series of courses is designed to empower servicemen and women and equip them with the soft skills necessary for a seamless transition, like translating their military experience into a civilian resume and the importance of branding and networking. These classes are free to the public and found on Home Depot's careers website.

Turning to veteran communities, in 2011, The Home Depot Foundation recognized the growing crisis with veterans homelessness and pledged to invest half a billion dollars in veterans' causes. We are \$475 million toward that goal and have improved or built more than 55,000 veterans homes and facilities. The Foundation also made a \$50 million pledge to train the next generation of skilled tradespeople and help fill the growing skilled labor gap.

The Foundation's military program, in partnership with Home Builders Institute and SkillBridge, is offered on 10 military installations, including Camp Pendleton in Congressman Levin's district. Over 3,000 transitioning servicemembers have graduated from this 12-week program equipped with industry-recognized certifications and ready to start a new career in the trades.

Beyond the Foundation's military program, The Home Depot also helps other veterans and others interested in working in the trades to start their careers, first through our free construction skills program and then by networking with our hiring professional customers to find a job in their area. More information on all of our Path to Pro workforce programs can be found at [www.PathtoPro.com](http://www.PathtoPro.com).

We are proud to have been named a military-friendly employer, spouse employer, company and brand, as well as Forbes' Best Employer for Veterans, among other awards. As you can see, I take immense pride in representing a company that has held an unwavering commitment to military families and veterans of communities.

Members of the committee, thank you for having us here today. I look forward to answering your questions.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF ERIN IZEN APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Ms. Izen.

We are now going to go to the time of questioning and I will yield myself 5 minutes.

Mr. McCoy, you know, as supporters of veterans employment, what do you see, and this is a big question because that is one of the main reasons we are having this, what do you see as the biggest barriers to hiring veterans? How can this committee help improve the opportunities for veterans and eliminate these barriers?

Mr. MCCOY. Thank you for the question, Chairman. One of the barriers is aggregating veterans. We are elusive. None of us are currently wearing a uniform right now. How can you tell we are a veteran? Finding those veterans in our communities doing the work that they are doing is difficult.

As several people have mentioned, only 7 percent of our population have served, so we work to find them wherever they are. We have been very successful with the Hiring Our Heroes program. We take part in every single opportunity that they offer. We go to military bases, Camp Pendleton, we go all across the country to find them.

One of the things that could help us be more successful is having some type of employment coalition connection team at the TAP centers. Oftentimes finding somebody who you can work with is difficult.

The CHAIRMAN. Have you found that some of, and this can go to any of you, have you found that we have some TAP programs that are more than willing to let you in and others that are not so willing? What problems do you face when they are not so willing?

Mr. MCCOY. Thank you. That is a great question. What we see is everybody is stretched very thin. There are hundreds of servicemembers who are looking for opportunities to learn how to translate their skills, their experience, the time in the military, what that looks like, what a right resume looks like. We work with them to figure out how we can help supplement any of the work that they are doing by participating in career workshops. We are very active at military bases to help in those kinds of capacities, and we do that as much best we can to help servicemembers.

The CHAIRMAN. Go ahead.

Ms. IZEN. I would say, seconding what he said, it is difficult for us sometimes to get onto the bases because there is quotas and maxes. If you are not the first there, sometimes we cannot get in. Then I would say the recruiting access for getting onto the base, too, can be different. It all depends kind of on the command, what they support, and who their network is. Having a central way for us to access those bases, like he mentioned, would be very helpful.

Mr. JONES. Just add, the consistency, Mr. Chairman, of the turnover of those people that are working in the TAP offices, the different contracts that land those, also limit you to resources. There is not a consistent way to communicate with them. Even if you cannot get on the base, there should be a way to communicate with them on a regular basis, post job alerts or something to that effect.

Mr. EVERSOLE. Let me just add, Mr. Chairman, there is widespread inconsistency across the bases, which creates challenges for a lot of companies. I would say that this year in particular, maybe last year as well, given some of the recruiting challenges, it has been more difficult to access bases over the last couple of years because of that tension between retention and transition, and that is creating some problems for organizations like ours.

The CHAIRMAN. I think you hit the nail on the head there because it is a case where it is not a natural reaction for DOD to try to encourage their servicemembers to leave. Okay. Especially at a time when recruitment is down and everything like that.

Mr. Jones, when a veteran is hired by Walmart, what programs do they have access to on the day one that they can continue to grow as an employee?

Mr. JONES. Great question, Mr. Chairman. We have LBU, Live Better University, and we have a training curriculum. It is state-of-the-art training. Zero dollars that costs, anything for them to be able to upskill, reskill and any certifications, focusing on—whether they want to focus on Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) education.

In addition to that, we have the Find a Future platform that we have launched. That was initially focused externally. Now we are using that to upskill and reskill current employees. From day one, all of our servicemembers that join, to include our Guard and Reserve and military spouses, have access to that.

The CHAIRMAN. Yes, I think each one of us know and understand that when our veterans leave their active service, whatever their particular Military Occupational Specialty (MOS), might not be something they can use in your company. Probably disarming bombs is probably not something that each of you need. The veterans themselves provide an opportunity, and I express this so much to everyone.

We spend a lot of time in this committee because we have to deal with people who have been hurt and mentally or physically by the DOD. However, every veteran, and we got to make sure we stay focused on that, is a quality employee that will show up on time. This is mission-centered and is a great employee to hire. That is what I hope we will bring out today.

My time has expired, and I will yield to the ranking member.

Mr. TAKANO. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. You heard me mention forced arbitration agreements undermining Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act (USERRA) Protections for servicemembers in my opening statement. I would like to ask Mr. Jones whether Walmart uses forced arbitration agreements for currently serving Guard or Reserve members.

Mr. JONES. Ranking Member Takano, that is something we do not participate in. We do not force or require arbitration to dispute USERRA concerns. We do not force them to sign anything, and we are in full support of the USERRA Act.

Mr. TAKANO. Why don't you?

Mr. JONES. I mean we believe in citizen-soldier partnerships. We understand that, you know, serving in the Guard and Reserves makes us better as a company. It is the diversity of our workforce. The work that they experience in our offices or in our front—our stores, they bring that to the military. Then their weekend drills and their weekend—and their week—two-week-a-year experience, they bring that back into the workforce.

We value that from a diversity standpoint. The skills that they bring in is transferable.

Mr. TAKANO. Well, speaking about diversity, I would like to know about Walmart's philosophy about Diversity Equity and Inclusion (DEI) programs and whether you embrace them and why.

Mr. JONES. Absolutely. I mean, diversity—the stronger—we are stronger with diversity. I mean, we know that. We know that the military is one of the biggest foundations for us to pull talent from.

It is the most diverse workforce out there, and so we value that. We know that, you know, every person matters, and we treat everybody the way they should be treated. We understand how impactful diversity is to our organization, and we promote that.

Mr. TAKANO. Well, thank you, Mr. Jones.

Mr. McCoy, same question. Does Verizon employ forced arbitration agreements?

Mr. MCCOY. Thank you for the question, Chairman—Ranking Member Takano. We work with our legal teams to ensure that we comply with the full rights and laws of USERRA. As a currently serving Guardsman, I understand how difficult it is to leave and to leave work in the middle of the week, at the end of the week. We do everything we can to ensure that we are completely complying with USERRA.

As to our specific forced arbitration policy, my legal team will respond back with that of more detail.

Mr. TAKANO. Well, thank you. Thank you. With regard to DEI and diversity initiatives, fully embracing it at Verizon?

Mr. MCCOY. Thank you for the question again. The diversity of the military is unmatched anywhere else in our workforce. We work actively to ensure that we are finding veterans wherever they are. We work with different groups. We look at different groups that aggregate veterans by how they identify wherever they are at geographically, wherever their heritage and lineage is. We work with all of those groups to ensure that we are actively finding the top talent in these groups to recruit them to Verizon, and then we work to retain and support them.

Mr. TAKANO. It is not just with respect to veterans. You are looking for diversity in all different manner. Is that correct?

Mr. MCCOY. That is correct.

Mr. TAKANO. Ms. Izen, could you comment about whether Home Depot uses forced arbitration agreements with current serving and Reserve members?

Ms. IZEN. In general, Home Depot does not have arbitration agreements in any of our employment contracts. In very rare cases, you might find them where we acquired companies, an agreement was already in place. In general, no.

Mr. TAKANO. Okay. When you acquire companies, they may have in place arbitration agreements for Guard and Reserve members, but you do not employ them with your own employees?

Ms. IZEN. Correct.

Mr. TAKANO. Can you comment as to why you do not?

Ms. IZEN. I cannot.

Mr. TAKANO. Okay, fair enough. What about DEI diversity, equity, and—

Ms. IZEN. Yes. Home Depot has many DEI and equity programs. We fully embrace them. Veterans' causes are just one of them. We do a lot that is very impactful. I will give you one example from a veteran's perspective.

I talked about our fellowships in my testimony. Seventy-two percent of the people that we have hosted through our fellowships are diverse by self-disclosure. We really feel because the military over-indexes on being diverse and overeducated, that when you hire those people, that is what you get when you hire veterans.

Mr. TAKANO. Your DEI initiatives are not just focused on veterans, but—

Ms. IZEN. No.

Mr. TAKANO [continuing]. the full gamut from gender to—

Ms. IZEN. Yes.

Mr. TAKANO [continuing]. ethnicity, race, all different backgrounds?

Ms. IZEN. Correct.

Mr. TAKANO. Do you believe that—does Home Depot believe that diversity is actually a strength?

Ms. IZEN. I would say that we believe our associates of all types make us our strength. We have got all different genders, backgrounds, and we do support them through different DEI initiatives.

Mr. TAKANO. Well, thank you, Ms. Izen. I yield back, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Ranking Member.

Representative Franklin, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. FRANKLIN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you to our panel for being here today. I appreciate everything that you all are doing, both in your professional capacities and also in your service to our country.

Not to be overlooked, Ms. Izen, my wife would be—she would scold me if I did not acknowledge that the role you have as a military spouse and a mother is just as important and challenging and sacrificial as all the gentlemen there to your right, but also what you all do in your leadership roles for businesses throughout the country.

Obviously, you guys are huge companies. You have a lot of assets to pour into this. I would tell you that there are hundreds of thousands of smaller businesses out there that are looking to your initiatives to figure out, what can we steal from those guys? What are the best practices? I can tell you, as a former veteran business owner, too, I would often look to the things that you all are doing to see is that something we could integrate?

In the limited time we have, about 4 minutes, so about a minute for each of you, I would love to hear, with respect to attracting and retaining veteran workforce, what is the one thing, you know, I am sure you spend a lot of time thinking about how can we improve our deal, our programs, what is the one thing that you would either have us stop doing or do less of or start doing that we are not doing that would help your job be easier?

Ms. Izen, I would like to start with you and just go down the line. Got probably about 45 seconds each.

Ms. IZEN. Gosh, it is hard to pick one and fit it in 45 seconds.

Mr. FRANKLIN. Just one thing that is most impactful.

Ms. IZEN. One thing that would be really impactful for you guys is help making transition a priority in the commands. We have talked about how they have got a lot on their plates, they have got limited people. To be able to give up these people to do, like, a Hiring Our Heroes program, it is very difficult.

We have had challenges where we have identified someone that wants to come to our fellowship program, makes it through our interview process, we are ready to bring them on, and then their command decides that they just cannot let them go. We lose that

fellow, or we have even had them in our program get called back and get promoted, which is a good thing, but get pulled back out of the program. Making that transition and kind of protecting that time a priority would be very helpful, especially at the junior enlisted level.

Mr. FRANKLIN. We hear that frequently. Mr. McCoy.

Mr. MCCOY. Thank you for the question. I would say one of the things that you could do to help us all would be to continue to talk about and support transition programs throughout all phases of a career. When we look at how we go to Air Force Specialty Codes (AFSCs), we go to MOS schools, all of the different professional military education that we go to, talking about what skills you are gaining when you go to those. That helps us build a repertoire throughout the course of our career that when we transition, we know we have built these skills, we know who we are, we understand what value we bring to the workforce, and can continue to talk about that. As my good friend, Sergeant Major of the Army Retired Tilly says, talk to those old veterans. We want to help.

Mr. FRANKLIN. Do you feel that they communicate those skills well when they are out there in the job force looking? I know we try to help them a lot through TAP and all, but translating military skills, whether it is ordinance disposal, to civilian skills, do they do a good job of that or can we do better to help them?

Mr. MCCOY. We could do better. It is hard sometimes, though, to talk about some of those very outside of the traditional civilian employment skills of how you translate it. It is talking about the generalities of leadership, time management, success that you have had, that helps.

Mr. FRANKLIN. Great. Thank you. Mr. Jones.

Mr. JONES. Sir, I do not want to duplicate efforts, but, you know, I think the SkillBridge program and programs like Hiring Our Heroes Fellowship Program, those programs give a preview and help educate the civilian population on the skills that servicemembers bring. It is an on-the-job training program that allows them to really understand.

You know, it is really easy to focus on hard skill. Right? Cybersecurity is cybersecurity. As a first sergeant leading a communications team and moving into talent acquisition, you know, that is my soft skills that allowed me to do that. Right? You do not get that, you know, reading a resume.

I think there is an opportunity to really focus on how do we talk about servicemembers of this generation? You know, World War II is known as the Greatest Generation. I would say that this generation is the most educated military workforce we ever had. What are we doing to promote that? I think there is an opportunity there. We do that through these programs that we have. Right? Getting it out into the communities, into these civilian corporations. That really gives them a good understanding and peek behind the curtain to understand, you know, what this talent really is about. We chose to serve in the military for a purpose.

Mr. FRANKLIN. Okay. Mr. Eversole.

Mr. EVERSOLE. Thank you, sir, for that question. Very quickly, I think we need to support, bolster, and protect SkillBridge. The majority, after doing this for a decade, the majority of

servicemembers that we serve and we see come out, they are relying heavily on their soft skills when they come out, their leadership, their resiliency. Those are the hardest things to show, you know, show to a potential employer. I can put that I am a great leader on my resume, but nobody is going to buy it until they actually see it in the workforce.

To protect these servicemembers and these SkillBridge opportunities allows them to showcase their skill sets in a work environment and allows them to get hired and brought in at the right level, which helps with retention and all the other things that go along with employment.

Mr. FRANKLIN. Great. Thank you. Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you.

Ms. Brownley, you were now recognized.

Ms. BROWNLEY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I appreciate that.

I was going to go down the line of mandatory arbitration, but I am going to switch gears here since the ranking member has asked that. I will focus on gender pay, equal pay.

I mean, one thing about the military, there are a lot of good things about the military, but one really good thing about the military is that there is equal pay amongst men and women within the military. They come out of the military and the Pew Research Center did polling to say that we are still falling behind by an average of \$7,000 of a pay differential between women veterans and male veterans.

My question really to all of you, you know, what are your organizations doing to eliminate the gender pay gap across the board, regardless actually of veteran status?

Mr. JONES. Thank you, Ms. Congressman. I think that we are always evaluating our processes and evaluating our compensation. Recently, we have done a reevaluation of our compensation, and we will always continue to do that to make sure that, one, from a pay area and from a skills base that we are paying accordingly. I think that that is something that is always top of mind. We are paying our associates based off of the qualifications they bring into the organization, not based off their gender.

Ms. BROWNLEY. Thank you. Mr. McCoy.

Mr. MCCOY. Yes, thank you for the question. Not to repeat what Mr. Jones said, but we agree. We are working to make sure that when we work with servicemembers of both genders, we are working with them to make sure they understand the skills and experience they bring to the table. They are selecting the right level of position, and they are articulating their skills and experience in a way that helps them ensure that they are getting the job that is the best fit for them. That allows for maximum compensation.

Ms. BROWNLEY. Very good. I will say this Pew Research report also stated that women veterans are getting paid more than women civilians, and likewise for male veterans versus male citizens.

I guess, you know, the question is, when you say, well, it is about their abilities and so forth and so on. You know, to me, it seems as though what is really happening is the people coming in from the military are more qualified, therefore, getting a higher pay than their male or female counterparts.



Mr. JONES. Yes. I would just like to add, I think some of the programs allow for that, you know, long understanding of it. You know, you do an interview process that may be three or four interviews, and you are looking at a resume to base a decision off that. We try to focus on making sure that we have the right pay areas for each one of those.

As you start to be able to evaluate and understand the additional skills that that person brings into an organization, when you have a program like the Fellowship Program, where you have a 90-day evaluation of that person, you are understanding a little bit more level of detail of their skills. Therefore, it allows you to bring that, too, when you come to the offer process, when you go to the compensation and asking them, you know, this person brings these additional skill sets that we did not see on their resume. Based off our evaluation of this personnel, you know, we have the ability to give them more compensation based off the experiences that they have. I think that is really important.

Ms. IZEN. I will comment, too. In addition to what he said, I think it is important to note not just what they get in the initial wage. It is also the ongoing investment that companies make to make sure they have a best associate experience, so benefits, bonuses, job and career development. We see that at Home Depot, especially in our stores. Ninety percent of our leaders started as hourly associates. Even though they may come in at one level, it is also helping them advance and move quickly based on the capabilities that they have.

Ms. BROWNLEY. Thank you for that. I think the data that I am speaking of incorporates, you know, all of—the full package as well.

I just have a few seconds left, so I just wanted to ask, you know, I commend all of you for reaching out to our veteran population for their employment. I also commend you for hiring disabled veterans as well. I am just wondering, what are you doing in terms of accessing more disabled veterans to accommodate them either at work or their ability to work from home?

Mr. MCCOY. Thank you for the question. We have a lot of accessibility. We—service dogs, equipment, whatever that needs, we work with them to find the right solution.

Mr. JONES. I will just add, on day one, we are introduced to the—during the interview process, we talk about accessibility, but on day one, they are introduced to our accessibility team. Anybody that has a need that to be able to better allow them to perform their duties at work, we are going to accommodate them to best of our ability.

Ms. BROWNLEY. My time is up. I yield back.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Ms. Brownley.

Dr. Miller-Meeks, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

Ms. MILLER-MEEKS. Thank you, Mr. Chair. I also want to thank the chair for having a hearing on something that reflects positively on our veterans, and that is the tremendous attributes that they have that they bring into the workplace. Often we are focused on mental health or suicide or Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and we get this thought that all veterans are like that. As a veteran, I am just going to say I really appreciate that we are talking about the positive attributes of veterans.

One of the things that our state of Iowa did, I was director of Public Health, so I was instrumental in this with our Governor at that time, Governor Branstad, to do a home-based Iowa initiative. Our home-based Iowa—you are nodding your heads, you know very well of the program—was precisely to get veterans employed.

Along that same time, what we also did was to have no state income tax on military pensions. That is helped attract more veterans to our state, and we are delighted to have them.

For my part, it was working with licensure and licensure laws, both for veterans, recognizing their training within the military, but also veteran spouses.

This question is for Mr. Jones. What ways can the Department of Defense and the Department of Veterans affairs better prepare our servicemembers to be successful in your company, or the other panelists, or companies—or a similar one as they transition from military to civilian life?

Mr. JONES. Thank you, Ms.—thank you for your service.

There is many ways that I think we can—you all can help us. We touched on it a little bit. Really focusing on educating them left of transition, right, allowing them to understand where their skills are best utilized.

I think we talked about hard skills and soft skills. I think about the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB). Right? When I joined the military, I took the ASVAB, and I had no idea that I would be good at as a combo guy for 20 years in the Army. Right? Twenty years later, if I would have reverse engineered that and took the ASVAB on a way out, that might paint the picture of what I could be now, all the skills that I learned.

Again, Michael talked about, we are the best trained workforce in the world. We have the best training organization, the best leadership training. Right. Reassessing those is, I think, the biggest piece of doing it and left of transition is really important.

Ms. MILLER-MEEKS. Thank you.

Mr. McCoy, in your testimony, you mentioned that Verizon has a special dispensation for employees who serve in the National Guard and Reserve. Could you elaborate on that?

Mr. MCCOY. Yes. Thank you for the question. Thank you as well for your service. Home Base Iowa, good job.

We have the opportunity to make sure that we are asking servicemembers, whether they are currently serving or they are veterans, to have a self-identified, in that we then work with them to make sure that they understand, hey, when I go out on military leave, it is not a bad thing. The military gap pay provides the opportunity to cover the—up to the Verizon base salary compared to the base salary, so we are talking base to base in the military. This does not account for any kind of special pays or flight or any of those other things. That makes sure that they are full when they are gone, that if their military pay is much lower, they would be made whole.

My last deployment, I had an individual who was a Chief Technology Officer (CTO) at his company. He was an E-5. He could not deploy. He would have lost his house.

You know, making sure that we find ways to keep our Guardsmen and Reservists in uniform helps our Nation.

Ms. MILLER-MEEKS. Thank you for that.

Ms. Izen, first of all, I really appreciate my 10 percent discount as a veteran at Home Depot, so I am just going to throw that out there. Does Home Depot partner with the VA and the Department of Labor? What recommendations would you have for improving opportunities for transitioning servicemembers to connect with civilian employers?

Ms. IZEN. Yes, we certainly partner with Department of Labor. We have a lot of partnerships, including SkillBridge and Hiring Our Heroes, across the way. I would say keeping those partnerships, making sure Congress supports them like we have been talking about, is critical.

I would also say, and we touched on this a little bit, the hard skills versus the soft skills. Usually when we say soft skills, people think, oh, they need to know how to write the resume or how to do the interview, but it is really being able to talk through skills—you know, Chairman Bost mentioned an artillery person. My husband was a tanker. Talking about how when you are a tanker, what does that mean when you come to the civilian workforce? He is now a middle school teacher. Translating tanker to middle school teacher is not something that generally a class is going to teach you how to do or that you are going to get from a military skills translator. Making sure that we are giving enough in those classes to talk through some of those things so that they can fully articulate their transition would be very helpful.

Ms. MILLER-MEEKS. Even though it has been a while since I have been in military school, I can readily see how a tank commander would be able to navigate middle school.

With that, thank you to our panelists. Thank you, Mr. Char. I yield back my time.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Dr. Miller-Meeks.

Mr. Levin.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank the ranking member. I thank you, gentlemen, for making this Veteran Employment Week. I was telling staff in our Economic Opportunity Subcommittee, every week is Veteran Employment Week, but nonetheless, very grateful.

Grateful also to the chairman of the Economic Opportunity Subcommittee, Mr. Van Orden. I was honored to get to chair that subcommittee myself for 4 years. We are going to continue working together to do all we can to try to get every veteran a great job.

I am also thankful to all of you for the work you are doing at Camp Pendleton. I am hopeful, as I heard about base access, that you have all the access you need at Camp Pendleton. I saw a kind of nod that way, so maybe we could speak after. You could speak with my staff after to see if we can do anything to help you in that regard.

I wanted to ask you about making sure that we are hiring enlisted and officers and that we are giving both the time and attention necessary. I think everybody that serves has unique skills, experiences, aspirations, and I think it is our duty as a grateful Nation to make sure everybody has a chance to succeed.

Sometimes our enlisted servicemembers are overlooked. I have seen that, and that is despite the valuable skills and valuable life experiences they are bringing to the table.

I will start with Mr. Jones. In your company's veteran recruitment work, and I was very impressed to hear about what you are doing, how do you ensure that enlisted veterans specifically have opportunities both in the retail side and then in the higher paying corporate jobs?

Mr. JONES. Thank you, Mr. Congressman. I appreciate that. I think what better commitment and what better example is Walmart hiring as their senior military personnel an enlisted guy? Right. I think that that is an example of the commitment.

Mr. LEVIN. We did not plan this in advance.

Mr. JONES. It was not planned. I text messaged you, but it did not come through. No, I think, you know, we really focus on all levels of skills. I think that is the narrative in the civilian sector that, West Point—you think about the academies, that is your only way, or the Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC), and that is the exposure that people get because those are usually in positions of authority and you hear that.

Again, it is storytelling, internal storytelling of the personnel that are inside of your company and understanding those people and telling their stories. So-and-so was an infantryman, now is a truck driver. So-and-so was a, you know, a medic and now is leading an IT as a project manager. Internal storytelling, I think, is the most critical thing that we can do not only to educate the civilian population, but for the other veterans in our organization to stand up and be counted and really pay it forward to those others. Right.

We see a lot of that, a lot of referrals from those types of actions. Right. They are proud of their service after we tell that story and they bring the next person on. That is how we have really been focusing on it here, sir.

Mr. LEVIN. Appreciate that. Please keep at it.

Ms. Izen, I want to ask about SkillBridge. I have noticed that participation rates in SkillBridge are lower for enlisted than for officers. Curious if you know in your company's SkillBridge program what percentage of participants are enlisted versus officers.

Ms. IZEN. I do not have the exact stat. I will tell you, it is harder to get the junior enlisted. The commands are less likely to give someone who has not had 20 years in the military the time away toward the end of their time with us, and so they are harder to find.

We have stood up programs specifically focused on the junior enlisted. We have a program to become a tool tech that is in our rental centers. We have a program for our IT help desk. We have a program for store leadership in the department supervisor level.

Our biggest challenge is finding the people to come be in the program, especially with servicemembers trying to relocation. That makes it hard, too, because if they are finishing their time in, you know, Virginia, but they want to move to California, the relocations across can sometimes be difficult with the SkillBridge program as well. It is actually just finding the people and getting them into the program seems to be harder.

I will say, too, with retail, and I am sure Walmart can appreciate this as well, 1 in 12 veterans work in retail, but 1 in 4 people in the United States work in retail. Veterans just do not think of retail as a place that I can go and have a second career. Even though, as I mentioned before, 90 percent of Home Depot's leadership in the store is started as hourly associates. They just do not think of it as a place to go. They think of it as a cashier.

We could use help in making sure that servicemembers understand the breadth of opportunities in front of them, too. It is not just that they have to go out and find logistics, if they were doing logistics in the military. Their skill set can translate across a wide range of industries.

Mr. LEVIN. Very much appreciate that answer. I think you have our commitment. We are going to do all we can to continue to improve TAP to be responsive to, you know, everybody across the board, enlisted and officers alike.

I am out of time, but let me know about Camp Pendleton, will you, please? I yield back.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Mr. Levin.

General Bergman, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. BERGMAN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Ms. Izen, do you have an actual tool belt on that orange apron?

Ms. IZEN. Not on this one, but the one I actually wear in the stores, yes, it is full.

Mr. BERGMAN. Okay. Well, one of my proudest possessions, actually, I have a couple of them, each from the Home Depot stores in my district, signed by the veterans there. I, like Dr. Miller-Meeks, thank you for the 10 percent discount. I decided to invest some of my grandkids' inheritance in it.

You know, to the point here, Mr. Chairman, thanks for holding the hearing, and thank you for being here.

What I noticed in your initial testimony was the subject of access at the bases. I think we might have a rare opportunity here to maybe take this hearing as a group over to Armed Services at some point and military personnel, because roughly just under 70 percent of the people that you are going to hire are still committed to the individual Ready Reserve under their 8-year contract.

When you think about access to the bases, when you think about who is the target market, if you will, for your recruitment and hiring, when they leave Active Duty at Camp Pendleton, or pick your fort or pick your Naval base or your Air Force base, they still have a commitment to the Individual Ready Reserve (IRR).

My question to you is, have you all looked into what the different services might do as far as they maintain contact with the individual Ready Reserve? Sometimes there is IRR musters, other things. Anybody got any thoughts on that? Any background or experience?

Mr. JONES. Mr. Congressman, I would say that I am not aware of anything that we have done with IIR. In my experience, in my previous experience, I think it is a great point. It is something we should look into. I think the access still is going to be limited.

We have challenges right now reaching servicemembers in our own companies. I think accessing them externally is going to—

Mr. BERGMAN. Well, when you think about, here you have these largely young men and women, whether it be officer and enlisted, who have been in pretty intense military engagement since they put the uniform on, and now they are in a transition phase, some of them are going to be looking for work immediately, others not so much. I would suggest to you that as—we, as Veterans' Affairs Committee, with that second stage, you know, afterwards, after that initial 8-year commitment has been fulfilled, that we begin to see the data on all of these folks.

All that means is that I believe there is different opportunities. Love to explore those with you—

Mr. JONES. Yes, sir.

Mr. BERGMAN [continuing]. to see how we make the contact. You can picture what a young—let us say, if you serve 4 years active duty and you enlisted and went through boot camp at the age of 18, what their mindset might be at 22, especially if they are not married, do not have children. They are a pretty tough group to get a handle around there for a while because they are probably going to go out and just relax a little bit.

I just—I am proud of all of you. We are all proud of all of you for what you are trying to do. Let us see if we can figure out, in fishing terms, a way to throw that net or expand the net so that we get the message across.

Mr. JONES. Yes, sir. I think you bring up a really interesting point. Some of the things—I think extending—you know, nobody wants to extend an enlistment, but you think about what we did with the Warrior Care units as people, you know, got into those transition units or those warrior transition units. You know, maybe there is an opportunity, again, looking left of transition as an opportunity to work with those that are transitioning out of the military.

I think one of the things that I failed as a noncommissioned officer (NCO), I thought I was a pretty good noncommissioned officer. One of the things that I failed is my transitioning servicemembers. I basically said, we are going on, we have missions, we are going back to combat, you know, and I failed that. I think in my civilian life, you know, I have had the opportunity to kind of make—

Mr. BERGMAN. I hate to cut you off, but you are eating up my time.

Mr. JONES. Yes, sir.

Mr. BERGMAN. Okay. I will. As a good NCO, you did exactly the right thing because you have got to take the next unit to the fight. Those who are leaving, they have served honorably. Have a nice Life, move on. Now how do we bridge that gap?

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I yield back.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, General.

Representative Deluzio, you are recognized.

Mr. DELUZIO. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Hello, everybody.

Mr. Jones, I want to just start with a quick clarification for your answer to Ranking Member Takano's question about forced arbitration. I understand you are not using those for folks, Guard, Reserve, USERRA, Servicemembers Civil Relief Act (SCRA) issues. Are you—is Walmart using them for other employees?

Mr. JONES. No associates at all, sir.

Mr. DELUZIO. Good. Thank you. Thanks for that clarification.

Shifting gears, I want to talk a bit about military spouse, service-member spouse issues. Ms. Izen, I may start with you. I understand Home Depot has a spouse job transfer policy guaranteeing a job to one of your military spouse workers when their servicemember spouse is transferred or reassigned or has orders elsewhere. Can you give me a sense of what is that program? How does it work? Has it been a success? What have you learned from the program?

Ms. IZEN. Sure, I would love to talk about it. The stat I will use is that military spouses move across State lines 10 times more than their civilian counterparts. When you are moving every 2 to 3 years, it is very hard to have a career. When you have a family and you are having to go find childcare and you are buying a new house and you are doing all the things that come with a move every 2 to 3 years, it is hard to focus on your career.

What we do is we have a transfer program. If you are working at one store, distribution center, or location and you move on spouses orders, we will help you find a job where you are going. Almost all bases have a store within 30 miles of it, so we can guarantee that we will have a job offer for you wherever you go.

We have found it to be extremely positive. In fact, on my military relations team, one of my program leaders is a military spouse. She transferred across the U.S. with her family two times, I think, before coming to Atlanta and is now on my team in Atlanta as well. We see that it works. She was able to keep her career with us, and we have a lot of great stories about military spouses that have done the same.

Mr. DELUZIO. Thank you. Either of you from Verizon, Walmart, any similar programs or things you want to share that you are doing on military spouse employment?

Mr. MCCOY. Yes. Thank you for the question. We also offer a lot of portability. We look at how we can solve for whatever that challenge is, whether it is geographic, whether it is, hey, we do not have that type of role in that area. Our team as well as the human resources team works to solve for those problems.

On the employment side, I think to some of the previous questions, you have got to find them. Just like a veteran who takes off the uniform, they do not have a shirt that says, hey, call me, military spouse. It is figuring out how you can provide opportunities for them and meet them where they are at. My spouse I am still currently serving has lived through deployments; she understands that. I understand that we need to go out and solve for their issues. We use the Hiring Our Heroes military spouse program, the career accelerator, everything we can do, we try to find them and help them solve any issues that they have.

Mr. DELUZIO. Mr. Jones, anything to add from Walmart's point of view?

Mr. JONES. The only thing, sir, is just, I think, self-identification, and Michael hit on that. You know, it is really under—that is not a question that we ask. We have predominantly asked in the past, but we are now asking that question to self-identify as a military spouse so that we can help them inside their communities, inside of Walmart.

Mr. DELUZIO. Mr. Eversole, I may come to you on a related question. Home Depot, for instance, has a store within 30 miles of, I think you said, nearly every major base or many smaller businesses are not going to have that kind of footprint if someone is looking to move. What can we learn from success of these kinds of programs for companies with national reach that small businesses could be taking advantage of?

Mr. EVERSOLE. Thank you for that question, sir. I think the first priority that all companies need to do is actually track it and make it a priority. If you are not tracking military spouse employment in the first instance, it is really hard to think about what services or opportunities they may need in the future. It also impacts how you recruit people. If you do not understand the unique needs of military spouses because you are not tracking it and you do not understand it, it makes it really difficult to create programs and opportunities around that. It is impossible for organizations like mine to actually track outcomes. We are focused on outcomes right now. How do we help ensure that a population that is 92 percent women are finding meaningful career opportunities in this country because they are serving, too?

Mr. DELUZIO. Well, thank you. I encourage you all to continue thinking about spouses as well. The unemployment rate, as I understand it, for Active Duty spouses is six times the national average; for Reserve and Guard, it is double.

I have got a bill, H.R. 3900, which extends some USERRA benefits to spouses. I was pleased and very happy to see it pass out of our Economic Opportunity Subcommittee in a bipartisan fashion. I am hopeful we will see movement there, but there is a lot more work to be done out in the private sector and certainly for us here in the Congress.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I yield back.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you.

Mr. Luttrell. You are recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. LUTTRELL. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you all for your service and for the spouses especially. I mean, I am on borrowed time, you know, like most of you probably are, too. If it were not for my lovely bride, I do not know if I can make it.

You know, I told her when I got out of the military, I was like, I am never going to leave you again. I am sure all my colleagues in here that served military was like, I am never going to leave you again. Damn it, we got elected, and I have not seen my family in almost 8 weeks. It is one of those things.

You know, if you follow a servicemember's career, if they come out of high school into the military and they serve 20-plus—20 years, 20-plus years, what I have noticed in the veteran space is there is that little miss of becoming, for lack of a better term, you miss the opportunity to become an adult. What I mean by that, from the time that you were a kid to the time you entered the military and you left the military, you have been given clothes, food, shelter, your medical is paid for, the insurance is paid for, and we make these transitions outbound. Those little nuances that have been taken care of for our entire adult life, they are sprung upon us. A lot of times I see when I am dealing with veterans, that is the hole that they start to spiral down.



The great things that each one of your companies are doing, I am curious, with the turnover or the—you know, if there is something that we could pinpoint, are there problematic issues that you see in the veteran space that maybe we could start addressing in the DOD space?

I know timeframe when a servicemember is exiting, and you said the recruiting is a big problem. Some bases are not letting you in because they need to hold on to those bodies. I can appreciate that. Inevitably, we are going to get out.

You know, it hurts my heart to see, because when Eli and Derek and myself jumped off the bullet train that we were riding on, it did not even stop at the station. We literally had to jump off. No TAPs, no nothing. See you later. My uniforms are still in my locker and I never looked back, you know. We had to figure these things out.

I think my question is, one, is there this little focal point that we are missing that maybe we can handle on the DOD side that would assist you all? I will start with that, and anybody can open up.

Mr. MCCOY. Thank you for the question and thank you for you and your family service.

What I would say is talking about transition earlier. We know it, as soon as you join, you have an expiration date. You had your Mandatory Removal Date (MRD), you know when you are getting out. Mine is 2042. I know that I am going to get out of the military. Talk about it, understand it, realize it, internalize it, and bring it through into all the different phases of your career so that it does not punch you in the mouth.

It is talking about, hey, these are things that are going to change. Talk about how you have to buy insurance, how expensive is insurance, and all the different facets that are going to.

Mr. LUTTRELL. That never happens.

Mr. MCCOY. It does not.

Mr. LUTTRELL. I promise you. I was enlisted and officer. That conversation just never came up, especially—and I—and unfortunately, I was injured, so my timeframe got cut and I just had to leave.

Mr. JONES. I would say one of the things that I feel we missed out on as we started—after 9–11 is that we started to shrink down our training in noncommissioned officer courses and officer courses. One of the areas that I think we limited and we got rid of was the general studies portion of it, right, and we are in that portion of general studies.

As I was transitioning, I was like, what do I want to be when I grow up? I don't know what that's going to look like. I think about the month of general studies, about Army effective writing or financial planning and all that. That stuff was really focused on occupational, and I think there is an opportunity that the military and you all can go back into and saying, what are we doing to help them? Again, left of transition, but through every point of training when it comes to professional development and even in counseling.

As you start your career and you end your career, you are already building that resume. You are already talking about the grown-up conversations that you talk about, right? You are getting

exposed to that in a training environment because that is the one thing that we are really good at, is training. I think there is an opportunity right there, is in our academies and in our different professional development opportunities. To add that in.

Mr. EVERSOLE. Sir, I will just say that we have to start seeing employment post military service as this preservative benefit of transition. If you can take care of employment and find meaningful employment, a lot of the other more dangerous issues that some of our transitioning servicemembers face are mitigated when they have good employment in a network. I do not think the military sees it that way. We really have to work aggressively on this.

We also have to understand that some of these programs, even if they are for more senior enlisted and more senior officers, are really important if the servicemember has a family, because if you have a family, your decision-making matrix looks a lot different than if you are going to go home and sit on Mom's couch. It does not mean that the other person does not have, you know, real fears and concerns, but that person who has a family to take care of will take whatever job they can find, even if it creates long-term problems.

Mr. LUTTRELL. Do you have anything? I ran out of time, I know, I am sorry. Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you.

Representative Budzinski.

Ms. BUDZINSKI. Thank you, Chairman. Thank you, Ranking Member. Thank you to the witnesses for joining us here today on this very important topic. I appreciate Chairman Bost giving us this opportunity with this hearing to highlight what businesses are doing for veteran employment as well as areas for improvement.

My questions for you are really focused on STEM education and how we can expand those opportunities that currently exist or maybe new opportunities we could create for our veterans. I mentioned this at last week's House Veterans' Affairs Committee (HVAC) Education Opportunity hearing that veterans really do continue to face some significant challenges to employment and educational opportunities upon returning from service. Notably, these challenges are even bigger for student veterans, in particular, which is the issue I spoke to, that are seeking education specifically in the STEM fields.

Improving student access to STEM education is crucial for many reasons, including protecting our national security and expanding workforce across industries like healthcare, where we are seeing a severe shortage. That is why I have been proud to introduce the Veterans in STEM Expansion Act, which would improve access to the Edith Norris Rogers STEM Scholarship for Student Veterans, in particular. I believe veteran—I am sorry, I believe Federal legislation like my bill, as well as the opportunity businesses offer, such as yours, are crucial to bridging the gaps for vets that we see in STEM fields.

This leads me to my first question, really for all the panelists. I am curious your observations and if you think there is a lack of STEM veteran graduate available—I am sorry, do you think there is a lack of STEM veteran graduates available to hire? What is

your businesses—what are your businesses doing to improve these opportunities for our veterans?

Maybe I could start with Mr. Jones, if you would not mind.

Mr. JONES. Madam Congressman—Congresswoman, I am sorry, so some of the things we have is Live Better U, I talked about. We also have our Find a Future platform.

Our Find a Future platform acts as kind of like a career services for those personnel and understanding the gaps that are in the industry and what skills that may be best suited for you. We do push them as part of those opportunities where we have underrepresentation from a skill set in our company. That is some of the ways that we do that.

Ms. BUDZINSKI. Great. Any other panelists? Yes.

Ms. IZEN. I would love to speak about that. We have talked a lot about what Home Depot does to hire veterans, but we also have programs, as I mentioned earlier, to help get more people into the construction sector and fill the skilled labor gap, as you just mentioned. Getting that information into the hands of these separating servicemembers early enough so that they are aware there is a SkillBridge program for construction or that these jobs are out there and available is really critical and we could use the help.

Ms. BUDZINSKI. Great. Thank you.

Mr. MCCOY. Thank you for the question and thank you for your work in this space.

Finding opportunities for servicemembers, and we talked about junior enlisted, traditionally aggregate over into colleges. It is finding ways to engage them where they are at, providing these understanding of how do you take this degree and turn it into this job? Talking about that is one of the things that we do when we engage our student veteran population. There is over 750,000 student veterans. There is almost 90,000 in California's community college system alone. We are working to make sure that we meet them where we are and help talk about how to get a real job.

Ms. BUDZINSKI. That is excellent. Great.

Mr. EVERSOLE. Thank you for the question. I have seen across corporate America, especially over the last 5 or 6 years, that companies are investing heavily in STEM training programs, not only for military servicemembers and military spouses, but all their employees. The one thing that we have seen, and we work very closely with companies like Salesforce and Manage Google's Career Forward program, which provides training for veterans and military spouses, is that even with those degrees and certifications, getting a job without relevant work experience is really difficult.

We are firm believers that even, you know, the investment in training is critically important. We also need investments in bridges, experiential bridges, like internships, to help ensure that they get the skill sets and then they get the job, which is critically important.

Ms. BUDZINSKI. That is a great point. Okay. Could I actually stay with you, Mr. Eversole, just for some follow-up questions?

I appreciate the significance of the Hiring Our Heroes program and understand you all partner with other businesses, including some here, to engage veteran talent. From your experience in the program and in your work, what do you think are some of the ways

the Federal Government and industry partners can improve future partnerships to expand access to STEM education for veterans building on what has been discussed?

Mr. EVERSOLE. Yes, that is a great question. Thank you for that question.

I think it is critically important in the first instance to understand where a lot of our servicemembers are coming from, from a background and a socioeconomic perspective. For me personally, even though I retired as a Navy captain, neither of my parents graduated from high school. I grew up in a small town in Indiana, and my dad said, go to college or join the military, and I did both. Finding a job and understanding how those skill sets transition is really difficult.

We have to—and what does real economic opportunity look like in this country? That is a real challenge with a lot of our servicemembers. We have to help educate, in the first instance, what real economic opportunity and pathways into STEM look like and how they are attainable.

For me, a job in the IT industry would have been the local high school computer lab, and that is not what it looks like at all today. We really have to make an investment in helping young Americans understand what those opportunities and pathways look like.

Ms. BUDZINSKI. That is a great point. Great. If I could also ask, similar to what Congressman Franklin asked, are there any additional barriers? Oh, I have run out of—

The CHAIRMAN. Representative.

Ms. BUDZINSKI. Yes, I am out of time. Thank you so much. I yield back.

The CHAIRMAN. Representative Rosendale.

Mr. ROSENDALE. Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Before beginning public service, I owned a real estate, land and development company. When hiring employees in business and Congress, I sought out individuals who took initiative, were leaders, had a strong work ethic, worked well within a team, were critical thinkers, possessed emotional intelligence, and could handle stress. I found that through their service, veterans often have acquired all these important skills and make for great employees.

Unfortunately, on a larger scale, these skills that veterans have acquired through service do not always translate easily to professional success. Veterans are 37 percent more likely to be underemployed than nonveterans. Glad to hear the employment numbers are actually going up, but I am sorry to hear about how many of them are underemployed.

This statistic is very concerning, but I do believe we can fix it. The Transition Assistance Program attempts to provide pointers, including building a resume and interviewing tips. However, I have heard from veterans across Montana that the Transition Assistance Program is not adequate and more focused on checking a box than helping soon-to-be veterans find meaningful employment. I appreciate the committee's focus on improving the Transition Assistance Program, so that it actually translates into material progress for our veterans.

Ms. Izen, in your testimony you mentioned the Home Depot Military Fellowship Program. This is an innovative 12-week cohort pro-

gram that provides transition assistance where each fellow has a host team and veteran mentor. Can you talk more about the successors of that program?

Ms. IZEN. Sure, I would love to do that.

We have our own SkillBridge program. We also partner with Hiring Our Heroes. We have had over 150 fellows—100 of those in the last year, so it is a building program. They are in areas like corporate, such as project managers, analytics, logistics, talent acquisition, HR. We have them in IT and so cyber developers, even tech support for junior enlisted. Then we have them in retail, out in our stores and in our supply chain, for supervisor level experience.

When we bring them into our 11-week program, they get one-on-one coaching. Someone from our military relations team meets with them on a weekly basis. I feel it is really important.

We were talking about what can you do left of transition, but right of transition, driving the camaraderie. Veterans come from a place where they are surrounded by people that are service-minded and have been through a lot of the same things they have. Then they are thrown into a civilian population that does not understand them anymore.

When we take these fellows and then pair them with other veterans at The Home Depot for their 11-week program, they get the taste of what it means to work right of transition and what it means to wear business casual clothes or how you can take your lunch whenever you want to. Like it is the very simple things, and we giggle, but it is true that that is the stuff that they do not understand and do not know who to ask.

That fellowship program has been great for giving them a taste of what civilian work looks like. Then over 80 percent of them have come to work for us. It works really well as a trainer for us and also for the transitioning servicepeople.

Mr. ROSENDALE. Very good. Very good. Yes, they are not used to that because they are accustomed to having Mr. Van Orden barking at them to make sure they get their daily tasks done.

You also spoke about the Home Depot military spouse job transfer program. We spoke about a little bit earlier that guarantees the existing employee at a new store to must move to accommodate the spouse's order. I really like that a lot. Approximately how many spouses have benefited from this program?

Ms. IZEN. That is a great question, and I, unfortunately, do not have an answer because they are transferring across lines and managed by the H.R. team that has them now to the H.R. team that receives them. We ask them to let us know, but they typically do not.

We have a challenge. We track military spouses in Workday, which is our H.R. system, but similar to what veterans do, sometimes they do not want to self-disclose because they think it could impact their potential for being promoted if somebody knows they might leave in a couple of years. Even though we try to track it, we do not have great data on military spouses or when they move. We know it is working. I have lots of stories. We get great anecdotes from the field, but I cannot give you a statistic for how many.

Mr. ROSENDALE. If you are not able to track that, then my follow up to that was going to be, are you tracking the spouses that move

to another location if they are taking advantage of the program? If they are not, okay, so if they start off at X store and they, you know, move to another, if you are not tracking that, then you are also not able to track why they are not taking advantage of it if, in fact, they do not when they go to the other store or are they taking advantage of that?

Ms. IZEN. I think a lot of it happens because Home Depot has a culture of doing the right thing. I think, quite honestly, without a policy, our stores, just because of our culture, would already be doing that. We only hear about it when it goes wrong. Quite frankly, I do not think I have had a time when we have had it go wrong.

We did want to formalize the policy so that it is on paper and we have a process that they can follow, especially if they are going somewhere where there is not a base or they are going somewhere where a position does not exist. We have different processes to kind of follow when that happens.

I will also mention it is not just for the people that are out in the field. We also have locations like our customer care call centers. That is a remote job. We have 5,000 remote jobs we work to place them in. We have apprenticeships and things like that within some of the remote jobs as well.

Mr. ROSENDALE. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chair. Yield back.  
The CHAIRMAN. Representative Cherfilus-McCormick.

Ms. CHERFILUS-McCORMICK. Thank you so much, Mr. Chair, for holding this hearing today, ensuring that we can connect our veterans to economic opportunities and also examine any of the blockades.

My first question is to Mr. Eversole. Thank you for your service. Your testimony mentioned that most military members begin to search for employment after leaving their services, forcing many of them to rely upon unemployment compensation. Many would spend months, if not years, trying to find the right career. The total amount of Unemployed Compensation for Ex-servicemembers (UCX) compensation dropped from 966 million in 2011 to 111 million in 2022. Finding gainful employment before the servicemember transitions out the military saves money.

Can you describe what steps were taking between 2011 and 2022 to achieve these savings?

Mr. EVERSOLE. Thank you, Madam Congresswoman, for this question.

It was a whole of the private and public sector working together to find meaningful solutions in making veterans a top priority. A lot of that was really, in the initial years, was focused on triage and helping unemployed veterans. As we started to really do better with unemployed veterans, really thinking strategically about how we help transitioning service left of their transition to think about career opportunities, to connect with military-ready companies, to receive the right training, to leverage SkillBridge, and then the whole of government policy. There is really—I would not say one thing that really caused the needle to move so much. It was the realization that we all had to work together to make the needle move, and that is what we did.

Ms. CHERFILUS-McCORMICK. Thank you. My next question is for Mr. McCoy. I am happy that you brought up SkillBridge. Thank you for your service and for being here today.

Your testimony mentions that Verizon and the Department of Defense SkillBridge, where you provided separate military personnel with civilian work experience through internships and training during their last 180 days of service. Can you talk about how many veterans take advantage of SkillBridge through Verizon?

Mr. MCCOY. Yes. Thank you for the question.

We get a lot of interest. The work that Mr. Jones did to establish the Verizon program for the last 10 years has been well known and well recognized, and so we get a lot of interest. We require that the business have some type of headcount to be able to host and to hire them at the end of this, so that there is a successful work opportunity at the end of that training. We have been able to host 215 servicemembers and military spouses through our program, hiring 183 of those individuals.

Ms. CHERFILUS-McCORMICK. Now, do you have a breakdown of the veterans who use SkillBridge program by racial, ethnic, or even sexual orientation demographics?

Mr. MCCOY. We have some of those, not all of those.

Ms. CHERFILUS-McCORMICK. Will we be able to get a copy of that just to make sure everyone is taking advantage of this program?

Mr. MCCOY. Yes.

Ms. CHERFILUS-McCORMICK. Thank you so much.

Then, Mr. McCoy, prior to coming to Congress, I was Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of a company that recruiting and retaining top talent was always our focus. How has Verizon worked to recruit and retain veterans?

Mr. MCCOY. Thank you for the question. We work really hard to make sure. We encourage, first, self-identification because if we do not know you are there, we cannot include you in messaging. This week there is lots of opportunities. I was able to give out 148 tickets to NFL Salute to Service games, or opportunities to unfurl the flag at stadiums. I was able to invite servicemembers across New York City and San Diego to participate in parades.

While those are the really fun ones, we are also there to reach out to and connect. If you do not have your military badge on your profile, you maybe do not know that that person has some shared experiences and it is building that camaraderie, you know. We have all talked about that. That shared sense of service brings us all together, the experiences that we have had, and we make sure that we do that. We recruit them to self-identify, and then we encourage them to self-identify once they become an employee to help them be retained and engaged.

Ms. CHERFILUS-McCORMICK. This is a general question. It is my last. What could Congress do to help you retain and identify more talented veterans? It is for anybody.

Mr. MCCOY. Well, the TAP program would help us recruit more, expanding the impact, the ability to add virtual connections. We talked about junior servicemembers moving from one side of the country to the other. Right now, if you do not physically have a presence there to show up to attend those TAP events, they might

not know about the Verizon opportunities in California as they move from the East Coast to the West Coast or vice versa.

We want to be where we can be, as many places as we can. Virtualizing some of those opportunities would help us deliver our information and share those opportunities more broadly. Because as we have all alluded to, they are an elusive creature, that veteran.

Ms. IZEN. I will just second what he said, because having a consolidated resource to be able to talk to people, because we are a small team. Military Relations at the Home Depot—we are small but mighty, but we cannot be everywhere. When there is local bases doing local things, we cannot always make it there. Having some way in central to be able to talk to people separating would be fantastic.

Ms. CHERFILUS-McCORMICK. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I yield back.

The CHAIRMAN. Representative Self, you are recognized.

Mr. SELF. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I hope I am not replotting old ground. Now that we are back with regular legislative business, we do have to juggle committees. I do want to explore your access to bases that I heard in your opening remarks. The 180 days under SkillBridge, how many of your applicants actually get the 180 days? What percentage? Any idea? We will just go down the line.

Mr. JONES. Thank you, Mr. Congressman. All the way.

Mr. SELF. Airborne.

Mr. JONES. I think I would say that they enter in 180 days, but we probably do not get them for about—we probably only get them for about 90 of those days due to the limitations that we have from the fellowship program.

From a SkillBridge standpoint, I think there is a little bit more flexibility there. When you start working about SkillBridge, now it is a command to organization relationship that you have to work with. I think that is where the opportunity is.

What has benefited us from the fellowship program is that it is housed in a relationship, a Memorandum of Agreement is housed at HOH, and so we do not have to work with that individual chain of command on that. I think there is an opportunity there.

I do not think—I would say probably about 90 percent of them are not maximizing the 180 days.

Mr. SELF. That is because of their command?

Mr. JONES. I would say they are limited to that or they are unaware of the SkillBridge program or the fellowship program, frankly.

Mr. SELF. Okay. Thank you.

Mr. McCoy.

Mr. MCCOY. Thank you for the question. We also do not see servicemembers taking 180 days. One of the things that we look at is we try to put them in on the back end so that we can hire them immediately so there is not a gap. We take advantage of 90.

Ms. IZEN. I will reiterate what my partner at Walmart said. I think the bigger problem is being aware of the program and then getting approval on the front end to participate in the program. Generally, once they make it to us and they are a couple of weeks in, we have had a couple get pulled back, but they are pretty com-



mitted at that point. The bigger problem is, especially in the junior enlisted ranks, getting the approval to participate up front.

Mr. SELF. You see an obstacle in the command approval process?

Ms. IZEN. Correct.

Mr. SELF. With that, I yield back, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. Representative McGarvey.

Mr. MCGARVEY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you guys all so much for being here. Really appreciate the work you all are doing to highlight the importance of veterans coming back in and having jobs in our community.

I am excited about this hearing. I want to highlight the need to have our veterans come home to jobs with dignity and good pay.

While we are talking about that, though, let us talk about our veterans in specifically right now, we know that almost half a million vets pay more than 50 percent of their income for rent. There is still food insecurity; that is a major problem. The Department of Labor just released in their October jobs report that 8.4 million workers are working multiple jobs now.

When we look at our vets, we know that our vets do not just deserve jobs, they deserve careers. We are talking dignified, good paying work, opportunities for growth. I want to drill into this a little bit when we talk about the jobs veterans are getting.

Mr. Jones, I know, we will start with you. Walmart has done an amazing job, 530,000 veterans hired over the last decade. That includes military spouses. That is a huge number. My brother is still Active Duty right now. I can tell you grateful to the commitment to hiring veterans. I would like to get a better sense of what that number means in reality.

Let us say you are a recently separated junior NCO. What is the starting salary? Are they earning minimum wage? Just above it? What kind of job is that person getting at Walmart?

Mr. JONES. Mr. Congressman, thank you very much. Great question.

I think it is a diversity. We do not limit where your entry point is. Our goal is to meet that person where they are in their transition. If that means right now that is working in our store as a cashier, because if that is what is right for their career and we give them experience to our Live Better U to educate and upskill, then we want to make sure that they are gainfully employed and that they have income coming in. That is the first and prominent. We do not want them unemployed.

Second, we found that they advanced very quickly through the ranks. We are not limited to frontline of workers. We have personnel through our entire organization. We are a self-sustaining organization just like the military. Giving them that exposure to understand where they can be or where they are at is something that we really take pride in focusing on.

There is no limitation to where they start in the company. We hope that they are working in jobs that are equivalent to what they have worked in, but we know that not all skills, hard skills, will transfer, but soft skills definitely will.

Mr. MCGARVEY. Yes, absolutely. Getting into that just a little bit more, you mentioned LBU, which I want to ask about, because we talk about this idea of jobs versus careers. We know that Walmart

has promoted 63,000 of that 530,000 number and that includes veterans. It also includes military spouses, which we have talked about. I do not have a breakout of that. That is about 12 percent of those veterans have received promotions.

How many are taking advantage of LBU and the programs that you are working on? What does that potential for promotion look like?

Mr. JONES. I do not have the exact number, sir. I will tell you that early on, as soon as they are onboarded, that is the first thing that they are eligible for. From day one, they are eligible for, you know, tuition assistance for free from LBU.

I do not have that number. I can follow up with that number, but they are eligible. We over communicate that through our performance agreements all throughout the year. Every time there is an opportunity to talk about how to career progress, that is an opportunity to speak about that.

Mr. MCGARVEY. I appreciate that, because one of the things we are looking at here is how can we help? Right? How can we help in this?

We look at apprenticeships, when we look at on-the-job training, we know that Department of Labor-Veterans Employment and Training Services (DOL-VETS) program connects vets with apprenticeship programs, that program has led to good outcomes. Last week, we had a subcommittee hearing where we noted that less than 2 percent of post 9–11 GI Bill recipients use that on-the-job training program. I was wondering if you were having more success with that, which is why I was asking about LBU in there.

Just a little bit of time left, so I will go to Mr. Eversole. I do believe in the apprenticeship model. I do want our veterans to have good jobs, good paying careers that they can get into when they leave. What more can be done to increase the involvement of veterans and registered apprenticeships? What can employers do and what can we do in Congress? You get the last 30 seconds.

Mr. EVERSOLE. Thank you, sir, for that question. Apprenticeships are critically important for our servicemembers, much like SkillBridge. We have to do a better job of communicating those opportunities beforehand and leveraging things like SkillBridge as a pre-apprenticeship that then transition into a full-time apprenticeship.

This is a function of communication and the Department of Labor, this is an area where the apprenticeships have grown significantly and benefited our veterans and their families incredibly.

Mr. MCGARVEY. Thank you guys for what you do. Mr. Chairman. I yield back.

The CHAIRMAN. Representative Van Orden.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Ms. Izen, although I am not a Purple Heart recipient, I want you to take this back to your bosses and say thank you for having Purple Heart-specific parking spaces in front of your stores. I mean, I know that just seems like it is nothing, but to me, that is an incredibly powerful gesture, so thank you for that.

Mr. Rosendale was referring to me yelling at people and it is part of my nature as a senior enlisted guy. First Sergeant, you know what I am talking about.

Could you give me, anybody here, a list of specific bases that are not allowing you access? The reason I ask this is because I learned in the military, when a letter shows up from a congressional office, which it will, to the base commander, if they are not allowing you access, I would like specifics. I know we speak in generalities lots of times, but we will type that letter up and I will get an answer immediately because that is wholly unacceptable.

Captain, what has your experience been with dual vets and their Disabled Veteran Outreach Program offices?

Mr. EVERSOLE. Thank you for that question, sir.

I do not have any specific knowledge of the Department of Labor's vets disabled outreach efforts, so I will respectfully decline to do that. I am on the, in full disclosure, on the Federal Advisory Committee for the Department of Labor Vets. I know that from the Department of Labor and that committee's perspective, making sure that our disabled vets have the right resources and tools to be successful is a top priority and certainly something that we, as a Federal advisory committee, talk about all the time.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Okay. Thank you.

First Sergeant.

Mr. JONES. Sir, I think—

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Sorry, First Arm.

Mr. JONES. First Arm.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. My bad.

Mr. JONES. Sir, I think one of the biggest opportunities is working with the Development and Operations (DevOps) and levers in each of the career one-stop offices. As a best practice, those are some of the things that we train our recruiters on in working out when we do outreach.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. You are intimately familiar with these programs?

Mr. JONES. Yes, sir.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. How often do you use them and what is your throughput, would you say?

Mr. JONES. In my current role, I am new to Walmart. I have been here for about 70 days. In my previous work, I would say on average, we would outreach to them once a month, just ongoing communications about opportunities that are available in those communities. I think instead of looking at it from a national level, I mean, really focusing at the county level is really important because they have a good understanding of the skills of those personnel, what their needs and resources are. If they have a disability, we can work directly with them ahead of time, being hired to work with our accommodations team to identify those things.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Very well. Mr. McCoy.

Mr. MCCOY. Thank you for the question. Thank you for your service.

Tommy was my boss, so he trained me on how to do this. We still do that. We set up regular—

Mr. VAN ORDEN. I am sorry, is someone ping-pong for a submarine back there? Okay, thanks.

Mr. MCCOY. We reach out to them based on the geographic location, like you mentioned. We make sure that we empower the non-military recruiting team to understand what do these organizations

do? What are these opportunities to engage with them? We host information sessions with them, and we are regularly outreaching and try to get as many veterans to apply as we can.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Very well. Then I have a minute 30 left. Ma'am, are you familiar with these guys?

Ms. IZEN. I am not intimately familiar with those programs. I would say that we treat our disabled veterans the way we treat all of our disabled associates, and we have processes to make sure we do the right thing for them.

As a company, we do focus on disabled veterans and helping them through the Foundation investment I mentioned earlier of half a billion dollars to veterans causes. One of the things that we do is help critically wounded veterans have living spaces that work for them. There is an example in the testimony that I have on file, and with groups like Gary Sinise Foundation. We outfit their homes to make sure that they have the appropriate living spaces.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Okay. Well, I am just going to take a couple seconds to thank you all very much. I am the chairman of the subcommittee responsible for the transition assistance program. Mr. Levin, who had to go to another committee hearing, is the ranking member. I want you to know we are working very, very hard and we put our veterans first.

If there is anything, you do not have to wait for a congressional hearing. If you guys have any ideas on how to make this transition period more useful, I would like you to reach out directly to my office. As we know, that 24-month window from the time you take off your uniform is when, unfortunately, a lot of our veterans commit suicide because you lose your rank and your status and your uniform and twice the husband, half the paycheck, that sort of stuff.

Please feel free to reach out directly to me at any point that you—you know what I am talking about. Just God bless you and your families and your work. Thank you so much.

Mr. Chairman. I yield back.

The CHAIRMAN. Mr. Mrvan, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. MRVAN. I just wanted to take a moment. I realize it is about employment, but with Home Depot, I was a local elected official, worked with Jim Chancellor, who is an advocate for veterans. Home Depot, on two occasions, donated goods for a Veterans Service Organization (VSO), for Disabled American Veterans (DAV) for a roof, and then their employees came out and did the roof. Then for another home for transition for homeless veterans, they supplied all the goods and the windows. I thank you, and I am not picking and choosing winners, but I am giving you personal experience on the overreaching value of your organizations with veterans and their families.

That being said, the period of transitioning out of the military is an extremely stressful time. Servicemembers are balancing their responsibilities to military while figuring out where they are going to live, find a job, or enroll in school. The bare minimum our military services should provide is a comprehensive readout of the skills and experiences of servicemember and how these skills and experiences qualify the individual for certain jobs in the civilian

workplace. However, this is not the case, and only the most basic summary of services is provided.

In the effort to facilitate a smoother transition of military personnel into civilian employment what specific measures or initiatives do you believe employers can recommend to the military that would help improve the process of transitioning or translating military skills and experiences into valuable assets into the civilian job market?

Mr. MCCOY. Thank you for the question, and thank you for your work in this space.

One of the things that we see in the civilian side is certifications. The military is a heavy training organization, but we do not provide certifications for the skills and experiences that you learn. You are not getting an International Information System Security Certification Consortium International Information System Security Certification Consortium (ISC2), Certified Information Systems Security Professional (CISSP) certification for going to a communications school.

Implementing some of the rigors of civilian certification processes could help with that transition because you understand your skills and experience that transition directly into requirements that are written in job descriptions. That would help, but it could be portable across state lines and it could be easily implemented.

Mr. JONES. Sir, I would just add, you know, we understand the importance of that at Walmart. Our foundation has focused on creating transition tools or focusing on skills with some of our non-profits to help with that translation of skills and identifying those areas and allowing them to be available to them so they understand where they are fit. Working through the Manufacturing Institute or with Hire Heroes to create a taxonomy of where they can map into jobs directly from their military transcripts into Walmart is what we are really focusing on. That is underway right now.

Mr. MRVAN. Okay. I guess just to take it one step farther, how are you communicating with the DOD to make sure that that is a—those skill sets are being administered on their end prior to?

Mr. JONES. It is a public partnership. We are working with MilGears and COOLs through that communication. As they are starting to identify and need their transcript, their military transcripts, that is where they can do it.

We also sit on boards with the Department of Labor and Chamber of Commerce to communicate what we are working on with that. That is really how the message is getting out, sir.

Mr. MRVAN. Okay, thank you. With that, I yield back.

The CHAIRMAN. Representative Ciscomani, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. CISCOMANI. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you to our witnesses for coming before the committee to testify.

Companies across the United States are working hard to support our brave men and women who have served our country and protected our freedoms. Before we reschedule this hearing, my constituent, Lauryn Dougherty, who is a small business owner in Tucson, Arizona, was set to participate in this hearing. I want to take a moment to thank her for her willingness to participate in the legislative process and for her hard work and dedication serving our

Nation. Lauren now owns and runs a small business, Cracked Armor Roasting Company, while attending school and also raising a family.

Now, Mr. Jones, the Walmart Foundation is something this committee sees as a unique program to help small businesses, like Lauryn's, around the country grow. What impact has the foundation had on veteran-owned small businesses?

Mr. JONES. Thank you, Mr. Congressman. Obviously, we have our open call. You all are familiar with that. A part of that commitment, we committed to spend \$350 billion over 10 years on items made and assembled in the United States. We really focus on veteran-owned business as well. We just had that last week where we had our open call.

One of those businesses is Grind Oral Care, sells U.S. made toothpaste, but is a veteran-owned business. They came to our open call and they received the Golden Ticket, and we are continuing to do that.

In the future, we look to work with IVMF to focus on what are the areas of opportunity for veteran entrepreneurs that need help and where are they lacking resources? We are going to come together and formulate a panel in conjunction with the Certified Veteran-Owned Business Coalition to work on that, sir.

Mr. CISCOMANI. That is great. Let us know if there is anything we can do to help on that as well. I think that is a great effort. Very interested in helping out in whatever way we can.

You know, my district in Congressional District (CD) 6 in Arizona and the southeastern corner of Arizona, it is home to about 70,000 veterans, a little over 70,000 veterans. All these things are highly important. With our veterans also come their families and those that are in service now, but also our veterans. They deserve all the support and resources the government can provide as they transition from service life to civilian life. We cannot do this alone. That is why the work our businesses are doing to support and attract veterans and their families also is so important.

To all the witnesses, could you please speak briefly to the initiatives and programs your organizations provide for servicemembers, spouses, and families as well? What opportunities do they have and what benefits are they provided as well?

Ms. IZEN. I will start on this one. I talked previously a lot about the military spouse transfer program and how we have remote work capabilities for the military spouse career, so I will set that aside.

We also try to make sure that we take care of the whole family. When you move a long way, you will arrive somewhere new and you need childcare. We have resources to help you find local childcare. You need new doctors. We have resources that help you find new doctors in your area. You probably are stressed out. We have 24/7 counseling available for you.

It is also the softer side. It is not just the career, but the softer side of what comes along with the move and the stress of a deployment.

Then we also have guides and things that when a servicemember deploys that works for The Home Depot or is a Guardsman who takes time away, we have guides that tells the stores or their man-

agers what to do during that time. At 60 days, you should send a letter. At 6 months, you need to check in on the family. At holidays, be sure you reach out, which sounds so simple, but when you are busy and you are a leader in a store, you are not thinking about what you can do to help those families. Guides like that that are so simple can be so impactful to make sure we are taking care of the whole family.

Mr. CISCOMANI. Thank you. Thank you.

Mr. MCCOY. Thank you for the question. We do a lot of the similar things. We are working with our team members to make sure that we know, hey, when somebody goes out, we reach out to them. We send them care packages, we send them letters. We do a lot of letter writing across our entire organization to make sure that the deployed servicemember, as well as the spouse and the family left home, are engaged and retained and just part of the community that is Verizon's family. We do a lot of that work.

We also have portability of careers. We also help with transitioning across different career areas with upskilling through our Tuition Assistance Program, but also our internal certification programs.

Mr. CISCOMANI. Thank you.

Mr. JONES. Sorry, all the same. The only thing to add on, and I know these organizations do the same, is our associate resource group, our employee resource group engagement. Then during the onboarding process, making them aware of what is available to them from a benefit standpoint. We do a really good job of that.

Then just following up through our employee resource groups or associate resource groups as companies, I think that is the biggest thing.

Mr. CISCOMANI. Thank you.

Mr. EVERSOLE. We are focused on employment. We have to ebb the 21 percent unemployment that military spouses are facing and really help the families have the income they need to be successful.

Mr. CISCOMANI. Excellent. Thank you. Mr. Chair, I yield back. Thank you.

The CHAIRMAN. Now I recognize the gentlewoman from the other part of Illinois, Representative Ramirez.

Ms. RAMIREZ. Thank you, Chairman Bost. I also echo my colleagues' sentiments thanking every witness that is here today.

We know that high-quality, good-paying jobs provide veterans access to safe and stable housing. Right now, our Nation is facing a housing crisis. In my city of Chicago, the part of the state I am in, rent has gone up by 5.7 percent in certain parts of the city. Some communities are reporting that veterans and others are having to now pay sometimes even 30 percent more when they are having to renew their lease. Instead of passing critical legislation to fully fund and meet our Nation's housing needs, today when we go into the chamber, we are going to be voting on appropriations bill that will cripple vital housing efforts by cutting billions from Federal programs for rental assistance and the construction of new affordable housing units.

I think it is imperative that we continue to prioritize housing as a human right, including especially for our veterans. I know we may not be able to fix the housing crisis today, and certainly in

this hearing now, but I know we can take one important step by ensuring that veterans have jobs with living wages that allow them to stay afloat with a safe roof over their heads.

Just talk a little bit more about housing. This is a question for Ms. Izen and I guess also for Verizon and Walmart. Do you hire veterans that are experiencing homelessness?

Ms. IZEN. Of course. We do not distinguish based on where you live.

Ms. RAMIREZ. Great. Do you keep track—yes, go ahead. Yes or no?

Mr. MCCOY. Yes.

Ms. RAMIREZ. Yes. I assume you work with them, of course. What would you say? Do you keep track of how many veterans who you are hiring are experiencing homelessness or at risk of homelessness?

Ms. IZEN. We have enough trouble even tracking who the veterans are. They do not want to tell us. I would imagine getting a veteran to tell us that they are also homeless would be a very difficult thing.

I will say, at The Home Depot, we have what is called the Homer Fund, and it is an associate financial assistance program. It is our internal charity that is funded by our associates, for our associates, that helps people, just like the situation you are talking about. When they get down on hard times, somebody gets sick, somebody passes away, this organization steps in to help with that.

It would certainly be the case, now that the person is working for us, if we realize that they were down on their luck in that way.

Ms. RAMIREZ. At orientation, is there an opportunity for employees to know about these programs, should they need them?

Ms. IZEN. Absolutely.

Ms. RAMIREZ. Okay, great.

Ms. IZEN. Absolutely.

Ms. RAMIREZ. Great. I want to now talk a little bit about diversity and certainly the diversity that exists within our veteran community.

In this committee, one of my priorities has been amplifying and advocating for women veterans, disabled veterans we have been talking about today, and veterans of color. I know that they are a critical part of the veteran community, and often they go unrecognized.

This is a question, yes or no, I think across the board for all of you. Do you have programs that are tailored specifically to women veterans, disabled veterans, or people of color? I will start with you.

Mr. JONES. Yes.

Ms. RAMIREZ. Thank you. Ms. Izen.

Ms. IZEN. No.

Ms. RAMIREZ. Okay. Let me ask a follow-up question. Do your organizations keep track of demographic information, included but not limited to gender and race of the veterans utilizing your programs?

Mr. EVERSOLE. Yes.

Ms. RAMIREZ. Okay. Through the what?

Mr. MCCOY. Through our SG report.



Ms. RAMIREZ. Okay.

Mr. MCCOY. Yes.

Ms. IZEN. Yes. Our fellowship is 72 percent diverse.

Ms. RAMIREZ. Okay. Numbers and data can shed light on who is being unintentionally left out or who can be better served. When organizations produce their Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) or their diversity, equity, and inclusion reports, it is vital that veterans are included in all that data. I would be interested in hearing, and this could be an answer from any of you, particularly those with specialized programs, what are some of the greatest needs you are hearing from some of these communities? Either of you can answer what we have left.

Mr. MCCOY. I think one of the biggest things that we see, everybody keeps saying this, is self-identification. We see women veterans are one of the least likely groups to self-identify. There is a variety of different reasons that go behind that, but making sure that they understand that it is a safe opportunity for them, that they are not going to be put in a position where, hey, you have to self-identify or you do not have to self-identify, it is 100 percent a choice. We want to make sure that the opportunities that we create for female veterans are unique and they are specialized to them. Sorry.

Ms. RAMIREZ. Did anyone else want to answer? Okay.

I would just emphasize, I think it is really important, as we hear from a lot of our veterans who will not self-identify, who, of course, it is the same. We see even in school when trying to get data of how many families are experiencing homelessness, that we have different efforts and resources to help identify those needs, because you are going to see that impact in the workforce. You are going to see that in their performance. Certainly for our veterans who have other things that are happening, it is important to be able to tailor programming and provide that outreach. I would love to—particular programs that you have, you can send the information over. It would be really helpful.

I had just one last question, and this just goes following up on the TAP program. I heard you saying virtualizing the program. Is there anything else you think that we could be doing to make the TAP program more effective?

Mr. MCCOY. Centralizing points of contact.

Ms. RAMIREZ. Got it. Thank you. I yield back. Thank you, Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you. The gentlewoman yields back.

This panel, we want to say thank you for being here today. I think there was a great amount of information that was given to us and we appreciate that. We let this panel be dismissed, and we will set up for the next panel.

Mr. MCCOY. Thank you all. Thank you.

[Recess]

The CHAIRMAN. Okay. I would like to now introduce our second panel, if I can. First off, let me say to our second panel, thank you for sitting through the long questions of the first panel. Let me also say we are hoping to get your information and your statements. The advantage of that is we will not be asking you a lot of ques-

tions, because right now it looks like about two of us against you. Not against you, but for you.

First, we have Mr. Joe Gerardi?

Mr. GELARDI. Gelardi, sir.

The CHAIRMAN. Gelardi, and he is president and chief executive officer of Vectrona, LLC. Correct? All right. Then also we have Mr. Chris Maynor, owner of Daniel Deans Clothing Store. I want to welcome you both, but I want to say a special welcome to Chris and Chelsea, to Washington, DC, to talk about veteran small businesses and employment issues. They own and operate a store that is actually in my hometown, right across the street from our own business. Daniel Deans is where you can purchase a wide range of clothing and outdoor accessories through their small business. Chris and Chelsea are active in helping veterans within the community throughout services and building connections with local veterans organizations.

It is a pleasure to see them to do this work and what they are already doing in Murfreesboro in helping our local community. This commitment is excited to hear about, and we want to continue to grow veteran-owned small businesses across the country. I want to thank you both for being here today. Then we are looking forward to your testimony.

With that, I will have you both stand, if I can.

[Witnesses sworn.]

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you. You may be seated, and let the records reflect that all witnesses have answered in the affirmative.

Mr. Gelardi, you are now recognized for 5 minutes for your opening statement.

#### **STATEMENT OF JOE GELARDI**

Mr. GELARDI. Thank you, Chairman Bost, esteemed committee members. Thank you for this platform to discuss a pivotal role of veterans and veteran entrepreneurship in our Nation's economy and security. Having served with exemplary veterans throughout my own 23-year Navy career, most of the time was spent flying F-14 Tomcats and F-18 Hornets before founding Vectrona. Throughout that time, I witnessed firsthand veterans' unwavering dedication and integrity, and these qualities remain intact as they transition to civilian life, enriching our businesses and communities.

Veteran entrepreneurs employ nearly 6 million American workers and generate about 1.2 trillion in annual revenue, businesses large and small. Veterans represent just 2.3 percent of the workforce, but veteran businesses account for an oversized 7.3 percent of the U.S. private sector economy. This is not just a statistic, it is a testament to their indomitable spirit and the value they add post service, including the experience and mission insight that they bring to critically needed in the Department of Defense.

However, as Secretary of Defense Austin observed earlier this year in his small business strategy, the participation of small business in the defense industrial base has declined by over 40 percent in the past decade, and the number of small businesses receiving contract awards has dropped by more than half. While the Secretary's initiatives to provide new training resources is commend-

able, his observations reflect a dire need to reform not small business training, but our approach to acquisitions.

Acquisition professionals need more education to better understand how their decisions, policies, and processes create increasing barriers to success that hurt veteran entrepreneurs and professionals, the war fighter, and the Nation as a whole.

Our veterans find themselves up against a burgeoning regulatory maze that can be discouraging and disheartening and stifles the very innovation we need to maintain our technological edge. Take Section 174, the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act, for instance, which effectively penalizes veteran small businesses for tackling our Nation's most challenging technology needs.

General Brown, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, previously challenged the Air Force to accelerate change or lose in the face of growing peer threats. Left unchecked, Section 174 is a massive speed brake on veteran participation in small business innovation research and puts our competitive edge at risk.

Other programs intended to level playing field for all, such as the Alaskan Native Corporation (ANC) Program, makes it much harder for veteran businesses to compete by giving ANCs nearly 20 times the contracting power of other small businesses.

The transition from active duty life to civilian life to participate in business in the economy is fraught with challenges. Existing transition programs miss the mark because information and assistance often comes too late in the process and training is often out of touch with current private sector business practices. To remedy this, we must revamp transition programs to be more adaptable to servicemembers unique needs and schedules, and be more reflective of the differences between military and business culture.

Transition challenges are not just about the economics. They are also about the human cost. Without adequate support, pressure on our veterans can lead to heightened emotional stress and financial insecurity, which exacerbates mental health issues and substance abuse, in some cases resulting in a veteran suicide rate of 22 per day, a national tragedy that speaks volumes about the urgency of improving our support, infrastructure, and transition programs.

Robust support is essential not just for the well being of veterans, but also for businesses and the Nation that depends on them. By equipping veterans with the tools for success in the business world, we honor their service and encourage future generations to serve, knowing that their skills and sacrifices will be valued both in and out of uniform.

Veterans lead in combat, in business, in innovation, and in government. I urge this committee to champion reforms that will empower veterans to contribute further to our Nation through entrepreneurship and innovation. By doing so, we not only repay our debt of gratitude, but we also invest in the very fabric of our Nation's future.

Thank you for your unwavering support to veterans, and I look forward to supporting you and enacting meaningful changes.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF JOE GELARDI APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Mr. Gelardi, for your testimony.

Now the written text statement of Mr. Gelardi will be entered into the hearing record.

Mr. Maynor, you are now recognized for 5 minutes for your opening statement remarks.

#### **STATEMENT OF CHRIS MAYNOR**

Mr. MAYNOR. Chairman Bost, members of the committee, thank you for your opportunity today to provide my remarks for this critical issue.

As a 15-year Army combat infantryman with three tours to Iraq, I never imagined myself opening a small business. For a large part of my life I have had the opportunity, relying on my fellow comrades for support. My life changed once I got out of the service, transferring from military life to civilian life. I did not have a meaningful purpose in my life. If it was not for family and friends, I might have been one of those 22 veterans today. When we leave the service, you feel like you have lost a purpose you had in the military.

In 2017, I married my wife, and she showed me that I did have a purpose, a drive to succeed, not only for myself and my family, but also my fellow comrades. I started back to school at John A. Logan College, receiving my degree in heating and air in 2018. I became an active member of the local Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) and moved all the way up in chairs become district commander. About the same time, I took a job at John A. Logan College in the heating and Air department.

Between using my vacation and sick time for days off for PTSD reasons or days with VFW events or helping fight for my fellow veterans' benefits, I had no time for family or my five children. I mentioned many times to my wife that I would like to open a men's clothing store. I figured it would—I would open my own business and I was having a difficult day with PTSD, I would not risk losing my job, taking more time off.

Finally, after some more convincing, my wife agreed and time would start our own small business, a men's clothing store named Daniel Deans. We wanted to open a store that offered varying men's clothing along with accessories, like Hurricane Marsh, Burlebo, Jim's Formal Wear, and we aimed to create a place where men could physically interact with items to try on and be one of the local presence in the community.

We quickly learned it was no walk in a park starting our own business with all my struggles, Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), PTSD, challenges left to my co-owner. She had multiple long hours, phone calls, countless emails back and forth with different companies, searching for websites claiming to have knowledge for veterans starting small businesses. With not understanding any of the rules or regulations of all the programs, it became difficult to try to figure out we even qualify for any of them. We just stopped trying at the point we had proceed opening a business with our own—in our own pocket putting us in debt.

There is such a high demand for veterans trying to move forward in life, become business owners. They are trying to find new purpose in life after the military. Years ago, it used to be more service officers, we knew everything there was to know about veteran ben-

efits. Maybe if we took things back to those times and focus on getting more service officers out helping veterans, we might have more veteran-owned businesses.

If we develop something for veterans to help other veterans, we might get a better turnout. I believe civilians do care about veterans, but they do not understand the bond of a veteran taking care of another veteran. There is no other stronger camaraderie.

Veteran service officers are underpaid and overworked and, as a result, for that reason we do not have many left. If we must keep all the resources for grants and funding opportunity on websites, I would like to recommend it be developed to present it in a way we say in the military KISS, keep it stupid simple.

A user-friendly website, three buttons: veterans, disabled veterans, women veterans. The user could easily click their category, fill out the application and the paperwork, and apply for grants and funding automatically.

We appreciate your time today giving me the opportunity to further discuss struggles for trying to open up veterans small business. Thank you, Chairman Bost. This concedes my testimony.

Again, thank you for, Ranking Member Takano, an opportunity to testify on this opportunity issue before the committee. I am prepared to take any questions you committee members may have.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF CHRIS MAYNOR APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Mr. Maynor. We are going to open it to questions now, and I will take the first 5 minutes.

As a veteran yourself, Mr. Maynor, what do you think the barriers that still exist in hindering veteran employment opportunities or are there opportunities to start new businesses?

Mr. MAYNOR. The information for the veterans to find is still difficult. It is not easily out there for them.

The CHAIRMAN. Okay. When Daniel Deans—and I know you just opened in September, what were some of the barriers that you faced at the beginning of trying to get it open, and what are some of the barriers you are facing now that you are open?

Mr. MAYNOR. Well, we looked into getting grants to help us, and we could not find any. One website, we called them, and they are like, what is on the website? Figure it out. That should not be the case. We just started funding ourselves. We put ourselves in debt now, and we are trying to get out, but we are also trying to grow. That would be—

The CHAIRMAN. You are also still trying to keep up with—both you and your wife are keeping up with jobs on your own besides owning a business.

Mr. MAYNOR. I still work at the college at nighttime on second shift. My wife does a lot of it. I work during a day, and then I go right back to work at nighttime, then also trying to spend time with five children.

The CHAIRMAN. In your testimony, you mentioned that when you left the military and transitioned into civilian life, you did not know the meaning of life. We are happy, first off, to have you sitting here before us today and that you are representing small businesses. What—the other concerns that I think we need to put on record, you say looking for grants, are there—and you were talking

about VSOs. Do VSOs have the access to know and understand what helps small businesses or not? I know you are involved with them pretty heavy.

Mr. MAYNOR. Yes, I believe they all have it. I think it is more of a state-level VSO jobs other than just relying on the American Legion or the VFW to help that VSO.

The VSOs, you know, when you return to Illinois, they help you sign up for the free hunting license or if you are a certain disability rating, they help you sign up for that stuff. That should be an office. We should just be able to walk right into either your local courthouse or one of the National Guard units where there is a person there that can help you out. Just like they have a recruiter there to sign you up. There should be something to help you transit it out.

The CHAIRMAN. I am going to ask you something from your level at the VSOs. Have we seen a reduction in rural areas in the amount of VSOs that are out in the rural areas that could provide for that?

Mr. MAYNOR. Yes, sir. Unfortunately, the VSO the VFW had in Marion committed suicide. We are down to one for the American Legion, one only by appointments, and our state level, she is working three counties, so it is very—

The CHAIRMAN. That is a hindrance not only in small business, but that is also a hindrance to other things that VSOs provide for and counsel on.

Mr. MAYNOR. Yes, yes.

The CHAIRMAN. Okay. Well, I want to say thank you for you being here today.

One other thing I wanted to bring up, and I was wishing that Mr. Crane had not left the room, because I just wanted to bring up the fact that, you know, he has a veteran small—Eli Crane, our member, he has a veteran small business, and they make little things like this that are just fantastic, and they are veterans. I gave these away whenever I was running for a ranking member. His business, and I hope that his testimony will be given later on to explain how he found a way to become the entrepreneur that he is with his small business as well. We wish you luck with that.

I will yield back the balance of my time. Mr. Mrvan, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. MRVAN. Thank you. I just wanted to follow up with one other question on the ability or the availability to resources for you. I am going to mention a couple specific to see if you are aware, just for our knowledge.

When it came to accessing capital, was there any access, either through the Small Business Administration (SBA) or through Dolves, D-O-L-V-ETS, Dolvets, Veterans Business Outreach Centers, or the veterans lending program at your bank or financial institution?

Mr. MAYNOR. Sir, we come from a small community and did not know anything of that.

Mr. MRVAN. Okay. Then, so, in order to put it together, you depended on your own resources. Have you heard of or is there anything that advances any type of assistance going forward as a veteran for small businesses that you have been aware of?

Mr. MAYNOR. No, sir. We have been reaching out to other veteran businesses and trying to grow with them and offer their products in our store and try to—I get phone calls all the time from local veterans wants to try to startup a car cleaning business, and another one is starting up a coffee business. They are asking me, where do I go to these grants? I am like, I am not sure. As soon as I find out, I am going to get it to you.

Mr. MRVAN. It does not go unnoticed, because we are here to learn from your experience. When you said you went on a website and then you contacted them and they said, what is on the website is what is available, can you share what the website was?

Mr. MAYNOR. That would have been my wife that did that, because I do not have the patience half the time when it comes to that.

Mr. MRVAN. Fair enough.

Mr. MAYNOR. I am a hard charger, so it just—it is, you know, for a veteran that, you know, with fighting PTSD and TBI and all that, it should not be so hard to look for veteran benefits. It should not be dangled in front of us, here is this, or not even know about it, because I believe that we need to come up a way to help our veterans, especially in small communities.

Mr. MRVAN. I think every member who sits here, who protects and advances veteran benefits want to make sure that it is not a facade, that they exist so that they have a purpose. Your message is loud and clear, and we can do our best to be able to take that experience, that you had to be able to translate that to the VA and VA benefits who provide those. How do we get to rural areas? How, when people are discharged, do they get that information? There is a benefit to you being here. I thank you very much.

Mr. MAYNOR. Thank you.

Mr. MRVAN. With that, I yield back.

The CHAIRMAN. General Bergman, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. BERGMAN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I want to get just quick demographics of the both of you. How many years active duty?

Mr. MAYNOR. Fourteen years.

Mr. GELARDI. Twenty-three, sir.

Mr. BERGMAN. Okay. What I heard you say, Mr. Maynor, was, I just want to make sure I got this right, on the VSO piece more state level? I wanted just to give you a chance to expand on that a little bit about what you meant.

Mr. MAYNOR. Usually Veterans Affairs is through the state level, who hires, I believe. I mean, do not hold me true to it, but I believe that is a State Department job. The state, like state of Illinois would hire your local VSOs and then assign them to the communities.

Mr. BERGMAN. Since we have 50 states and 4 territories, the model for each state could look a little different based on that state's desire and under that state's, you know, commander in chief, which is their Governor or their legislative body, as to how they structure it. Do you see—and I ask you for both your experience, what do you see as the interaction today between the veterans at the local level, that person who went back to Virginia

Beach or somewhere in Illinois or Michigan or wherever they went, do you see them as being able to connect the dots?

You know, maybe TAP did not catch it all, you know, because if you got 20-plus years in, you are going to look at life one way because you walk out the door with a pension. Okay? You have now a little bit of income coming in, so you could maybe pay your basic bills. When you walk out with less than 20, unless there is a disability, you do not have. You got zero cash coming in the door. Now you have to figure out what you are going to do next, go to work for somebody or start a business yourself.

Any thoughts on what this committee should know from a national level because we represent all 50 states and the 4 territories. Anything you would want to share with us in your challenges there?

Mr. GELARDI. Well, we certainly have very different backgrounds and experiences, and I definitely commend you for what you have overcome. In my experience, when I was making the decision to start a business, it was in a very different field. More into providing knowledge-based working, consulting with a focus on trying to help solve warfighting challenges that we struggled with when we were on active duty. My challenges in dealing with how do we offer these capabilities to the government was the frustration with working through the regulations, the long lead time to work through acquisition processes and dealing with a government that does not understand small business.

Mr. BERGMAN. Government was part of the problem, not part of the solution?

Mr. GELARDI. Absolutely. I honestly feel like we are in a battle every day with the government.

Mr. BERGMAN. You could not have articulated it any better. That is a great way to end this. Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

The CHAIRMAN. Representative Ramirez.

Ms. RAMIREZ. Thank you, Chairman Bost. I think I echo the sentiment of my colleagues here and a lot of what you said here when we say that veterans are crucial to our local economies, both as employees and as owners of small businesses. I want to thank you for being here today, for both of you being here.

I know it is also a sacrifice to leave home, leave the business, and then fly to D.C. with a schedule that is never really steady, and things have changed. Just want to say thank you for being here.

As I heard the testimony specifically from Mr. Maynor, you talked about the challenges of even starting your small business. I think it is important for us to understand, as elected officials just what are the kind of things that are necessary to make it easier for us to support our small businesses, particularly our veterans? I have a couple of questions specifically for you.

You talked a little bit about the challenges when you were even beginning to open up your business. What would you say was the hardest part of starting the business?

Mr. MAYNOR. Talk my wife into it would have been the hardest part. Second would be just trying to—I mean, we sell clothing, so we have to purchase the clothing first to wholesale it and sell it back. Just coming up with the money, you know, we started look-



ing into grants, started looking into the websites, did not come anywhere. We turned to credit cards and we started purchasing stuff with credit cards.

I mean, we are making our payments. We are not taking a paycheck. We are re putting it back into our business. I am going to continue working at nighttime until I can, but as right now, we are just going into debt to get us started. That is—I hate debt, so it is not a good word. It does not fit me. I like to have everything taken care of, and it is a heartache trying to make sure not only if you are paying your employees, but also staying on top of the vendors to have the product to sell to move forward.

Ms. RAMIREZ. We know also when you put things on credit card, those credit cards do not wait. That 19 percent Annual Percentage Rate (APR) is very real and accumulates, so it is really unfortunate. You know, as you think about, particularly as a veteran, what are the points, I think, you think of outreach and the places where you think veterans can access more assistance when thinking of entrepreneurship?

Mr. MAYNOR. Well—sorry.

Ms. RAMIREZ. Either of you can answer actually.

Mr. MAYNOR. If—you know, there is a VA in every community. If we just had an office in there that could help veterans with questions or guide them to the correct area would be the greatest.

Ms. RAMIREZ. Yes. What are other things? Maybe this is just to follow up in addition to your answer. You know, you hear from members here, we anxiously want to figure out what are those impediments and how do we address them? What are other ways that you think Members of Congress can be helping our 2.5 million veteran-owned businesses and the many to come?

Mr. GELARDI. Overwhelmingly, it is the complexity of regulatory requirements. The regulations are unknowable. When you are very small and you are starting out, it is the biggest challenge. It is daunting. There are a lot of really excellent people at the Small Business Administration and in the acquisition process, in APEX Accelerators and other small business assistance centers who, you know, try to help. Most of the time, in my experience, the Small Business Administration folks are spending more time enforcing compliance than they are actually trying to help us. It just becomes this giant time suck that is not actually returning, you know, value or providing us real assistance in moving forward to become more effective and grow our business.

Ms. RAMIREZ. Did you want to add anything?

Mr. MAYNOR. No.

Ms. RAMIREZ. Yes, I want to just echo what you have heard from my colleagues here. We have a responsibility. You gave everything, you risked everything so that we could be here. There is impact and PTSD and all the other challenges and family and housing and all the costs associated with it. Making sure that small businesses are able to thrive is a priority for us. I want you to hear this, that for me, as I think about the connection of housing, economic development, small business, it all intersects. We have to do better. I appreciate you explaining some of those specific ways to do that.

I am from the State of Illinois, the beautiful State of Illinois. I am just also thankful to see another Illinoisan with us here today.

Thank you, Mr. Maynor, and also Mr. Gerald, for your passion and for your dedication to serving our communities, particularly for you serving Illinois.

I yield back.

The CHAIRMAN. I am going to do just one follow-up question before we go into our closing. I need to ask both of you, when you left the service, did you receive the TAP program?

You see, I came from an era that they did not have a TAP program. I tell everybody that my commanding officer tapped me on the shoulder and said, see you later. That was it. Was it—what was your experience with TAP?

Mr. GELARDI. I did participate in a TAP program. I did not know what I did not know. I realize now in hindsight, that that was wholly inadequate. We help a lot of other veterans that are transitioning now and so we stay in the pulse of the experience.

Big shortcomings with any transition assistance now is when, as servicemembers, when we enter the service, we train as a team, we go into combat as a team, but you transition alone, and you do not really have a network. We build throughout a career a huge network of servicemembers, but that network looks backward. It does not look forward into business or nonprofits or whatever career field you want to move into. You go into it alone.

The Transition Assistance Programs, when you walk out the door, they are done with you. There is no follow up. There is no knowledge of how people performed, no additional assistance. No one is checking in with you 6 months down the road, and people do not understand the culture. When they get their first opportunity, maybe for a promotion, maybe a new opportunity at business, they do not really have mentors or anybody to help them. They are alone for the first time trying to navigate it.

What is a shame about that is we leave those veterans kind of sort of out there on their own, but we are also losing an opportunity to capture that data, tell a greater story to a next generation of recruits. Would not it be amazing if we had this data base of success stories that we followed people through their transition, that we knew the new impact they were making, the new value they had created in their lives and the lives of others? When somebody was being recruited, you know, we could tell them that story, not just of what their military career was going to look like, but how it was going to launch them into the next phase of their life. That is all lost because the institution, the military, does not look for the long-term return on investment.

Mr. MAYNOR. I went through the Warrior Transition Unit at Carson, Colorado. Hired Heroes did a great job. They came in, helped me write a resume, like comrade said. There is a big transition difference of the job market in Colorado Springs to Murfreesboro, Illinois. Hiring Heroes is not south of Chicago. There is no opportunities for the smaller communities.

It is great to get that training, but it needs to transfer to your local area, too. I know we do not have any numbers in our area, but just because we do not have numbers does not mean the veterans in that area do not need help, too. If we could create some programs to help the smaller areas to transit after they move to the area, because like I said, the job market is a lot bigger dif-

ference in Phoenix or Denver or Chicago than it is in Small Town, USA.

The CHAIRMAN. Okay. I agree with you, and I am going to tell you that we are trying desperately to add to the TAP program, but it is a battle between this committee and House Armed Services Committee (HASC) because VA, you would think that they work well together, VA and DOD, but each one tries to protect their own turf, and TAP is the hardest part for us, too.

If you have been through one TAP program, you have seen one TAP program. They are all different, and we have got to try to get uniformity in between them.

I want to thank you for being here as the witnesses today, especially knowing—leaving your business, coming to Washington, DC, flying across the country. Thank you for doing that.

Our veterans contribute immensely to our society and the economy here in this United States. We are grateful to the men and women who have served this country and are continuing to serve throughout their participate—and participation in adding to the economy.

Now, I ask unanimous consent that all members shall have 5 legislative days in which to revise and extend their remarks and include any extenuous [sic] material. Hearing no objections, there is nobody here, so ordered. The hearing is now adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 1:05 p.m., the committee was adjourned.]



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**A P P E N D I X**

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## PREPARED STATEMENT OF WITNESSES

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### Prepared Statement of Tommy Jones

Chairman Bost, Ranking Member Takano and Members of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs:

I am honored to join you today as an Army veteran and the new leader of Walmart's Military Programs, to share with the Committee the work we are doing to support military families and create opportunities with employment, and beyond, for veterans and military spouses. I am grateful for your leadership and partnership in honoring our nation's veterans' service and sacrifice, and for all you do to aid in their transition to civilian life.

At Walmart, we're committed to supporting those who serve, and we have been since the very beginning. Our founder, Sam Walton, served in the U.S. Army Intelligence Corps during World War II and brought with him the values that define our company to this day. It is that same set of values that make us so grateful for our nation's veterans. As we reflect on their sacrifices, we look to honor their futures too. **Honoring service members is in our DNA.**

Our goal is to support veterans and military families during and after their service. That's how we've built a culture where **veterans feel they belong**, with benefits for their well-being and an understanding that the skills gained in service can transfer to any job.

In 2013, we announced our Veterans Welcome Home Commitment. Since then, we've hired more than 533,000 veterans and military spouses and promoted nearly 64,000 to roles with greater responsibility and higher pay.

Building on the success of our Veterans Welcome Home Commitment, we launched **Find a Future** at the end of June 2021. Find a Future is a tool that guides military-related prospects through an audit of their current skills, experience, and education. It fosters conversations about a wide range of future possibilities and aspirations, including employment, education, and entrepreneurial outcomes, and then teaches them how to build a road map and how to make connections with partners and resources to help achieve their goals.

Our efforts have paid off. After more than three and a half million engagements with members of the military community through Find a Future, we are now expanding the platform and taking what we have learned to create opportunities for other communities, including our own associates. So, whether you're just starting out, reentering the workforce after a gap, looking to earn a career certificate or advanced degree, or even thinking about launching a new career or business, we'll help you reach your goals.

Support for our Nation's service members comes in many forms, including the knowledge that there's a job waiting for you if the military relocates your family. Walmart's Military Family Promise guarantees a job at a nearby Walmart store or Sam's Club for all military personnel and military spouses employed by the company who are transferred by the U.S. military. It allows military spouses, in particular, to remain in the same personnel and pay systems, and gives them the opportunity to turn jobs into careers.

Associates and their families also can take comfort in knowing that their well-being is among our top priorities. They have access to free counseling sessions, coaching, and digital wellness tools to help them manage stressors, build resilience, and get the care they need fast.

Our medical coverage starts at just \$33/month and includes virtual medical care and psychiatry services for all eligible plan participants. Associates and their families also can get discounts on fitness plans. Qualifying associates can take advantage of our 401(k) match and our associate stock purchase plan. It's all part of our commitment to help our associates live better.

Walmart also has key relationships with organizations focused on supporting those who have served in the military. Organizations such as Merging Vets and Players (MVP) provide veterans with a new team to assist with transition, promote personal development and show them they are never alone. Sheep Dog Impact As-

sistance is another organization that offers veterans opportunities for physical activities to foster camaraderie, peer-to-peer training to transform struggle into strength and volunteer opportunities for continued service.

Once associates are hired, they have access to one of the world's largest learning ecosystems so they can take the valuable skills and experiences they bring to their job and expand their horizons even further from day one of employment.

We've launched a career fellowship program, expanding our investment and involvement in the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Hiring Our Heroes programs to offer hiring summits and fellowship opportunities to veterans and their families.

Walmart Academy offers hands-on, immersive learning, using cutting-edge technology in handheld devices, virtual reality and combining both classroom study and training on the sales floor. Last year, the Academies helped more than 400,000 associates build the skillset they want.

Through Live Better U (LBU), Walmart associates get access to education and training programs to help them excel in their jobs and create the career paths they want – 100 percent paid for by Walmart. Since the program launched in 2018, associates have saved nearly half a billion dollars in tuition costs.

These are just a few of the ways we strive to ensure all learning counts and reflects our commitment to creating a path for every associate to learn and grow.

While I've shared with you what Walmart is doing to recruit, hire and retain veteran talent, we're also deeply committed to sourcing products from veteran-owned businesses to add to our stores and on-line assortment. In fact, in FY23 Walmart spent \$1.2 billion with veteran-owned suppliers.

As a founding member of the **Coalition of Veteran Owned Business**, Walmart is committed to help grow and support veteran owned businesses in communities throughout the U.S. This first-of-its-kind national initiative supports the success of veteran, service member, and military spouse-owned businesses by connecting them with entrepreneurial education and training, small business resources and solutions, and commerce and supplier opportunities to help connect and educate both sides on doing business together.

Additionally, Walmart hosted our tenth annual "Open Call" event October 24 and 25, where we provided entrepreneurs the opportunity to meet face-to-face with Walmart and/or Sam's Club and potentially get their products on our shelves or on our e-commerce platform – and ultimately, in the hands of our customers. Open Call is part of our commitment to spend an additional \$350 billion over 10 years on items made, grown, or assembled in the U.S.

One of those businesses, Grind Oral Care, sells U.S.-made toothpaste to customers across the country in stores and online thanks to their appearance at Open Call in 2022. Grind is a small, veteran-owned business based in Salt Lake City, UT that supports veterans experiencing homelessness and gives to nonprofits that work with veterans. We're proud to have helped Grind grow.

To strengthen our support of veterans as they reintegrate into their local communities, Walmart and the **Walmart Foundation**, our philanthropic arm, have invested more than \$44 million since 2011, in job training, education and innovative public/private community-based initiatives.

Walmart also offers a wide range of programs that are available to veteran organizations, such as our **Spark Good** programs, which includes our local community grants program and programs designed to engage both associates and customers. Now through November 30, we are running a campaign through Spark Good Round Up, where Walmart will match customer donations 2:1 at checkout online to veteran charitable organizations, including up to \$2 million for Operation Homefront.

Walmart and the Walmart Foundation aim to build a skills-based talent marketplace that recognizes the rich skills transitioning military and veterans bring to the table, unlocking opportunity and accelerating economic mobility for them in the civilian sectors. We have supported many organizations doing great work with veterans through our commitments. Three that I want to call out are **Hire Heroes USA**, the **Institute for Veterans and Military Families (IVMF)** at Syracuse University, and the **Manufacturing Institute**.

Hire Heroes USA's singular focus on veteran employment is not only working to place veterans with the right job, but also gaining incredible insights into what the critical needs are for those separating from service. We have supported them with multiple grants over the years, with our most recent grant supporting their focus on updating internal practices and processes to ensure their team can enable each veteran to translate their skills for civilian employment.

IVMF's **AmericaServes** program streamlines and digitally connects veterans to services in their communities. Through our commitment, we have supported AmericaServes programs in multiple communities, and continue to provide direct support for their work in Texas.



The Manufacturing Institute has long since served veterans through their **Heroes MAKE America** program, which has supported service members with transitioning into the manufacturing industry. Since 2022, we have supported the institute with over \$1.5 million in funding to support their coordinated effort with **Solutions for Information Design** and **Jobs for the Future** to modernize how skills are translated from military service to civilian occupations. An effort we believe will be transferable to other industries.

As we look to the future, we see great potential to address the remaining barriers to successful transition from military service to civilian life, but only through collaboration and a shared vision will we realize it. We will continue making investments in veteran serving organizations. We recognize it is only when government programs and initiatives, large and small corporations, and non-profit organizations come together that much is possible.

Thank you for the opportunity to share with the Committee how Walmart is supporting the military and veteran communities through a strategic mix of employment, education, entrepreneurship, well-being programs, and philanthropic efforts. And, again, thank you to the Committee for your leadership and partnership in serving the veteran community. We remain steadfastly dedicated to this work, now, and into the future, and look forward to continuing to evolve and grow our approach to best serve veterans and military families. Finally, I'd like to conclude by extending my deepest respect and gratitude to my fellow veterans for your sacrifice and service.

I look forward to the opportunity to answer any questions you may have.



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# Statement of Hiring Our Heroes, U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation

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**ON:** "Veterans Serving Veterans: The Impact of America's  
Businesses on Veteran Employment and Opportunity"

**TO:** U.S. House Committee on Veterans' Affairs

**BY:** Eric Eversole, President, Hiring Our Heroes, U.S. Chamber  
of Commerce Foundation

**DATE:** November 7, 2023

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

**"Veterans Serving Veterans: The Impact of America's Businesses on  
Veteran Employment and Opportunity"**

**Testimony of Eric Eversole  
President, Hiring Our Heroes,  
Vice President, U.S. Chamber of Commerce**

Good afternoon, Chairman Bost, Ranking Member Takano, and distinguished members of the Committee. My name is Eric Eversole and I am the president of Hiring Our Heroes and a vice president at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. I also am a retired Captain in the U.S. Navy Reserve, Judge Advocate General's Corps.

Hiring Our Heroes (HOH) is a national, grassroots organization committed to serving veterans, transitioning service members, and military spouses. Founded in 2011 as part of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, we provide a full range of tools and resources to connect the military community with meaningful careers.

Since 2011, we have served more than one million members of the military community. There is no "one size fits all" approach to finding meaningful careers. We work to understand the unique needs and deliver best in class events and programs. No matter where or when, we stand ready to serve the employment needs of the military community.

HOH is a program of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit affiliate of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation harnesses the power of business to create solutions for the good of America and the world. It anticipates, develops, and deploys solutions to challenges facing communities—today and tomorrow.

## Employment Landscape for Veterans and Military Spouses

### *Veteran Employment Landscape*

In 2011, the United States faced a crisis in veteran unemployment. As the nation started to wind down military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, there were hundreds of thousands of transitioning service members—most of whom were under the age of 25—returning home from war zones and finding a difficult job market. Young veterans especially struggled as their unemployment rate soared to 30%.

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation leapt into action. For our part, we launched HOH, leveraging our state and local chambers and relationships with business community. Other companies and organizations, like JP Morgan Chase & Co. and Syracuse University, followed suit by creating veteran-focused hiring and training programs. The federal government also undertook significant efforts. Led by the White House and its Joining Forces campaign, federal agencies made veteran employment a top priority.

This joint private/public sector effort yielded significant dividends. Within a few short years, post-9/11 veteran unemployment was cut in half from 12.1%<sup>1</sup> to 5.8% in 2015.<sup>2</sup> Veterans under the age of 25 saw a more dramatic decrease. Their unemployment rate dropped from 30.2% in 2011<sup>1</sup> to 13.0% by the end of 2015.<sup>2</sup> These trends have continued as veteran unemployment remains at historic lows of 3.0% or below.

Perhaps more impressive was the paradigm shift in how veterans found employment prior to leaving military service. For decades, most military members began to search for employment after leaving service, forcing many of them to rely upon unemployment compensation (UCX) as their transition safety net. Many would spend months, if not years, trying to find the right career. The economic and societal costs were staggering.

Chart A represents the annual number of UCX claims filed by newly transitioned service members since 1985. As the chart shows, military members have long relied upon UCX as part of their transition, especially after significant military operations like Iraq and Afghanistan. This fact was evidenced below as more than two million UCX claims were filed by newly

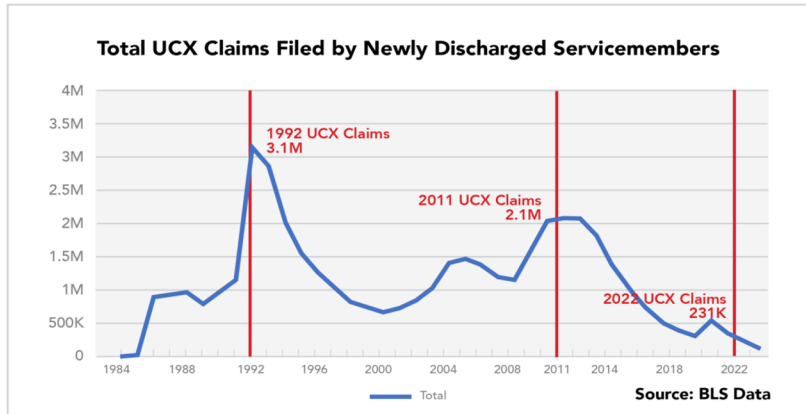
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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Labor (2012, March 20). *Employment Situation of Veteran-2011*. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Retrieved November 1, 2023, from [https://www.bls.gov/news.release/archives/vet\\_03202012.pdf](https://www.bls.gov/news.release/archives/vet_03202012.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of Labor (2016, March 22). *Employment Situation of Veteran-2015*. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Retrieved November 1, 2023, from [https://www.bls.gov/news.release/archives/vet\\_03222016.pdf](https://www.bls.gov/news.release/archives/vet_03222016.pdf)

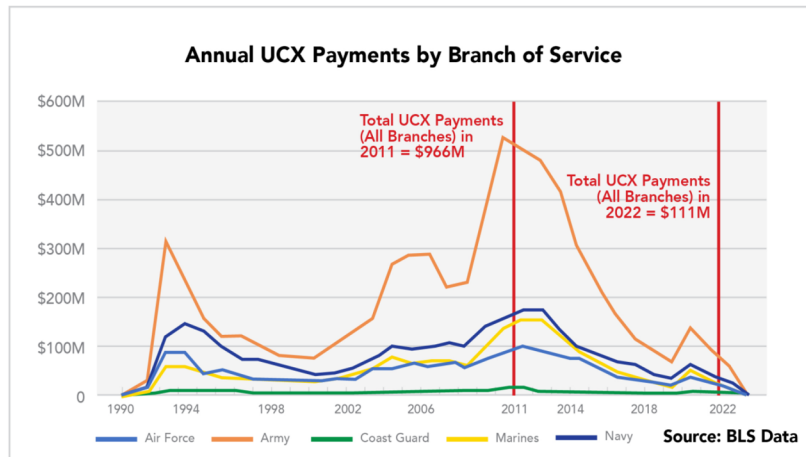
transitioned veterans in 2011. By 2022, the number of claims dropped to an historic low of 231,000—a 9-fold reduction since 2011.

**Chart A.**



Not surprisingly, the reduction in UCX claims saved the Department of Defense millions in costs. The total amount of UCX compensation dropped from \$966 million in 2011 to \$111M in 2022.

**Chart B.**



The importance of this shift in UCX cannot be overstated. Beyond the financial savings to the military, it underscores the speed and efficiency in which many transitioning service members find new careers. It demonstrates a shift in how military members plan for transition and how quickly they find employment. It also highlights why pre-transition employment programs are so important to the Department of Defense.

#### *Military Spouse Employment Landscape*

Unfortunately, our country has not witnessed the same improvement for military spouses. For too long, military spouses have faced double digit unemployment rates. That trend continues today as military spouses face an unemployment rate of 21%, leaving too many military families with the economic realities caused by a single income. For many, it is forcing them to decide between continued military service or leaving service for two incomes.

This latter fact was evidenced by the recent Blue Star Families Military Family Lifestyle Survey.<sup>3</sup> That survey indicated that military spouse employment was a top concern for military families at 48%. This point was further made by the 2023 Army engagement survey indicating that 27.4% of soldiers intend to leave because of the impact of Army life on their significant other's career plans and goals.<sup>4</sup>

#### **Evolution of HOH and Overview of Programs**

HOH focused its early efforts on connecting unemployed veterans to employers in local communities. Leveraging our broad network of state and local chambers, as well as our network of employers, we hosted nearly 800 hiring events in three years. Our mission, at least in those early years, was focused on solving widespread unemployment and underemployment.

As veteran unemployment eased, HOH shifted its strategic and programmatic focus in three important ways. First, we moved "left of transition" by providing more services to on-base military populations. That included both transitioning service members and military spouses. Second, we transformed our hiring events to provide much needed career advice and job search

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<sup>3</sup> Blue Star Families (2023). *Military Family Lifestyle Survey 2023*. Retrieved November 1, 2023, from <https://bluestarfam.org/research/mfls-survey-release-2023/>

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Department of the Army (2023). *Career Engagement Survey Third Annual Report*. Retrieved November 1, 2023, from [https://talent.army.mil/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/DACES-Third-Annual-Report\\_Final.pdf](https://talent.army.mil/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/DACES-Third-Annual-Report_Final.pdf)

training from industry experts. Finally, we invested heavily in providing internships for both transitioning service members and military spouses.

Much of our early evolution started with the creation and execution of Career Summits. Working closely with our private and public sector partners, including the Army, Joint Forces, the Department of Veterans Affairs, and the Department of Labor, HOH re-imagined hiring events to better serve transitioning service members. These events not only created an environment where transitioning service members, especially junior military personnel, could connect with employers across industries, it provided them an opportunity to learn best practices for landing a job. In their simplest form, these summits opened the aperture for service members to think more broadly about their abilities and value to civilian employers.

HOH hosted its first Career Summit in early 2014 on Ft. Bliss, Texas, and since that time, has hosted more than 186 Summits serving nearly 70,000 active duty service members and military spouses. We are honored to work closely with the Department of Defense, all branches of the military, and local base leadership to execute these events. In our view, they are the hallmark of private/public partnership and serve as a critical connection point for the military community.

That same year, HOH was one of the first organizations to implement a SkillBridge program, providing internship opportunities to transitioning service members at Joint Base Lewis-McChord. Our SkillBridge program, known as the Corporate Fellowship Program, provided transitioning service members with a 12-week internship with companies for on-the-job training and an opportunity to showcase their soft skills. With an 85% offer rate for our fellows and an average salary of more than \$100,000, it is not surprising that the program now serves more than 2,000 service members each year.

HOH also hosts industry-focused virtual hiring events for veterans, transitioning service members and military spouses. Launched in response to COVID-19, these virtual events are supported by Brazen, a virtual hiring event platform provider, and help connect members of the military community with military-ready employers. These events have greatly expanded HOH's reach into the military regardless of an attendee's geographic location.

While all of our programs, events, and resources are open to military spouses, we know that military spouses face unique challenges and thus we offer unique programs to meet their needs. The transitory nature of military life

often creates long periods of unemployment and/or underemployment. Work opportunities are further limited by issues associated with childcare, remote duty locations, state licensing requirements, and status of force agreements (SOFAs).

To meet these challenges, HOH has created a suite of programs and training geared toward military spouses. In 2017, we launched Amplify—a career-intensive workshop tailored to military spouses who are re-entering the workforce or looking for a career change. Amplify attendees spend two full days in career development workshops and interactive sessions, focusing on public/professional speaking, salary negotiations, networking skills, personal branding, interview techniques, and military spouse entrepreneurial options. Amplify has become an incredibly important tool as more and more military spouses, 92% of whom are women, return to work after the pandemic.

HOH also manages the nation's largest network of career-focused military spouses as part of our Military Spouse Professional Network. That network—tens of thousands strong—provides vital peer-to-peer support to military spouses in more than 60 locations. It not only provides professional connections around the world but also brings employment leads and ongoing professional development at the installation level to these communities. By fostering these networks, we have created a sense of belonging among military spouses that enables them to navigate the challenges of their unique lifestyle with resilience and success.

More recently, HOH helped to launch an internship pilot for active duty military spouses in collaboration with the Department of Defense (DoD) and Deloitte. That pilot, known as the Military Spouse Career Accelerator Pilot (MSCAP), provides military spouses with a 12-week internship modeled after our Fellows Program. While the program is still a pilot, we have seen incredible impact thus far and look forward to continuing the program in the future.

Finally, HOH developed and launched an upskilling program with the support of Google in 2021. That program, known as Career Forward, allows learners to develop industry-recognized skillsets and earn an industry-validated credential at no cost to the veteran, service members or military spouse. Current Google Career Certificates include data analytics, IT support, project management, user experience (UX) design, digital marketing & e-commerce, and cybersecurity. Once these certificates are completed, HOH works to connect completers with ready-to-hire employers.



## **Impact of HOH Programs**

2023 has been a year of growth and impact for HOH. Coming off the heels of COVID-19, it is the first full year our teams have been able to engage populations in-person and without the significant limitations created by the pandemic. This year, we have worked closely with military installations to host Career Summits and provide internship opportunities as part of our Fellows Program. We also continued to grow our digital hiring events and online Google certificate program, reaching deeper into the military community regardless of an individual's duty station. Finally, we expanded our impact for military spouses by hosting more Amplify training events, as well as hiring events, and launched the highly successful internship pilot known as MSCAP.

### *1. Career Summits*

Career Summits continue to serve as an important employment gateway for transitioning service members and military spouses. Not only do these on-base events allow attendees to connect with and be hired by military ready employers, but they also provide attendees with an opportunity to explore career pathways, hone their jobseeker skills, and learn about employment services being provided by HOH and other private and public sector partners.

Our Career Summits have rebounded fully since the pandemic and saw steady growth in attendance and impact in 2023. Thus far in 2023, we have hosted 38 events on military installations across the world, including events in Germany and Great Britain, and served more than 9,100 transitioning service members and military spouses. Additionally, more than 1,000 employers have attended these events and extended more than 7,500 job offers.

### *2. Virtual Hiring Events*

Created out of necessity during COVID, virtual hiring events allow us to reach deeper into the military community regardless of an individual's duty location. These industry focused events, much like our Career Summits, not only provide attendees with an opportunity to connect with employers but allows them to open their aperture on a wide array of companies and career paths.

Year to date in 2023, we have hosted 31 events with 393 employers and more than 12,500 attendees. Importantly, these employers have referred 83%

of the candidates to “next steps” in their companies’ hiring process—i.e., either an interview, candidate pipeline or individual screen.

Much of our success is due to the individualized approach we take with virtual event attendees. Each of the 12,500+ candidates are screened by our “Career Connectors” prior to the event. This team of subject matter experts reviews each candidate’s resume, provides advice, and, when helpful, referrals to other programs to improve a candidate’s profile. This year, Career Connectors have made more than 54,600 referrals to other nonprofit and government agencies.

### *3. Fellows Program*

SkillBridge and our Fellows Program is one of the most important, if not the most important, transition programs available to transitioning service members. It provides an experiential bridge to showcase a service member’s soft skills—e.g., leadership, communication, problem-solving—and helps to ensure the right fit and job level. Additionally, as most jobs are secured through networking, the program focuses on building much needed civilian networks to support smooth transitions to careers in the private sector.

Since 2014, we have seen an exponential growth of our Fellows program, from one location (Joint Base Lewis McChord) to a program meeting the needs of transitioning service members around the globe. This year alone, we hosted nearly 2,400 active duty who came from and/or were stationed at more than 100 different military locations, both in the United States and around the world.

The impact of the program is undeniable. Over the last four years, we have hosted more than 7,500 fellows with more than 1,000 employers. Eighty-eight percent of those fellows have received a job offer within three months, and the average salary has been more than \$100,000. This year has been no exception with 2,398 active duty service members participating in the Fellows Program.

Our internal data further underscores the importance of SkillBridge. In a survey conducted in 2022, which included both SkillBridge participants and non-participants, SkillBridge participants were far more likely to find transition to be “easy or very easy” (40% compared to 25%) and report positive employment outcomes within three months of transition (79% compared to 58%). SkillBridge participants also were more likely to report positive reasons

for taking a first job (e.g., “it was a great opportunity” versus “I didn’t feel like I had a choice”) as compared the non-participants.

#### *4. Military Spouse Programs*

Military spouse employment is a top priority for HOH as military spouses continue to face a 21% unemployment rate. While the challenges are many, HOH has taken a comprehensive approach to military spouse employment by focusing on localized, more personalized approach to spouse employment. We provide military spouses with a range of tools and resources, as well as connections to companies, to help them be successful. This year alone, Amplify has served 2,283 military spouses, with 79% of attendees reporting favorable job outcomes within 90 days of the event.

To compliment the Amplify program, our team provides a yearlong calendar of virtual and in-person hiring events focused solely on connecting military spouses to American businesses. This year we have hosted over a dozen of these hiring events with nearly 2,000 military spouse job seekers resulting in 83% being hired or referred to next steps—i.e., interviews, placement in a talent pipeline or next-level candidate screening.

Our work on the military spouse internship pilot (“Military Spouse Career Accelerator Pilot” or MSCAP), in collaboration with the Department of Defense and Deloitte, has yielded significant results over the last 10 months. This pioneering three-year initiative, funded by the DoD, has established a pivotal linkage between military spouses and coveted 12-week fellowships, connecting them with employers actively seeking to augment their workforce with exceptional talent. Since its inception in late December, the program has ushered nearly 400 military spouses into internships and an offer rate, thus far, of more than 83%. Perhaps more importantly, more than 60% of the internships have been remote, creating longer-term employment solutions for military spouses.

#### *5. Career Forward*

Career Forward—our certificate training program sponsored by Google—is creating unprecedented pathways for transitioning service members, veterans, and military spouses. As noted above, Career Forward provides members of the military community with the ability to earn certificates in high-demand industries. The training, along with wraparound support, is 100% virtual and provided at no cost to the enrollee.

In two short years of existence, the program has enrolled 8,000 members of the military community. Nearly 50% have completed their certificates and 1,500 have already received a positive job outcome as a result of the new certificate, such as a promotion with their current employer or placement with a new employer. The top two certificates are project management and data analytics.

## **Looking Forward**

### *1. Importance of Internships*

Programs like SkillBridge and the new MSCAP program are instrumental to achieving our mission and to the military community. Over the last decade, HOH and our private and public sector partners have worked to promote and highlight the value proposition of military talent. Collectively, we have made great progress and fundamentally shifted how military members prepare for transition and how companies view military talent.

Notwithstanding this shift, the need for experiential bridges, like SkillBridge, will remain constant because most service members rely upon their “soft skills”—i.e., interpersonal skills like leadership, communication, listening, problem solving—as their most transferrable skillset. While such skills are prized in corporate America, they are difficult to evaluate without seeing them first-hand. This is especially true for more senior members of the military, especially those retiring, as they lack civilian networks and the industry-specific skills needed to be considered for roles commensurate with their military experience. Programs like SkillBridge allow service members to illustrate their value and provide a risk-free opportunity for assessment for both the service member and a company.

For many of these same reasons, MSCAP serves a critical need for military spouses who are seeking a career change or who quit a job due to a move. The struggles faced by military spouses have long been known. Frequent moves, gaps in work history, and residing in economically underserved and remote locales make it difficult for military spouses to find a job or one at the right level. Programs like MSCAP solve these challenges by getting their foot in the door with employers, allowing them to show their incredible soft skills, work ethic and commitment. From there, hiring decisions are easy.

## 2. *Solving Military Spouse Unemployment and Underemployment*

The challenges faced by military spouses as they search for meaningful careers must be a national priority. For too long, military spouses have faced high unemployment and underemployment rates. Not only does this create near-term economic challenges for military spouses and their families, but the impacts of unemployment are often cumulative, resulting in their inability to plan for, save for, and be ready for retirement.

For many military families, military spouse employment—and the need for two consistent incomes—is forcing them to make tough decisions about continued service. That fact was highlighted by a White House statement in early 2023, noting 1 in 5 military families cite challenges with spousal employment as a reason for considering leaving active duty service.<sup>5</sup> The Army’s engagement survey reached a similar result, indicating that 25% of soldiers intend to leave because of the impact of Army life on their significant other’s career plans and goals.<sup>4</sup>

While much has been accomplished over the last 10 years, much more must be done to provide military spouses with meaningful career pathways. HOH is committed to working with a broad array of private and public sector partners to tackle these challenges.

## 3. *More Individualized Service and Better Data Through Collaboration*

For the last decade, HOH has worked to be more strategic in its approach and provide more personalized approach to transition. We discovered long ago that there is no one size fits all approach to transition. Nor is there any one organization that can meet every need.

Our internal data shows that transitioning service members often use a web of resources as they transition. Many will leverage one organization for resume assistance while leveraging our programs to connect with employers through Career Summits or the Fellows. Many others benefit from mentorship programs or upskilling programs prior to be directly placed with an employer. By working together, HOH and these organizations will be more effective and efficient in their provision of services.

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<sup>5</sup> The White House (2023, June 9). *Executive Order on Advancing Economic Security for Military and Veteran Spouses, Military Caregivers, and Survivors*. The White House Briefing Room. Retrieved November 1, 2023, from <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2023/06/09/executive-order-on-advancing-economic-security-for-military-and-veteran-spouses-military-caregivers-and-survivors/>

As HOH continues to evolve, we believe these strategic partnerships will be critical to our success. By sharing information and resources, we will be able to better understand the core needs of our constituents and provide a customizable approach to their transition and career journeys. In the end, it will make us far more impactful and allow us to better serve the military community.

### **Conclusion**

Over the last twelve years, Hiring Our Heroes has been proud to serve our veterans, transitioning service members, and military spouses in local communities throughout the United States and abroad and to do so with a wide array of private and public sector partners. And with more than 200,000 service members making the transition off active duty annually, there is always more work that needs to be done.

Hiring Our Heroes remains wholly committed to the mission of connecting veterans and military spouses with meaningful career opportunities and is honored to serve on the front line of this movement. We will continue to unite our partners in our common mission as we work together to continue to achieve fundamental change in the veteran and military spouse employment landscape.

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

## **Prepared Statement of Michael McCoy**

### **Opening**

Chairman Bost, Ranking Member Takano and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on behalf of Verizon and the over 8,200 U.S. Veterans and over 500 military spouses we are privileged to employ. I am honored to be here today and deeply appreciate the Committee's focus on Veteran employment and opportunity.

My name is Michael McCoy, and I am Head of Military Affairs at Verizon. I am a proud third-generation service member. I have served as an Officer in the Army National Guard since 2011 and continue to serve today. At Verizon, I lead a team of other Veterans to recruit and support former military professionals. Serving our Veterans is not just a job for me. It is my passion, part of my heritage, and my life's work.

Military service is an honor. But I know that it also presents unique challenges. For example, I was deployed when my wife, Nikki, was six months pregnant and returned home when my son Owen was 8-months-old. Military service, by its nature, is all-encompassing and becomes part of your identity. For much of a service member's career, your life proudly revolves around being a part of the cohesive unit that shares in the critical mission of defending the country. Like a separate ecosystem, service members work within the military and move up its ranks as they excel. They receive health care at military hospitals, often live in military housing, buy groceries and other necessities from the base commissary and base exchange, and socialize with other military families. As a result, the military has its own culture, values, uniforms, systems, and even its own language, which is notorious for its acronyms. But military service can't last forever, and the person you are after transition is different than the one who enlisted.

Few understand the magnitude of the transition from military to civilian life. Even though military service requires frequent moves and continual change, leaving a life and mission that you know and value and stepping into the civilian world is challenging—professionally, financially and emotionally. My colleagues and I at Verizon understand the immense sacrifices military families make, the stress associated with the transition to civilian life, and the tremendous value they bring to the workforce. Today, I would like to share how we recruit and support Veterans.

### **Verizon Values Veterans**

At Verizon, we believe that Veterans make our company better. Our industry has a long history with the military, dating back to the Bell Telephone system and World War I U.S. Signal Corps, and continues a symbiotic relationship today. In addition to providing for our national defense, the U.S. military is perhaps the greatest job training program in the world. It cultivates individuals who are disciplined, skilled, and performance-oriented. Former military personnel are seasoned leaders, problem solvers and team players with a strong work ethic who thrive under pressure, making them ideal employees in the hyper-competitive communications workplace.

Military service imparts both hard and soft skills that are highly valuable. Those skills include engineering, communications, intelligence, cybersecurity, supply chain management, finance and flying experience. At Verizon such knowledge translates into a variety of critical jobs. For example, we recruit pilots to fly drones for disaster response. We seek military-trained engineers to build our best-in-class networks and protect them from cybersecurity attacks. We also find that Veterans generally excel as project managers, particularly in the coordination of supply chains and logistics.

In addition to technical expertise, Veterans bring important interpersonal skills to the table. The military is a melting pot of highly qualified candidates from across the country, and requires individuals with different backgrounds, cultures and experiences to work alongside each other. During their tenure, service members also learn situational awareness and understanding of the geopolitical and cultural dynamics around the world. This exposure to a wide variety of environments trains service members to adapt rapidly to changing circumstances. Today, more than ever, these qualities are invaluable in the business world. For all of these reasons, we enthusiastically recruit, retain, and engage the military community.

I'm proud to share that Verizon's success in hiring and retaining military talent has been repeatedly recognized. We have been a #1 Military-Friendly company three times and ranked in the top 3 of military-friendly companies over the past five years. Verizon has also ranked #1 by Best For Vets twice and has received almost every Employer Support of the Guard and Reserves award multiple times. In addition, we are a two-time recipient of the Vets Index 5 Star employer and two-time

recipient of the US DOL GOLD Hire Vets Medallion Award. To achieve this success, Verizon relies on a three-pronged approach: recruiting, retention and support.

### **Recruiting**

While Veterans are exceptional assets in the workplace, it can be challenging to find transitioning service members who are interested in working at Verizon and have an applicable skill set. To attract separating service members, we established a dedicated web page for Veterans and military spouses. See: [verizon.com/military-careers](http://verizon.com/military-careers). This page provides information on the skills we seek and the jobs that are currently available, along with opportunities to connect at job fairs and information sessions. We also invite service members to stay in touch as part of our talent network should a job match open in the future.

To further facilitate recruitment of those ready to separate from active duty, Verizon works with two programs under the Department of Defense (DoD): SkillBridge and Transition Assistance Program (TAP). Through SkillBridge, we provide separating military personnel with civilian work experience through internships and training during their last 180 days of service. To the greatest extent possible, we give service members direct training at Verizon that prepares them for open positions in the company. Veterans appreciate this path because it helps them acclimate to civilian life, relieves them of the job searching stress, and allows them to focus on training and development.

Regarding TAP, we are working to expand our relationship with all TAP centers. As you are aware, military personnel separating from service engage with TAP officials, who provide civilian career counseling. Through TAP, Verizon markets its programs, such as apprenticeships and internships. But based on our experience as an employer, we believe that TAP may be under-resourced, and there is an opportunity to expand its reach and accessibility. For example, providing virtual classes on career opportunities in addition to current in-person classes would allow potential employers such as Verizon to share information more broadly with separating service members. It would also be helpful if employers were provided with TAP points of contact to enable more timely communication.

Another valuable recruitment program for Verizon is “The Hiring our Heroes Fellowship”, offered through the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation. This fellowship gives Verizon access to a broad talent pool that includes transitioning service members, military spouses and Veterans.

Through our partnerships with the DoD and the U.S. Chamber, we have provided skills training to over 215 service members to make them successful in the communications industry areas of expertise since 2018. From that group, we have been able to hire 183 SkillBridge or Hiring our Heroes Fellows into a wide variety of jobs throughout Verizon. I am pleased to report that ninety percent of these participants are still with Verizon today, and many have been promoted into roles with greater responsibilities.

We also have strong partnerships with many other Veteran serving organizations. For example, we have had success with 50 strong, a national, industry-led effort supporting employers and military-affiliated job seekers. This partnership has been extremely productive because 50 strong digitally aggregates Veterans and the broader military community into weekly events via teleconference, which allows employers to present to a broad group, and then host their own breakout rooms. FourBlock, also, has been a terrific partner and one we invest in. This organization works to bridge the divide between transitioning Veterans and businesses through career readiness programs. Last, we support No Greater Sacrifice (NGS). NGS is dedicated to the children of our Nation’s fallen and wounded service members. It delivers scholarships and resources to improve the quality of life for these children through the pursuit of higher education and allows them to graduate from college debt-free.

In addition to these programs and partnerships, Verizon seeks out former military talent from a variety of other sources. Our recruitment team hosts monthly coaching and information sessions for the military community to help them better prepare for job searching, resume writing and interviewing. We publicize these events on our dedicated military career website and through regular emails to our nation-wide and global partners. Since 2013, we have hosted or attended over 1,750 virtual and in-person events to recruit Veterans.

Finally, it’s important to note that there are also over 100 VA-recognized, Veteran service organizations across the United States. As transitioning service members begin their research, they can become inundated by information from organizations trying to help. As employers, it can be difficult to effectively break through to these organizations to provide service members with information about jobs, career fairs, and other opportunities. Having the Veterans Administration provide guidance and coordination between organizations could help ensure that only the most relevant



information is presented to job seekers. This effort, in turn, could reduce decision fatigue as Veterans pursue opportunities that best match their needs and talents.

### **Retention and Support**

At Verizon, we believe that retaining our Veteran employees is just as important as recruiting them. We do everything we can to ensure service members are valued and supported. Verizon's dedicated military recruitment team has personally lived through transitioning back to civilian life and strives to create an environment conducive to helping new hires adjust to a civilian work environment. Verizon never stops mentoring and developing former service members so they can thrive and advance in their new careers. New hires receive a welcome email to the Veteran or the spouse, which provides an explanation of corporate resources, a connection to other Veterans, and Employee Resource Group information. They also can agree to have a Military Service badge placed on their internal profile.

Service members, like me, are driven by teamwork and achieving a collective mission. Verizon's core values of respect, integrity, performance excellence and accountability align with military values. Veterans also want a continued sense of camaraderie, the opportunity to serve others, and to live their values. That is why we established an Employee Resource Group within the company called "VALOR", which stands for "Veterans and Advocates Leading the Organization Responsibly".

Verizon VALOR is open to all Verizon employees. It gives Veterans and their supporters a forum to connect and build a network of friends and colleagues. This group is designed to provide emotional support and guidance on career development and advancement. It also encourages volunteer projects that provide thousands of hours of Veterans-focused community service every year. The projects include supporting homeless shelters for Veterans, career coaching for transitioning Special Forces service members, sponsoring and participating annually in Veterans Day parades, and writing letters to deployed service members. We even have Verizon-branded military apparel for employees provided by Call For Fire, a Service Disabled Veteran Owned Small Business that donates a percentage of its profits to U.S. Veteran-serving nonprofits.

Verizon and VALOR also coordinate to provide pro bono assistance to U.S. military Veterans across the country. Our volunteer attorneys provide a myriad of legal support to Veterans. Additionally, we partner with law firms and nonprofits to maximize our community impact.

### **Benefits and Flexibility**

A special aspect of our retention efforts is ensuring that Veterans avail themselves of the benefits they have earned. In addition to helping service members fully understand and register for their existing VA benefits, we diligently track and alert our employees to any changes in law or policies that might impact them. For example, this year, we partnered with the Veteran Affairs communications team to inform all of our Veterans about the PACT (Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics Act of 2022) Act's passage, which was successful in increasing the number of "intent to file."

Finally, we give special dispensation for our employees who still serve in the National Guard or the Reserves by providing a generous military leave policy, including gap pay for up to 36 months, in which Verizon pays the difference between an employee's Verizon salary and their military pay if the Verizon pay is higher.

### **Closing**

In closing, I would like to thank you again for holding this hearing and for your ongoing support for military Veterans and their families. The demands of military life shape a person's character, values and worldview. At Verizon, we believe that military experience prepares an individual for success and that military talent helps drive our company's productivity, innovation and growth. And while we utilize and appreciate the existing government programs that connect companies like ours with retiring military personnel, there are always ways to fine-tune and improve these initiatives. As you consider how to advance employment and opportunities for America's Veterans, Verizon stands ready to work with you to support the men and women who have bravely served our country.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. I am happy to answer any questions you might have.

**Prepared Statement of Erin Izen****Testimony of Erin Izen****Senior Director, Workforce Programs, The Home Depot**

before a

**Full Committee Oversight Hearing**

of the

**House Committee on Veterans' Affairs****November 7, 2023**

Chairman Bost, Ranking Member Takano, and distinguished Members of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, thank you for opportunity to testify before you at this hearing on The Impact of America's Businesses on Veteran Employment and Opportunity. As a military spouse and mother of U.S. Marines who have separated from the service, today's topic is very close to my heart. With me today is Haley Weaver, who leads our Military Relations team, and is also a military spouse.

I am the Senior Director of Workforce Programs for The Home Depot – the world's largest home improvement retailer. Founded in 1979, The Home Depot operates more than 2,300 retail stores, distribution centers, and corporate non-product facilities across all 50 states, US territories, Canada, and Mexico, with over 470,000 aproned associates.

We take pride in taking care of our associates. One example is the investment of approximately \$1 billion wage in annualized compensation increases for our front line, hourly associates that we announced earlier this year. We've been continuously focused on cultivating the best associate experience in retail, with ongoing investment in associate wages, benefits, bonuses, job tools, and career development opportunities.

This also holds true for the military community. The Home Depot is proud to be a prominent ally to the active military and veteran communities through our work in creating career pathways for transitioning servicemembers, implementing company policies to promote long-term career growth for our military associates, and improving the places veterans live.

We are proud that tens of thousands of our associates are veterans, National Guardsmen, reserves, and military spouses. You can often recognize them in our stores by the celebration badges on their aprons.



### Veterans in Retail

Retailers such as The Home Depot acknowledge the substantial benefits that individuals from the military community bring to our organizations - the list of reasons to hire veterans is long and supported by hard data. A report published in 2012 by The Institute for Veterans and Military Families at Syracuse University highlights the exceptional qualities of veterans in the workforce. Veterans demonstrate remarkable adaptability in uncertain environments, exhibit higher levels of resilience compared to their non-veteran counterparts, possess expertise in culturally and ethnically diverse work settings, and actively foster improved collaboration within their teams.<sup>1</sup> Recognizing the exceptional value that veterans contribute to the workforce and proactively implementing supportive programs and policies leads to elevated employee retention rates. Industry data shows that veterans not only meet but often surpass their civilian counterparts on crucial talent metrics. For instance, veterans exhibit equal or superior retention rates (91%), offer acceptance rates (92%), and interview-to-hire ratios (91%).<sup>2</sup> We also find that veterans acclimate well to our culture of service and inverted pyramid leadership approach.

Advancements in legislation have not only enhanced incentives but also introduced cost-effective measures for employers seeking to hire veteran talent. Federal tax credits such as the Work Opportunity Tax Credit, Wounded Warrior Tax Credit, and Credit for Employer Differential Wages allow companies like The Home Depot to claim millions of dollars in tax credits annually.

Approximately 1 in 12 veterans opt for a career in retail trade<sup>3</sup>, compared to 1 in 4 civilians<sup>4</sup>. Organizations like The Veteran Jobs Mission and U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation's Hiring our Heroes program have made significant advances in driving awareness, but we still need strategic efforts by both government and industry leaders to increase veteran engagement in the retail sector.

### Transition Support Programs for Retail

Looking to our own company hiring, we value veterans' commitment, strong leadership, and decision-making skills. At The Home Depot, they can continue to be part of a culture that takes

<sup>1</sup> Institute for Veterans and Military Families at Syracuse University, "IVMF in Focus: 2011-2012 Annual Report" (2012). Institute for Veterans and Military Families. 197. <https://surface.syr.edu/ivmf/197>

<sup>2</sup> Society for Human Resource Management. (2021). USAA Veterans Employment Study. <https://www.shrm.org/hr-today/trends-and-forecasting/research-and-surveys/documents/usaa%20veterans%20report.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> National Retail Federation. (2016, June 16). Military Veterans in Retail: A Sound Business Decision. <https://nrf.com/research/military-veterans-retail-sound-business-decision>

<sup>4</sup> National Retail Federation. About Retail Jobs (sourced from Bureau of Labor Statistics) <https://nrf.com/topics/economy/about-retail-jobs>



care of each other and makes a difference. In fiscal year 2022 alone, we are proud to have hired over 14,000 veterans into rewarding careers across our organization.

In 2019, The Home Depot partnered with the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation's Hiring Our Heroes Corporate Fellowship Program, hosting our first cohort of military fellows supporting enterprise logistics operations at our Store Support Center in Atlanta, Georgia. The next year, in fall 2020, The Home Depot became an official Department of Defense Skillbridge authorized organization, rapidly expanding our ability to host transitioning servicemembers in DoD Skillbridge fellowship opportunities across our organization.

Since then, we have hosted over 150 transitioning service members in skill translation programs tailored to post-military careers in fields such as project management, cybersecurity, data analytics, supply chain, and retail management, among others. Officially known as The Home Depot's Military Fellowship Program, 12-week long cohorts are held three times each year. During the cohort period, The Home Depot's Military Relations team provides transition assistance training on what it's like to work in corporate America, and each fellow has a host team and veteran associate mentor to learn from.

I have witnessed the remarkable advantages that programs like DoD's Skillbridge bring to businesses such as The Home Depot. These initiatives provide invaluable early access to top-tier, professional talent emerging from the military, enhancing our workforce in unparalleled ways. Roughly 80% of the DoD Skillbridge participants at The Home Depot successfully transition into permanent associate positions. Graduates of our program have gone on to become cyber security analysts, software engineers, project managers, and are even senior leaders within our stores and distribution centers.

Carlos R. is one of many Military Fellowship Program success stories at The Home Depot in recent years. Joining our company through the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation's Hiring Our Heroes program in Summer 2020, Carlos was hosted by a strategic operations team in the Home Depot Installation Services (HDIS) and was successfully hired as a senior analyst of HDIS real estate strategy at the completion of his fellowship. Since then, Carlos has been promoted to manager, and now leads his own team in overseeing Supply Chain and Network Strategy for HDIS. "I think The Home Depot does a phenomenal job of offering opportunities to veterans,"



Carlos says. “They mentor you, guide you and put you in a position to succeed. And that’s something I and other veterans really appreciate.”<sup>5</sup>



*DoD Skillbridge military fellows on store walk with Kelly Mayhall, President - Southern Division*

Building on the success of The Home Depot’s Military Fellowship Program, our company expanded its efforts to create innovative hiring pathways aimed at addressing the unemployment and underemployment challenges faced by veterans and military spouses while concurrently supporting the hiring of in-demand technical positions. Through our relationship with the Department of Defense’s Military Spouse Employment Partnership (MSEP), in the spring of 2022, The Home Depot proudly introduced its inaugural Military Spouse Workforce Management Apprenticeship Program. This initiative was designed to address the unique hurdles with career mobility encountered by military spouses, caused by frequent relocations. The apprenticeship was offered virtually and consisted of 12-weeks of paid apprenticeship training in skill areas such as customer service, issue resolution, and data analytics. Upon completion of the program, military spouse apprentices transitioned into full-time positions within The Home Depot’s customer care organization.

Additionally in 2022, The Home Depot launched a paid 12-week Large Equipment Military Apprenticeship program in our Rental Operation Facilities in Tampa, Florida, and Marietta, Georgia. This program assists military veterans in translating their experience working on hydraulic, electrical, or diesel engines into becoming a Home Depot repair technician servicing large construction equipment. Over the course of the 12-week program, military apprentices

<sup>5</sup> The Home Depot. (2020, November 10). Military Veteran Spotlight: Carlos R. The Home Depot Foundation and Community News. <https://corporate.homedepot.com/news/foundation-and-community/military-veteran-spotlight-carlos-r>



receive tailored professional development training to enhance and refine essential soft skills, equipping them for success in their roles.

Furthermore, strategic partnerships with veteran service organizations and veteran employment partners such as Hire Heroes USA, US Vets, Work for Warriors, and others have assisted The Home Depot in connecting exceptional talent from the military community with our wide array of available career opportunities.



### Supportive Company Policies

When veterans put on an apron, they also receive a military-specific onboarding class, a veteran new hire coach, access to a veteran-specific resources and benefits, and an invitation to participate in one of our associate resource groups, including the Military Appreciation Group.



Our military associates are easily recognizable by the veteran and military spouse badges they can proudly display on their orange Home Depot aprons. Internal associate-led resource groups, such as the Military Appreciation Group (MAG), work tirelessly to ensure our military associates feel they are a valuable member of The Home Depot family, as well as educate non-military associates on the history and culture of the U.S. military. During Military Appreciation Month in May, Veterans Day in November, and additional holidays throughout the year, The Home Depot celebrates these associates with recognition events held in our stores, distribution centers, and non-product corporate facilities.

With less than 7% of the adult population having served in the military<sup>6</sup>, The Home Depot's Military Relations team developed and implemented required training courses for all Home Depot hiring managers, HR, and talent acquisition associates to ensure they know the value veterans bring to our company and can better understand their transferrable capabilities and skillsets. We also provide reference guides, generally translating Military Occupational Specialties (MOSs) and ranks to retail skills and common like roles.

<sup>6</sup> Those Who Served: America's Veterans from World War II to the War on Terror; US Census Report. 6/2/20, <https://www.census.gov/library/publications/2020/demo/acs-43.html>



At The Home Depot, supporting the well-being of our associates is an instrumental part of one of our company's core values, Taking Care of Our People. Acknowledging the distinctive challenges and life situations our military associates face, we strive to provide them with the policies and benefits that they need to take care of themselves and their families.

In 2020, we created the Military Spouse Job Transfer Policy, a testament to our commitment to supporting our military spouse associates. This policy guarantees a job offer at one of our stores or supply chain locations to military spouse associates when they move under their spouse's orders. With available positions across thousands of our U.S. locations, we can simplify their job transition during military relocations.

Military Spouse and military dependent associates like Jessica M. have utilized the job transfer program to seamlessly continue their career at The Home Depot, no matter where the military sends their family within the U.S. Jessica, a U.S. Veteran herself, began as a part-time cashier in Poway, California, before relocating to a store in South Annapolis, Maryland, as the night replenishment manager. "In California, my husband received orders that we were moving in a couple of months," she recalls. "When I told my store manager, he was nothing but supportive." For Jessica, the store environment created at The Home Depot makes that military relocation process easier. "I love that when someone – like myself – is just hired, the whole store welcomes them into the family." The company values are another added benefit. "When I was in the U.S. Navy, our core values were honor, courage and commitment," she says. "When I came to work for Home Depot, I felt that the words were different, but the goals were still the same."<sup>7</sup>

Supporting our military spouse and military dependent associates who are impacted by an overseas military relocation, The Home Depot now offers them the ability to use the Military Family International Leave of Absence (LOA) policy, which provides leave for a period up to five years.

In a dedicated effort to stand by our Active Duty, National Guard and reserve associates, The Home Depot recently enhanced our Military Leave of Absence Policy. This update includes a substantial full-pay benefit for up to seven consecutive days, complementing our existing supplemental pay policy, ensuring that associates who temporarily step away from their roles at

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<sup>7</sup> The Home Depot. (2021, December 1). Store Transfer Program Helps California Military Spouse Move Jobs to Maryland. The Home Depot Corporate Newsroom.  
<https://corporate.homedepot.com/news/culture/store-transfer-program-helps-california-military-spouse-move-jobs-maryland>



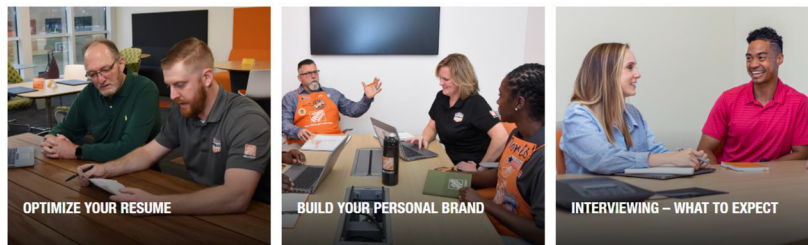


The Home Depot to serve our nation receive the financial support they deserve while defending our country.

To assist managers and HR professionals with understanding military policies, we have a holistic military resources website, which includes easy-to-understand infographics and one-pagers, along with checklists and process maps for navigating complex situations, like requesting different types of LOA.

#### Transition Support for All Veterans – Mission Transition

In July 2023, The Home Depot launched the first online guided version of Mission Transition, a series of courses aimed at providing U.S. service men and women with knowledge and resources to help them successfully transition into the civilian workforce. About 200,000 service members leave the military each year, but, according to Pew Research Center, only one-in-four veterans say they had a civilian job lined up after they left the military<sup>8</sup>. Mission Transition’s three self-paced, online courses can be completed in less than an hour and are filled with content, templates, scenarios, and language specific to experience from a military career. Courses include Optimize Your Resume, Build Your Personal Brand and What to Expect While Interviewing. There are even military-specific resume templates and sample interview questions. This program is available at no cost to the public and can be found on The Home Depot’s career website at [thd.co/missiontransition](https://thd.co/missiontransition).




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<sup>8</sup> Igielnik, R. (2019, November 7). *Key findings about America's military veterans*. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2019/11/07/key-findings-about-americas-military-veterans/>



### Transition Support Programs in the Trades – Path to Pro



There is a growing skilled labor gap impacting the construction industry. In addition to industry growth, tradespeople are retiring at record rates – around 40% of construction workers are expected to retire by 2031<sup>9</sup>. Today, there are nearly 400,000 open jobs requiring skilled plumbers, carpenters, electricians, HVAC specialists, etc.<sup>10</sup>

The Home Depot Foundation’s Path to Pro program launched in 2018 with a \$50 million commitment to train the next generation of skilled tradespeople and help fill the growing labor shortage in the U.S. The program and the Foundation’s trades-focused partnerships have introduced more than 200,000 people to the skilled trades and have trained more than 41,000 participants through programming available to youth, high school students, underserved communities, and separating U.S. military.<sup>11</sup>

The Home Depot Foundation’s Path to Pro military program, in partnership with Home Builders Institute (HBI) and SkillBridge, is offered on 10 U.S. military installations, including Camp Pendleton in Congressman Levin’s district. Over 3,000 transitioning service members have graduated from this 12-week program equipped with industry-recognized PACT and OSHA 10 certifications and ready to start a new career in the trades.<sup>12</sup> These servicemembers get hands on training, as well as partner with Habitat for Humanity to practice their skills doing home repairs for disabled, senior, and low-income veterans.

<sup>9</sup> HBI Construction Labor Market Report. Fall 2021. [https://hbi.org/wp-content/uploads/HBI\\_Fall\\_Construction\\_Labor\\_Market\\_Report.pdf](https://hbi.org/wp-content/uploads/HBI_Fall_Construction_Labor_Market_Report.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2023, October 3). Job Openings and Labor Turnover Summary. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

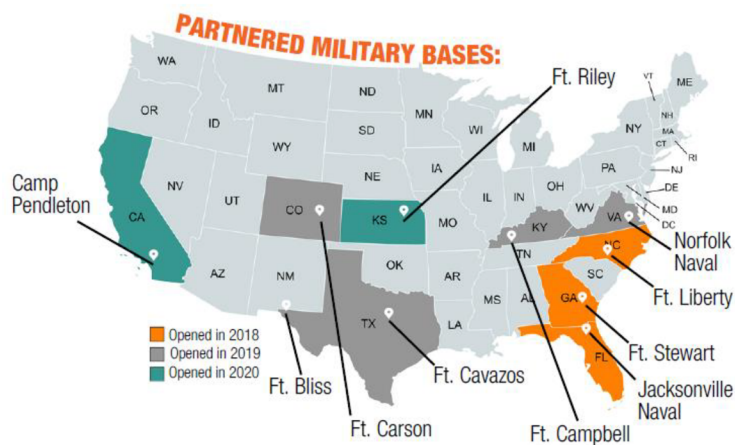
<sup>11</sup> <https://corporate.homedepot.com/page/path-pro>

<sup>12</sup> <https://hbi.org/military/>



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When John P. made the decision to transition out of the U.S. Army, he chose to turn to the Home Builders Institute (HBI) Carpentry Program on base at Fort Liberty in North Carolina. Through the HBI program, he was able to learn the trade from the ground up, investing in his future success. After graduation, John accepted a post-military career with Habitat for Humanity as a construction site supervisor.



*Home Builders Institute (HBI) Base Partnership Locations*

To serve aspiring entrepreneurs within the skilled trades, The Home Depot Foundation partners with Bunker Labs to introduce an entrepreneurship program designed to guide U.S. military veterans and military spouses through the process of establishing a successful business foundation. During the 8-week program, participants gain industry-specific mentorship, learn about market segmentation, how to address specific customer profiles and design a business plan for launch. The program's virtual offering makes it accessible to participants nationwide.

The Foundation also expanded its Path to Pro scholarship program with grants to SkillPointe Foundation, its partner since 2021, and through a new partnership with Folds of Honor. Military scholarships through Folds of Honor extend financial support to qualifying veterans and military family members entering or enrolled in accredited skilled trade schools. The Foundation recognizes the importance of working with partners, like Folds of Honor, to expand existing training initiatives and establish fresh pathways to address the nation's shortage of skilled labor. By diversifying their methods through entrepreneurship and scholarship programs, they aim to



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extend their reach to more communities, offering free training opportunities and fostering lasting positive transformations within the industry.



Beyond the Foundation's work in this area, The Home Depot also helps veterans and others interested in the trades to start their career through the business-side Path to Pro program. Launched in 2021, Path to Pro has provided skilled trades resources, trades training, and career networking opportunities.

PathtoPro.com is a resource library available in English and Spanish, containing educational how-to guides and video content, training opportunities, and a variety of information on different career paths. Its goal is to help individuals better understand the career potential in the skilled trades. Less than 3% of young people are interested in a career in the trades, so there is a lot of work to be done on marketing trades as a lucrative career path.<sup>13</sup>

Our Skills Program offers free introductory trades training, available in English and Spanish, for those interested in pursuing or growing a career in the skilled trades. Participants can take advantage of on-demand content that gives them the necessary training to secure entry level positions in skilled trades career paths, including electrical, plumbing, HVAC, drywall and painting.

Finally, our Path to Pro Network is a jobseeker marketplace, created to connect skilled tradespeople to hiring trades professionals in the construction and home improvement industries. Skilled trades jobseekers can utilize digital and downloadable guides, available in English and Spanish. These guides help them create a profile, upload their resume, and add

<sup>13</sup> NAHB Young Adults & the Construction Trades study. March 1, 2017. <https://www.nahb.org/-/media/DE91D89E4C8F4C1AA86239F9EBC3D55A.ashx>



photos of their work to network with The Home Depot's Pro customers for jobs in their area. 94% of Pro's cannot find the labor they need to grow their business<sup>14</sup>, so there are thousands of job postings across the U.S.

More information on all these programs, in both English and Spanish, can be found at [www.pathtopro.com](http://www.pathtopro.com).

### Improving the Places Veterans Live

In 2011, The Home Depot Foundation recognized the growing crisis with veteran homelessness. Since then, the Foundation has invested more than \$475 million in veteran causes and, working with our Team Depot volunteer force and nonprofit partners, built or improved more than 55,000 veteran homes and facilities.<sup>15</sup> The Foundation has pledged to invest half of a billion dollars in veteran causes by 2025, and I am proud to say we are ahead of schedule meeting that commitment. I am excited to note the estimated number of veterans experiencing homelessness in America has declined by over 55% since 2010<sup>16</sup>.

The Home Depot Foundation works to ensure safe, affordable housing for our nation's homeless and combat-wounded veterans. Across the U.S., there are roughly 3 million veterans living in inadequate owned housing, and 33,000 veterans who face homelessness on any given night. Additionally, there are more than 1 million post-9/11 veterans who have significant service-connected disabilities.<sup>17</sup> To address these challenges, The Home Depot Foundation partners with a powerful network of non-profit organizations, including the Gary Sinise Foundation, Tunnel to Towers Foundation, Operation Homefront, and others to build, repair and enhance homes for veterans. This includes temporary housing, critical home repairs, and accessible smart homes for combat-wounded veterans.

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<sup>14</sup> THD Consumer Insights Survey, May 2020.

<sup>15</sup> <https://corporate.homedepot.com/page/serving-veterans>

<sup>16</sup> U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. Point-in-Time Count. VA Homeless Programs.  
[https://www.va.gov/homeless/pit\\_count.asp](https://www.va.gov/homeless/pit_count.asp)

<sup>17</sup> The Home Depot. (n.d.). Serving Veterans. The Home Depot Corporate Website.  
<https://corporate.homedepot.com/page/serving-veterans>



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In May, The Home Depot Foundation teamed up with the Jared Allen's Homes for Wounded Warriors to build a smart home designed for U.S. Army, Staff Sergeant Chris Burrell, a military policeman who was leaving on a mission to support Iraqi police when explosives destroyed his vehicle, resulting in traumatic life-changing injuries. Overcoming the odds, after intense rehabilitation Chris returned to active duty to continue his military career until he retired after 20 years of service in 2021. To honor Chris' sacrifice and dedication, The Home Depot Foundation and Homes for Wounded Warriors retrofitted Chris' home to make it wheelchair accessible throughout, with zero-threshold entryways and exits. Lower and roll-under countertops and pull-down shelving allow Chris to stay in his wheelchair as he moves from room to room. The home also features a large main bathroom with a wheelchair-accessible shower.<sup>18</sup>



<sup>18</sup> The Home Depot. (2023, May 31). A Home for a Hero: The Home Depot Foundation and Jared Allen's Homes For Wounded Warriors Help Army Veteran Rebuild His Life. <https://corporate.homedepot.com/news/foundation-and-community/home-hero-home-depot-foundation-and-jared-allens-homes-wounded>




 The logo features the Home Depot orange and white color scheme. On the left, the words "THE HOME DEPOT" are stacked vertically in white on an orange background. To the right, the word "MILITARY" is written in a large, bold, black, sans-serif font.

*SSgt Chris Burrel's Home Dedication Ceremony*

Together with The Home Depot Foundation, Team Depot, The Home Depot's associate volunteer force, improves the homes of veterans and helps communities affected by natural disasters. In 2022, more than 45,000 associate volunteers helped further the mission and impact of The Home Depot Foundation by completing more than 2,200 projects in communities across the country.<sup>19</sup>

One recent Team Depot project in Washington state celebrated and acknowledged local hero, U.S. Air Force Technical Sergeant Dan Fye, who was severely injured by an improvised explosive device during his third combat tour. In partnership with Semper Fi & America's Fund, The Home Depot associates upgraded several areas of Dan's home including a new outdoor space equipped with a gazebo, storage shed, a Traeger grill, tools, and lawn equipment.<sup>20</sup>

Each year, The Home Depot Foundation, through Team Depot, launches Operation Surprise, a campaign where The Home Depot associates will complete hundreds of service projects for veterans from November 1-20, honoring U.S. military veterans nationwide. Projects are focused on repairing and improving veteran homes to make them more accessible, more affordable, and more livable for the long run. During Operation Surprise 2022, more than 12,000 Team Depot volunteers completed over 500 projects nationwide, in partnership with our nonprofit partners.



*Home Depot associate and local Atlanta veteran during Team Depot project*

<sup>19</sup> The Home Depot. Team Depot. <https://corporate.homedepot.com/page/team-depot>

<sup>20</sup> The Home Depot. (2023, August 9). Washington Hero's Home Makeover: Team Depot and Semper Fi Join Forces. <https://corporate.homedepot.com/news/foundation-and-community/washington-heros-home-makeover-team-depot-and-semper-fi-join-forces>



Since 2011, The Home Depot Foundation and Team Depot have volunteered 1.4 million hours of service to veterans, and built or improved more than 55,000 veteran homes and facilities, ensuring more of our nation's heroes have a safe, comfortable place to call home that fits their individual needs.

#### Honoring Military-Affiliated Customers

The Home Depot honors those who have served us all by providing our military-affiliated customers with tremendous value in their purchasing. We are one of the few big box retailers that offer discounts to our military-affiliated customers, and we have been doing so for over a decade.

We proudly offer a 10% discount off eligible purchases. Recently, we implemented a registration process, which allows us to extend the discount to all veterans and their spouses every day and for shopping online, instead of just in-store and only with a current military ID. We now also include Gold Star spouses.

Additionally, we recently launched partnerships with the Army & Air Force Exchange Service (AAFES) and the Navy Exchange (NEX) to offer tax-free and special pricing on appliances and other product categories for military shoppers in their stores. We currently have showrooms in five exchanges and expect to have 60 more by end of next year. This special pricing on appliances is also open to all veterans online via [ShopMyExchange.com](http://ShopMyExchange.com) and [MyNavyExchange.com](http://MyNavyExchange.com).







### Recognition

We are proud to have been named a Military Friendly employer, spouse employer, company, and brand, a Forbes best Employer for Veterans, a VETS Indexes 3-Star Employer, and a Best for Vets Employer by Military Times.



In recognition of The Home Depot's steadfast commitment to our National Guard and Reserve associates, we are a proud recipient of the Secretary of Defense Employer Support Freedom Award from the National Committee for Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve (ESGR).



### Conclusion

As you can see, I take immense pride in representing a company that has shown an unwavering commitment to supporting our active military and veteran communities. Members of the committee, thank you for inviting me here today to speak on behalf of The Home Depot. I look forward to answering your questions.

**Prepared Statement of Joe Gelardi**



Joseph E. Gelardi  
November 7, 2023

U.S. House of Representatives  
Committee on Veterans' Affairs  
Oversight Hearing:

"Veterans Serving Veterans: The Impact of America's Businesses on  
Veteran Employment and Opportunity."

Chairman Bost, Ranking Member Takano, esteemed committee members, including Representative Jen Kiggans of our home district, thank you for this platform to discuss the pivotal role of Veteran's and Veteran entrepreneurship in our nation's economy and security.

Having served with exemplary veterans, I've witnessed firsthand their unwavering dedication and integrity. These qualities remain intact as they transition to civilian life, enriching our businesses and communities. Veteran entrepreneurs own more than 2.5 million businesses, employ nearly 6 million American workers, and generate about \$1.2 trillion in annual revenue. Veterans represent 2.3% of the workforce but Veteran businesses account for an oversized 7.3% of the U.S. private sector economy. This isn't just a statistic; it's a testament to their indomitable spirit and the value they add post-service, including the experienced mission insight they critically provide to the Department of Defense.

However, as Secretary of Defense Austin observed this year in his small business strategy, the "Participation of small business in the defense industrial base has declined by over forty percent in the past decade" and the number of small businesses receiving contract awards dropped by more than half.

While the Secretary's initiatives to provide new training resources is commendable, his observations reflect a dire need for reform, not in small business training, but in our approach to acquisitions. Acquisition professionals need more education to better understand how their decisions, policies, and processes create increasing barriers to success which hurts Veteran entrepreneurs and professionals, the Warfighter, and the nation.

Our Veterans find themselves up against a burgeoning regulatory maze that can be discouraging and disheartening, and stifles the very innovation we need to maintain our technological edge. Take Section 174 of the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act for instance, which



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effectively penalizes Veteran small businesses for tackling our nation's most challenging technology needs.

General Brown, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs previously challenged the Air Force to "Accelerate change or lose" in the face of a growing peer threats, but left unchecked Section 174 is a massive speed break on Veteran participation in Small Business Innovation Research and puts our competitive edge at risk.

Other programs intended to level the playing field for all, such as the Alaskan Native Corporation program makes it much harder for Veteran businesses to compete by giving ANCs nearly 20 times the contracting power of other small businesses.

The transition from active duty to civilian life is fraught with challenges. Existing transition programs miss the mark because information and assistance often come too late in the process, and training is often out of touch with current private sector business practices. To remedy this, we must revamp transition programs to be more adaptable to service members' schedules and be more reflective of the differences between military and business culture.

Transition challenges are not just about the economics; they're also about the human cost. Without adequate support, the pressure on our Veterans can lead to heightened emotional stress and financial insecurity which exacerbate mental health issues and substance abuse resulting in a Veteran suicide rate of 22 per day; a national tragedy that speaks volumes about the urgency of improving our support infrastructure.

Robust support is essential not just for the well-being of Veterans, but also businesses, and the nation that depends on them. By equipping veterans with the tools for success in the business world, we honor their service and encourage future generations to serve, knowing that their skills and sacrifices will be valued both in and out of uniform.

Veterans lead – in combat, business, innovation, and government. I urge this Committee to champion reforms that empower Veterans to contribute further to our nation through entrepreneurship and innovation. By doing so, we not only repay our debt of gratitude but also invest in the very fabric of our nation's future.

Thank you once again for your unwavering commitment to our veterans and I look forward to your support in enacting these vital changes.



### Additional Comments

The following key issues are negatively impacting Veteran businesses, entrepreneurs, and professionals:

**Section 174 Recharacterization of Tax Amortization of Research and Experimentation Expenses.** Section 174 of the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act (TCJA) mandates a five-year amortization of R&D expenses, disallowing immediate deductions. This accounting change presents an inflated profit figure, causing businesses to incur taxes on funds already expended on R&D, which depletes cash reserves and could lead to reduced growth and innovation.

#### Key Facts:

- Funds allocated to R&D can misleadingly inflate apparent profits, leading to taxation on non-existent funds.
- This increased tax burden may siphon critical cash from small business operations and growth initiatives, and render Veteran business ineligible for participation in other SBA small business programs.
- Anticipated consequences include inhibited growth, job loss, and diminished investment in R&D, adversely affecting small businesses, SBIR programs, and the warfighter.
- The long-term impact could be a substantial setback in development and reduced R&D ventures by small businesses.

Action: Advocate for the repeal of the TCJA's R&D amortization requirement to allow small businesses to immediately expense R&D outlays, fostering continued innovation and economic growth without the burden of inflated tax liabilities.

**Alaskan Native Corporations (ANC).** The ANC program was intended to level the playing field for Alaskan small business, however it threatens Veteran owned small businesses by giving disproportionate advantages ANC who dominate all small business categories included VOSB, SDVOSB, and 8(a). With a \$100,000,000 direct award ceiling, ANCs have nearly 20 times the power of Veteran businesses in competition for direct award contracts. Additionally, ANCs make up 33% of all 8(a) small businesses in all the US, and 50% of all direct awards are directed to ANCs.



ANCs do not act as small business; they act as billion-dollar conglomerates who dominate markets and smother small businesses. This incentivizes large awards to ANCs at the expense of truly small businesses who are limited by a direct award ceiling of only \$4.5m.

**Recommended Action:** Congress should establish goals for ANCs that are separate and apart from the goals for all other 8(a) businesses.

**Innovation Funding.** Over the past ten years, DoD has implemented considerable changes in innovation programs and increased investment in research and development. However, the real challenge in innovation adoption with far too many viable innovations left to die in the “Valley of Death” because the adoption process is far too cumbersome. These programmatic gaps present tremendous risks for Veteran Owned Businesses who participate in Small Business Innovation Research programs.

**Recommended Action:**

1. Enable the appropriations process to support innovation adoption by allocating funding specifically to establish and sustain innovative technology solutions until the slow and cumbersome POM process can establish solutions in a program of record.
2. Direct innovation organizations to share R&D requirements to avoid duplication of investment. DoD repeatedly wastes funding on new R&D when organizations are simply unaware that another agency has already funded R&D for an existing solution. FAR 35.003(b)(3) states the SBIR program is intended to “avoid duplication of effort and increase participation of small businesses in federal R&D”, yet this cycle repeatedly wastes resources on redundant R&D that could have been better spent on adoption and perhaps worse – wastes time getting a solution to the Warfighter.

**Recommended Action:** Require innovation organizations to create better visibility on innovation investment and ensure requirement owners have reviewed current and completed needs before allocating them new R&D funding. Requirement owners should be directed to leverage existing innovations before investing in new R&D.

**Veteran Transition Assistance.**

**Program Adaptability and Access.** Current military transition programs are rigid, overlooking the unpredictable and demanding schedules of active-duty members, making engagement with critical resources difficult.



**Key Facts:** Service members' schedules are demanding and variable; transition assistance requires schedule and geographical adaptability.

**Recommended Action:** Institute flexible and dynamic transition assistance that is widely accessible, incorporating cutting-edge online platforms and resources for remote learning that accommodate individual needs and constraints.

**Cultural Transition and Emotional Support.** The transition from military to civilian life is a complex process that encompasses significant cultural and emotional adjustments. Veterans often experience a cultural and psychological divide as they leave behind a structured, mission-oriented military environment and enter the civilian workforce, which can lead to stress and a sense of dislocation.

**Key Facts:** Veterans must navigate a challenging cultural shift and potential identity crisis; emotional support is crucial during this adjustment period.

**Recommended Action:** Develop comprehensive cultural acclimatization training and support systems, which prepare veterans for civilian workplace dynamics and provide coping strategies for the loss of military camaraderie and structure, enhancing their emotional resilience.

**Integration into the Culture of Business.** A successful transition into the civilian sector involves more than finding a job; it means integrating veterans into the business ecosystem in a way that their unique skills and experiences are fully utilized. Transition programs must promote the value that veterans add to the civilian workforce, fostering economic growth and innovation.

**Key Facts:** Veterans possess unique skills valuable to the civilian sector; transition programs should highlight and harness these attributes.

**Recommended Action:** Launch initiatives that articulate the value proposition veterans offer to businesses, creating channels for meaningful employment and partnership opportunities that leverage veterans' specialized skills for mutual economic benefit.

**Financial Uncertainty with New Retirement Systems.** Veterans transitioning to civilian life under the new Blended Retirement System (BRS) may encounter financial uncertainty due



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to the system's differing payout structure. This can significantly impact their ability to transition smoothly, including the pursuit of entrepreneurship.

Key Facts: BRS changes retirement income dynamics; veterans need financial guidance tailored to this new system.

Recommended Action: Offer targeted financial planning and entrepreneurial support for veterans under BRS, providing financial education, access to startup capital, and business mentorship that accommodate the unique challenges posed by the new retirement landscape.

**Demonstrating National Gratitude Through Action.** Transition programs reflect the nation's commitment to its service members, demonstrating to the public and potential recruits that the well-being of veterans is a national priority. These programs are integral to showing gratitude and ensuring that veterans are valued members of society post-service.

Key Facts: Effective transition programs signal national appreciation; they are crucial for the well-being of veterans and their families.

Recommended Action: Strengthen and champion transition assistance as a core expression of national gratitude, ensuring that these programs are comprehensive, effective, and fully representative of our commitment to veterans' successful reintegration into civilian life.

By prioritizing these critical factors and integrating them into a cohesive transition assistance strategy, we can foster an environment in which veterans are empowered to succeed in the civilian sector, thereby reinforcing the strength of our military, the vitality of our economy, and the moral fiber of our nation.

Respectfully submitted for your consideration.

  
Joseph E. Gelardi  
Founder/CEO  
Vectrona, LLC

### Prepared Statement of Chris Maynor

Chairman Bost, Ranking Member Takano, and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity today to provide my remarks on this critical issue.

As a fifteen-year Army Combat Infantry Veteran, with three tours to Iraq, I never imagined myself opening a small business. For a significant part of my life, I had the terrific opportunity of relying on my fellow comrades for support. My life changed once I got out of the service, transferring from military life to civilian life. I did not have a meaning for my life. If it were not for family and friends, I might have been one of those 22 veterans a day we lose to the evil side. When you leave the service, you feel like you've lost that significant purpose you had in the military. After returning from my third and final tour in Iraq, many of my friends and family had already started their successful lives, leaving me wondering where to begin with mine. I worked a few side jobs over the next couple of years but still felt like I had more to offer. In 2017, I married my wife, and she showed me that I DID HAVE a purpose and the drive to succeed, not only for myself and my family but also for my fellow comrades.

I started back to school at John A. Logan College receiving my degree in Heating and Air in 2018. I worked for an amazing small business for almost 5 years. I figured out quickly that I was working a job that wasn't fit for my stress level and still not doing what I knew I was passionate about. At the same time, I became an active member in the local VFW. I moved all the way up in the chairs and became District Commander. About that same time, I took a job at John A. Logan College in the Heating and Air Department. I have worked there for almost two years now on second shift. So, between using my vacation and sick time for days off for PTSD reasons, and days for VFW events, helping fight for my fellow veterans' benefits, I had NO time for my family and 5 children.

I mentioned many times to my wife that I would like to open a men's clothing store. I figured if I opened my own business and was having a difficult day with my PTSD, I wouldn't risk losing my job taking more time off. Finally, after some more convincing, my wife agreed it was time to start our own small business, a men's clothing store named Daniel Deans, a tribute to my father who recently passed, also a veteran.

We wanted to open a store that offered a variety of men's clothing along with accessories like Hurricane Marsh and BURLEBO. We aimed to create a place where men could physically interact with the items, try them on, and be a local presence in our community. We quickly learned its no walk in the park starting up your own business. With all of my struggles (TBI and PTSD), the challenge was left to my co-owner and lovely wife. She had multiple hour-long phone calls, countless emails back and forth with different companies and searching websites claiming to have the knowledge for Veterans starting a small business and help with funding and different grants. With not understanding any of the rules and regulations of all these programs it became difficult to try and figure out if we even qualify for any of them. One company even told us over the phone to just look over the website, it was all there for us to read. We just stopped trying at that point and had to proceed with opening the business on our own and out of our own pocket putting ourselves in debt.

Once we started reaching out to different companies, some of which are also Veteran owned businesses, we learned that some allow you to pay overtime for product/inventory and will give any advice they have on opening a small business. There is such a high demand for Veterans trying to move forward in life and become business owners. They are trying to find that "new purpose" in life after the military. A lot of these companies do not have a voice behind them, a co-owner like I do, to help with these websites and search for all the different grants offered. Most startups will just give up like we did and try their best to move forward and hope for success.

Years ago, there used to be more service officers that knew everything there was to know about Veteran benefits. Maybe if we took things back to those times and focused on getting more service officers out there helping other Veterans, we might have more Veteran owned businesses. If we develop something for Veterans to help other Veterans, we might get a better turn out. I believe civilians do care about Veterans, but they do not understand the bond of a Veteran taking care of another Veteran. There is no other brotherhood, or sisterhood stronger.

Veteran service officers are under paid and over worked and as a result, the reason we don't have many left.

If we must keep all the resources for grants and funding opportunities on a website, I would like to recommend it be developed and presented in the way we say in the military: KISS (Keep it simple stupid). A user-friendly website with three



buttons: Veterans, Disabled Veterans, and Women Veterans. The user could easily click their category, fill out the application paperwork and apply for grants and funding automatically.

I am extremely thankful for everyone that has helped us along the way as we opened our small business. We appreciate your time today, giving me the opportunity to further discuss the struggles of trying to open a Veteran Owned business.

Thank you,

**Chris Maynor / Co-owner Daniel Deans, Murphysboro Illinois**

Chairman Bost, this concludes my testimony. Again, thank you and Ranking Member Takano for the opportunity to testify on this important issue before the committee. I am prepared to take any questions you or the committee members may have.

