



U.S. CHAMBER OF COMMERCE FOUNDATION

Statement of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation

ON: "COVID-19 Veteran Rapid Retraining Assistance Program"

TO: U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Veterans' Affairs,
Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity

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

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

The Foundation conducts research and produces events on issues facing business now and in the future. Through its initiatives, the Foundation builds skills, drives innovation, and encourages growth.

Committed to creating long-term economic opportunities for our veterans and their families, USCCF launched Hiring Our Heroes (HOH) in 2011 to assist military veterans, transitioning service members, and military spouses as they search for meaningful career opportunities and bridge the civilian military divide in the business community while strengthening and diversifying the country's workforce. Working with a range of private and public sector partners, HOH provides a suite of training, events and digital programs to meet the needs of the military community in obtaining economic stability through employment. Such services include career training, education and employer connections on military installations; virtual employment preparation and hiring events; digital resume tools to translate military experience into civilian skills; mentorship and career development workshops for military spouses; and fellowship programs providing internships for veterans, transitioning service members, and military spouses to gain on-the-job training with a high likelihood of employment.

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

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

“COVID-19 Veteran Rapid Retraining Assistance Program”

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

Good afternoon, Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Bilirakis, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee. My name is Eric Eversole and I am a Vice President at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the President of the Foundation's Hiring Our Heroes program.

Thank you for this opportunity to address the subcommittee and provide the Chamber's perspective and experience on veteran and military spouse employment and discuss how COVID-19 has impacted and will continue to impact those employment opportunities.

As discussed below, my testimony focuses on three core concepts and how important they are for transitioning service members, veterans and military spouses:

1. Bridging Military Experience with Civilian Skillsets and Experiential Opportunities Prior to Transition
2. Investing in Skills-Based Training and Ensuring Employment Accountability
3. Looking at Transition Holistically to Include Military Spouses

Background on Hiring Our Heroes

Founded in 2011, Hiring Our Heroes (HOH) is a nationwide initiative of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, which assists military veterans, transitioning service members, and military spouses in finding meaningful employment opportunities. We accomplish this goal through in-person and virtual hiring fairs, on-installation career summits, career development and networking events, a host of online digital resources, research and thought leadership initiatives in collaboration with public and private partners, and robust fellowship programs that offer on-the-job training and opportunities for long-term placement in competitive, growing industries within the civilian workforce.

Early on, our program leveraged the Chamber's vast network of state and local chambers to host hiring events in local communities throughout America. Between 2011 and 2014, we hosted nearly 1,000 hiring events assisting more than 200,000 veterans and military spouses as they searched for employment opportunities. We launched state of the art digital tools like Resume Engine and Career Spark to connect service members and military spouses with employers, large and small, throughout the United States. And, HOH made a commitment to address the systemic challenges associated with military spouse employment and creating employment opportunities to the forgotten heroes of our military spouse community.

As overall veteran unemployment started to dip in 2014, HOH shifted its focus to military and veteran populations that continued to struggle including junior enlisted service members, female veterans, veterans of color, wounded, ill and injured veterans, and military caregivers. We also continued to focus on the military spouse population as they struggled with more than twenty percent unemployment.

In 2014, in partnership with the Department of Defense, the Army, the Department of Veterans Affairs, and Department of Labor, as well as more than 100 employers, HOH hosted its first on-base career transition summit at Fort Bliss, Texas. Those events leveraged the broad reach and resources of the private and public sectors to provide world class training, industry insights, and employers committed to hiring veterans and military spouses. Since that time, we have hosted 116 career transition summits for more than 53,000 transitioning service members and military spouses.

We also launched our Corporate Fellowship Program (CFP) for transitioning service members as part of the new DoD SkillBridge program. As discussed in more detail below, our CFP provides a 12-week training and internship experience for transitioning service members with at least an associate's degree. In some cases, we also have the ability to host post-transition veterans and military spouses in the

program. To date, more than 2000 companies have hosted 3168 service members across the country. 74 percent have been hired with an average salary of \$91,183.

Finally, as part of our military spouse program, we have proven ourselves as thought leaders in raising awareness for this largely underrepresented population by facilitating a working group with the Second Lady's office and launching a national campaign powered by Starbucks to hire 100,000 military spouses over a three-year period. That campaign has not only encouraged more companies to track military spouses in their workforces, the campaign just passed the two-year mark with over 75,000 reported hires.

We also have taken a grassroots approach to educating employers on the value of military spouses and building over 50 local chapters of our Military Spouse Professional Network for over 35,000 military spouses worldwide to build their professional connections with peers and employers. We have developed comprehensive high-tough career development training curricula for military spouses providing mentoring, coaching and training and doubled the number of offerings over the past year due to increased demand. We also launched our Military Spouse Fellowship Program in 2017 providing military spouses and military caregivers with paid internship opportunities which has to date served 278 spouses and caregivers with an offer rate of 74 percent and average salary of \$58,833.

Impact of COVID-19

COVID-19 profoundly impacted HOH's mission—both from an operational perspective (i.e., how we serve people) and a scope perspective (i.e., how many people served). As a national, grassroots organization, HOH worked on and with military installations and provided most of our programming in-person. All of that had to shift in early March as the pandemic spread. Within a week, we had to reschedule more than a dozen major, in-person programs and events. We also had nearly 400 fellows in our Corporate Fellowship Program who needed to shift from an in-person internship to a remote work setting.

At the same time (early March), we saw a rapid increase in a request for services as overall veteran unemployment rose from an historically low 2.9 percent in December 2019-to more than 11 percent in April 2020. We also saw a rapid increase in the number of unemployment claims filed by newly transitioned veterans as that number increased from 400 per month in 2019 to more than 1,200 per month from March to June 2020.

HOH answered the call with our--“Career Community”—a virtual training and career education platform that provides live, interactive training sessions on leadership coaching, employment preparation, and overall wellness as well as recorded sessions for 24/7 access. The training and education prepare attendees for our virtual hiring events connecting job seekers with employers with high-demand roles despite the economic downturn. In the first 12 weeks of programming, HOH hosted 138 unique sessions reaching a global audience of nearly 12,000. In 2019 alone, we hosted 28 in-person events serving 12,000 veterans, service members, military spouses and military caregivers. We expect to reach over 30,000 in 2020 as a result of our shift to virtual programming.

We worked aggressively to expand the Corporate Fellowship Program and meet the needs of our transitioning service member population. We collaborated with companies across the country to explore virtual opportunities where possible, and CDC and state compliant in-person experiences.

Those efforts paid off as well. Since March, we graduated one cohort of fellows on April 3, 2020. 77.5percent have been offered employment with an average salary of \$92,582. Another 3 percent decided to stay in or go to school meaning that our overall success rate for the cohort is 80+ percent .

In addition, we launched our second cohort of fellows on May 18, 2020, with more than 150 host companies. It was our largest cohort ever with 475 fellows across the United States. They will graduate this Thursday, July 23, 2020 and already, over 25 percent have offers with an average salary of \$95,637.

One successful member is Rebecca Grayson, RN and military spouse. Rebecca is a qualified, licensed and experienced nurse, yet she was unable to find meaningful employment without a network to help her “get a foot in the door”. As she moved with her active duty spouse to a new state, she obtained her license to practice and was prepared to serve alongside her healthcare worker peers as the country saw shortages in providers due to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, no one seemed to be hiring. In response to the need to serve, Rebecca was prepared to stock shelves at a grocery store when she connected with our Military Spouse Professional Network and was provided a direct connection to an employment opportunity. Rebecca is now back to work as a registered nurse and “feels whole” again because she is able to contribute her skills and training to those in need.

Another successful graduate is Shala Gee, who decided to make a career switch from education to technology but was unable to do so successfully because she lacked experience in her new field. She was accepted into the first cohort of our 2020

Military Spouse Fellowship Program and received the first formal job offer of the year in the first week of her six-week internship. While her resume did not reflect direct experience in the industry, her skills shone through during her on-the-job training as the employer was able to see first-hand the adaptability, grit and drive military spouses bring to the workplace. As her active duty spouse prepares to separate from service, the dual income relieves some of the associated stress that accompanies transition. Shala has a renewed confidence in herself and is proud to model perseverance for their five children. As service members continue to transition during these uncertain times, the economic stability provided by a second income is critical to ensuring the overall wellbeing of the service member and the military family.

A Path Forward

As HOH continues to navigate the many challenges related to COVID-19, we are focused on three near- and long-term objectives:

1. Bridging Military Experience with Civilian Skillsets and Experiential Opportunities Prior to Transition

Over the last six years, HOH and a number of organizations have invested heavily in the Department of Defense's SkillBridge program—sometimes called Career Skills Programs by the Services. This innovative program provides early access to transitioning service members for the purposes of industry-based training, internships or apprenticeships. During a service member's last six months on active duty—and while they were still being paid by DoD—they can focus on their transition and jump start their civilian careers. In return, a company has to offer, but not guarantee, a high likelihood of employment.

Our SkillBridge program, the Corporate Fellowship Program (CFP), places active duty service members and veterans and military spouses in select locations in experiential learning opportunities with private sector companies prior to their transition from military service. The CFP is now DoD's largest SkillBridge provider featuring up to a 12-week syllabus and runs three times a year at select military installations and in host cities around the country. Fellowship candidates are carefully matched with participating companies based on the specific skills of the candidate and the preferences of both parties. Candidates then undergo exclusive on-the-job training at their host company, gaining firsthand experience in the private sector. This real-world experience is augmented by weekly educational sessions for the cohort, held in a classroom setting.

Since its inception in 2014, the CFP has seen unprecedented results. As noted earlier, more than 2000 companies have hosted nearly 3168 service members across the country. ***Seventy-four percent have been hired with an average salary of \$91,183.***

Importantly, the program has continued to perform well during the economic downturn. In fact, we graduated our last class on same day as the single largest announcement of unemployment. That class has had a 77.5 percent job offer rate with an average salary of \$92,582

Other programs, including Microsoft’s Software and Systems Academy (MSSA) and IVMF’s Onward to Opportunity, have had similar results. Both programs are open to any Military Occupational Skill (MOS) and education level of the service member as they are designed to upskill and reskill veterans to align with the needs of the current market. In 2019, MSSA trained 390 service members for high demand jobs in technology resulting in 78 percent receiving job offers with an average salary of \$83,475. The Institute for Veterans and Military Families’ Onward to Opportunity (O2O) program provides free education and certification testing for critical credentials such as Project Management Professional, Lean Six Sigma and various technology skills. While 2019 data is still being collected, the program graduated 3119 service members with a current job offer rate of 63 percent and an average salary of \$76,919. That number is expected to rise as 2019 reporting continues.

Why does SkillBridge work? It is simple: SkillBridge mimics an experience familiar to most college students. It provides service members with an opportunity to make connections, receive industry-based training, and showcase their non-technical skills (e.g., leadership and critical thinking) in a workplace environment. Companies likewise benefit from the relatively low-risk opportunity to evaluate military talent before making a hiring decision. It is a true “win-win” for both parties.

HOH strongly believes that we need to expand SkillBridge-related opportunities for active duty service members for now and into the foreseeable future.

2. Investing in Skills-Based Training and Ensuring Employment Accountability

One of the most desirable attributes of service members is adaptability. As the world of work continues to evolve at a rapid pace along with the need to constantly upskill and reskill, veterans are a natural pipeline of top talent for training in critical areas of need in industries such as IT, data science, trucking and transportation. If they did not

have the opportunity to train while on active duty, access to training leading to the desired end state of meaningful employment ensures a positive transition experience.

Over the last five years, organizations like Salesforce and Google have created an array of training opportunities for transitioning service members, veterans and military spouses to learn new skills or build upon existing skills. Other organizations, like HOH's Fellowship Program, provide on-the-job training opportunities. All these programs lead to a high likelihood of employment and most of them are free. Unfortunately, too many service members and spouses are unaware of the programs and, thus, are unable to take advantage of them while still associated with active duty service.

In 2017, HOH launched a pilot program to provide paid experiential learning opportunities for military spouses and veterans to participate in six-week internships in Maryland and the District of Columbia. Stipends were funded through a workforce development grant in partnership with the Anne Arundel Workforce Development Corporation in Anne Arundel County, Maryland. The program also provided training and certifications in areas such as IT and Cyber. Over the course of just under three years, nearly 278 fellows were hosted by over 300 companies with a job offer rate of 74 percent and average salary of approximately \$58,833.

In 2014, Salesforce created Vetforce, a job training and career accelerator program that is free for military service members, veterans and their spouses. Through Vetforce, military members receive training, classes and a wealth of career opportunities within the Salesforce ecosystem. Salesforce established partnerships with employers nationwide to connect Vetforce trained members of the military community with employment opportunities based on the training and skills received through the program. In addition to establishing a network of employers, Salesforce has dedicated \$1M to fund paid fellowship opportunities for veterans and military spouses to participate in fully remote work experiences leading to full-time employment. Salesforce's innovation in recognizing training is not the end state, employment is, which led to the development of the Salesforce fellowship program.

Google just launched Google Career Certificates to help Americans learn the skills they need to obtain entry-level jobs in high-paying, high-growth job fields— Data Analytics, Project Management and User Experience (UX) Design. The certificates are developed by Google employees who work in these fields, don't require a degree or prior experience, and can be completed in three to six months on a part-time, 100 percent online basis. These new career certificates build on the success of the Google IT Certificate program: 80 percent of the certificate completers got a new job, a raise

or started a new business. And we're reaching traditionally underrepresented groups in the IT field: 58 percent of IT Certificate learners identify as Black, Latino, female or veteran.

In addition to Google's career training solutions, creating access to jobs is a critical focus. Google has created Hiring Consortia to help certificate completers connect with employers hiring for roles in their field, building upon its [IT Certificate Employer Consortium](#) which includes Google. Google will consider its career certificates as the equivalent of a four-year degree for related roles.

The common factor in determining programmatic success amongst training programs is ultimately employment outcomes. Upskilling and reskilling to align with workforce needs is the first step, but it does not guarantee employment and the application of newly obtained skills. Putting experiential learning into practice and providing direct connections to employers are what drive positive employment outcomes.

3. Looking at Transition Holistically to Include Military Spouses

Military spouse employment is critical to the transition of today's service members and families. Recent research demonstrates that if a military spouse is employed during transition, service members feel less stressed, both financially and mentally. According to Department of Defense demographic data, military spouses comprise a population that is 92% female. Military spouses face unemployment rates of 24% which have been unyielding for the past decade, leading military spouses to support their service members during a permanent recession.

1. This 24 percent unemployment rate is up to 7.5 times higher than the current rate for all adult women.
2. Compared to the national unemployment rate, the proportion of unemployed military spouses has also grown substantially, from three to nearly eight times higher than civilian counterparts. Female spouses of active duty service members, on average, generate 37 percent less income than civilian spouses.
3. Even when considering education levels — military spouses, on average, have attained a higher level of education than their civilian peers — military spouses earn less than similar full-time civilian workers.
4. The choice to be a military spouse appears to incur a financial penalty.

Today's military families no longer live in a world where one income will suffice. Similar to their civilian counterparts, military families express the need for dual-incomes to achieve financial stability and realize their financial goals. When military spouses are not provided with adequate, flexible, portable career opportunities,

military families are forced to scrape by on one income, often leaving them with little to no money for emergency expenses.

A recent Military Family Advisory Network (MFAN) survey reveals that 77 percent of active duty, veteran and retiree respondents have debt. The amount of emergency savings varied significantly depending on family demographic: 27.4 percent of currently serving military family respondents said they have less than \$500 in emergency savings, while 49.2 percent of veteran family respondents (those without a military pension) reported having less than \$500. Nearly a quarter (23.5 percent) of these respondents said they do not have a viable plan for seeking assistance in a financial emergency.

In addition, today's military and veteran families are facing food insecurity and hunger, which may be tied to military spouse un- and underemployment. Today, between 7-9 percent of these families are food insecure or hungry (MFAN, 2020), with military and veteran families standing in line at food pantries or staring at empty pantry shelves.

Ending the chronic un- and underemployment rates faced by military spouses is critical to reducing these frightening statistics.

The information I've shared with you today underscores the need to look at service member transition from a more holistic point of view. Quite simply, when a married service member transitions, the spouse transitions too. Employment opportunities before, during, and after that transition are critical, and for military spouses, currently they are lacking.

Military spouses face a continual recession and that jeopardizes the well-being of today's veteran families. When employment programs provide opportunities for the spouse as well as the service member, military and veteran families have an increased chance of making a smoother transition and succeeding in their post-military life. Making them less likely to face the food insecurity and financial challenges mentioned here today.

Programs that help spouses create and expand professional networks, progress in their careers, and provide job placement opportunities, demonstrate continued success and warrant attention as well as expansion. They offer those who've served and supported our country the opportunity to provide for their families, give back to their communities, and perhaps a chance to realize the American Dream.

Conclusion

America is at its best when the private and public sectors work together on meaningful solutions to our society's most pressing challenges. Together, we answered that call in 2011 when our nation faced a crisis in veteran unemployment after the Great Recession. The current pandemic and economic downturn will require a similar concerted effort—one that is driven by a commitment to serve our veterans, transitioning service members and military spouses. We look forward to working with Congress, the Administration, federal and state agencies, and other non-profits on this important mission.

WITNESS INFORMATION

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Eric Eversole leads Hiring Our Heroes, a grassroots initiative to help veterans, transitioning service members, and military spouses find meaningful employment in communities across America. Eversole strategically engages the program's private- and public-sector partners in an effort to connect businesses to the talented men and women transitioning out of the military as well as their spouses.

For nearly two decades, Eversole has shown a strong commitment to the military and the men and women who serve. He first entered military service in 1994 as an enlisted security specialist in the Indiana Air National Guard. Eversole later accepted a commission in the United States Navy JAG Corps in 1998 and served on active duty until 2001. As an appellate attorney, he represented more than 250 sailors and Marines before the Navy-Marine Corps Court of Criminal Appeals and the Court of Appeals for the Armed Forces.

Eversole transferred to the Navy Reserve in 2001. He now serves with a Navy Reserve unit supporting the Navy's Appellate Review Activity and holds the rank of captain.

As a civilian attorney, Eversole served as a litigation attorney in the Voting Section of the U.S. Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division. He investigated and litigated cases to protect military voting rights under the Uniform and Overseas Citizen Absentee Voting Act (UOCAVA). Subsequently, he served as a special counsel for a presidential campaign and provided counsel on state and federal election issues.

Eversole founded the Military Voter Protection Project (MVP Project)—a program dedicated to promoting and protecting the voting rights of active duty military members and their spouses. In addition, he was an adjunct professor for the AMVETS Legal Clinic at Chapman University, which provides free legal representation and support to active duty service members and veterans.

Eversole holds a J.D. cum laude from Indiana University School of Law and a B.A. cum laude from Wabash College. He resides in Washington, D.C., with his wife, Amanda and their two daughters.

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