



U.S. CHAMBER OF COMMERCE FOUNDATION

Statement of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation

ON: “Veteran Employment Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic”

TO: U.S. House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity

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

DATE: May 26, 2021

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, active duty 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 education, events and 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 internship programs 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**

“Veteran Employment Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic”

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

Good afternoon, Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Moore, 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 our perspective and experience on veteran unemployment and highlight effective programs and initiatives ensuring veterans, transitioning service members and military spouses find meaningful employment amid the pandemic and beyond.

As discussed below, my testimony focuses on three core concepts and how important they are for veterans, transitioning service members, and military spouses to close the equality gap and reduce unemployment and underemployment:

1. Linking Military Experience with Civilian Skillsets and Providing the Bridge to Employment Prior to Transition
2. Investing in Skills-Based Training and Ensuring Employment Accountability
3. Advancing Returnships for Women

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 committed to address the systemic challenges associated with military spouse employment and equalizing economic opportunity for military families by improving employment conditions for military spouses, a population that has historically faced twenty percent unemployment.

Veterans have historically struggled to transition to civilian employment, experiencing gaps in employment and facing underemployment. Approximately 200,000 service members continue to transition to civilian life each year. Certain populations of veterans face greater barriers than others. In a March 2020 report released by the Wounded Warrior Project on women in the military, female veterans report feeling less prepared to navigate resources in their community after transition and earning approximately twenty-five percent less than their male veteran counterparts. IVMF's 2021 report on Black and African-Americans in the military revealed that getting a job was the top transitional challenge reported by respondents at sixty-two percent. The average reported earnings for Black and African-American Veterans was \$58,361 compared to non-minority veteran counterparts at \$77,217 whereas the average reported earnings of Black and African-American Veterans in STEM was \$81,942 which only accounts for eight percent of Veterans in the STEM workforce.

In 2014, in partnership with the Department of Defense, the Army, the Department of Veterans Affairs, and the Department of Labor, as well as more than 100 employers, HOH hosted its first career transition summit on a military installation 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 156 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. 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.

We also have taken a grassroots approach to educating employers on the value of military spouses and building over 60 local chapters of our Military Spouse Professional Network for over 50,000 military spouses worldwide to build their professional connections with peers and employers. Additionally, we have launched 21 Military Spouse Economic Empowerment Zones (MSEEZ) nationwide which connect military spouses with companies committed to hiring them and foster collaboration among local stakeholders to identify opportunities and barriers for military spouse employment. We have developed comprehensive high-touch career development training curricula for military spouses providing mentoring, coaching, 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 have to date served 419 spouses and caregivers with an offer rate of 85 percent and average salary of \$63,000.

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 of 2020 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 a 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. In 2020, we hosted over 240 virtual training and education sessions reaching an audience of over 10,000 as well as more than two dozen industry-focused virtual hiring events. HOH implemented a pre-screening component to virtual hiring events to ensure job seekers were appropriately prepared and referred to appropriate career development resources. This curated approach resulted in more than seventy percent of candidates moving to the next steps in the hiring process.

We also 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. Since March 2020, when the pandemic forced America to pivot, we steadily increased our number of active-duty military members and spouses who participated and found careers as a result of the program. In the last 12 months, more than 200 companies have hosted 1,465 Fellows across the country. 85% of those fellows received job offers with an average salary of \$95,000. That growth has continued in 2021.

The global pandemic has negatively impacted women in the workforce. The labor participation rate for women in February 2021 was nearly fifty-six percent the lowest reported rate since 1987. Military spouses, a population that skews ninety-three percent female, reflect this devastating effect. In a recent survey conducted by Hiring Our Heroes, military spouse unemployment has risen from an already staggering twenty-four percent in early 2020 to thirty-eight percent in early 2021. Fifty-four percent of respondents reported the expectation to return to work by September of 2021.

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. Linking Military Experience with Civilian Skillsets and Providing the Bridge to Employment 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 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 jumpstart 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 before their transition from military service. The CFP is one of DoD's largest SkillBridge program featuring a 12-week internship and runs three times a year at locations across 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 2,000 companies have hosted nearly 3,168 service members across the country. Importantly, more than 80% of our Fellows have received job offers and the average salary is now in excess of \$90,000.

Other programs, including Microsoft's Software and Systems Academy (MSSA) and IVMP'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 technical 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 skilled technology, 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 Microsoft 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 Programs, provide on-the-job training opportunities. All these programs lead to a high likelihood of employment and are at no cost to the job seeker. 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 advance of transition.

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 an 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, led to the development of the Salesforce fellowship program.

Microsoft's Software and Systems Academy (MSSA) provides transitioning service members, Guard, Reserves and veterans, including those with clearance, with critical career skills required for today's growing technology industry through a 17-week training for high-demand careers in cloud development or cloud administration. The program is available at no cost at select military installations and virtually. Program graduates have an opportunity to interview for a full-time job at Microsoft or one of their hiring partners.

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. Advancing Returnships for Women

As a solution to the devastating loss of women in the workforce as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, Hiring Our Heroes expects to place 250 military spouses and caregivers in returnships through its fellowship program in 2021. Additionally, the fellowship program for transitioning service members expects to provide direct pathways to civilian employment for over 1,500 service members in 2021, of which approximately twenty-five percent will be female.

Courtney Austin was approaching retirement as a Master Sergeant in the United States Army. She was stationed at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas and her last job in uniform included serving as an Advisor for Military Policy. As she approached her retirement date, she knew finding a job in the private sector would be hard, especially since her separation would be in late 2020 and the pandemic was still in full swing. To help her transition, Courtney applied for the Ft. Leavenworth CFP, was accepted into the program, and aligned with her host company, Wayfair. Wayfair felt her background was a fit for a Human Resources position they were currently recruiting for in St. Louis, Missouri. The CFP allowed Wayfair to bring Courtney on for a 12-week internship to see if she was a match for the role and their organization, all while Courtney was still in active-duty status. After 12 weeks in the fellowship, Courtney was offered a full-time role in Wayfair's Human Resources Department and accepted the position.

Despite wanting a career in information technology (IT), for the last 15 years, Janelle Fields worked jobs that were not in that field. She had her MBA and was a successful cosmetologist who owned her own salon. Still, the Air Force veteran's dream was to work in IT. In 2019, Janelle was unexpectedly laid off, and after having heard about Salesforce in some of her previous jobs, she began to pursue her Salesforce certification which, unbeknownst to her was a requirement for the HOH Salesforce Fellowship Program. The program offers virtual, paid 12-week internships with participating companies throughout the United States to veterans, military spouses, and transitioning service members. Janelle was accepted into the program and aligned with USAA as her host company. The fellowship allowed Fields to measure her abilities and prove her worth as a Salesforce professional in a corporate environment. Fields said her fellowship with USAA was a very rewarding experience, and on the last

day of her 12-weeks there, USAA extended a full-time employment offer to Fields who accepted the offer.

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

Eric Eversole

Vice President, U.S. Chamber of Commerce

President, Hiring Our Heroes, U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation
eversole@uschamber.com | (202) 463-5631 office | (202) 487-8146 mobile

U.S. Chamber of Commerce

1615 H Street, NW | Washington, D.C. | 20062-2000

Hiringourheroes.org | uschamberfoundation.org | uschamber.com
eversole@uschamber.com

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. Eversole transferred to the Navy Reserve in 2001 and retired as a Captain in 2019.

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.

References

Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis. (2020, July 2). FRED Economic Data: Unemployment Rate. Available: <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/UNRATE>

Military Family Advisory Network. (2020). 2019 Military Family Support Programming Survey Executive Summary. Available: <https://militaryfamilyadvisorynetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/MFAN2019ExcSummary.pdf>

Ramchand, R., Harrell, M., Berglass, N. and Lauck, M. (2020). Veterans and COVID-19: Projecting the Economic, Social, and Mental Health Needs of America's Veterans. Available: <https://bobwoodruffffoundation.org/veterans-and-covid19/>

U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2020, July 2). Employment Situation Summary. Available: <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/empsit.nr0.htm>

U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2020, March 19). Employment Situation of Veterans Summary. Available: <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/vet.pdf>

U.S. Government Accountability Office. (2017, November 8). Transitioning Veterans: DOD Needs to Improve Performance Reporting and Monitoring for the Transition Assistance Program. Available: <https://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-18-23>