



STATEMENT OF BRIAN LEWIS
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CONSUMERS ENERGY
BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
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Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Pappas, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for devoting time to the discussion of essential programs that provide economic opportunity for veterans and thank you for the opportunity to testify about the critical role employers, like Consumers Energy, can play in helping veterans as they move from military to civilian life including ways to leverage industry partnerships through the Transition Assistance Program and SkillBridge Program. My name is Brian Lewis, and I am Executive Director of Customer Operations at Consumers Energy.

I've worked at Consumers Energy for 12 years, serving in a variety of customer centric roles. As the leader of our customer operations team, I oversee our contact centers, complaints resolution, revenue operations, energy assistance and our digital channels. I am also a proud veteran having served as a Combat Medical Specialist and Medical Laboratory Specialist in the U.S. Army and Army Reserve from 1994 to 2002. During my years of service, the Army entrusted me with the lives of my fellow soldiers. However, despite having been trained to provide life-saving support, operate a blood bank or even oversee a microbiology bench, when I transitioned to a civilian life I found my Army training had limited transferability to the civilian medical field and my job prospects were extremely limited. While I'm grateful for the time spent serving my country, I felt underprepared and under resourced to navigate the transition from military to civilian life and I ultimately abandoned my medical aspirations. My experience led me to seek out other ways to serve and contributed to my desire to advocate on behalf of other veterans, helping them navigate the transition to civilian roles. I know firsthand the challenges that veterans can face entering a new career path after national service. It is because I know those challenges firsthand that I helped found the Consumers Energy's Veterans Advisory Panel and served as a past co-chair of this employee resource group.

Our company—Consumers Energy—provides natural gas and electric service to nearly 7 million Michigan residents. We are the state’s largest utility with customers in every county within the Lower Peninsula. My Consumers Energy colleagues and I take pride in serving our customers each and every day. This pride of service beyond self is something I, along with the over 800 other military veterans employed by Consumers Energy, have carried with us from our time serving our Nation into our new civilian mission to provide essential heat and light to our fellow Michiganders. Serving our customers can sometimes demand personal sacrifice as they count on us to keep power on around the clock and respond to emergencies during nights, weekends, or holidays, a similar sacrifice that our military men and women are accustomed to as well.

Consumers Energy has a longstanding commitment to provide opportunities for our military veterans. This commitment to veterans is backed up by the numbers. Our workforce is made up of 12% military veterans -- far greater than the national average of 7%. The company has also partnered with the Michigan Veterans Trust Fund to support energy vulnerable Veterans, giving nearly \$550,000 to that organization since 2020. Through our efforts to support veterans Consumers Energy has been recognized by the Michigan Veterans Affairs Agency as a gold-level "Veteran-friendly Employer" for nine years running. This designation recognizes our Company's efforts to recruit, train, and retain veteran employees, helping us fill critical positions across our electric and gas operations.

Our efforts to support veterans have been further recognized by the Department of Defense. In 2023 Consumers Energy received the Secretary of Defense Freedom Award in recognition of our support for employees serving in the National Guard and Reserve capacities. This award is the Department of Defense's highest recognition for a civilian employer and demonstrates the Company's efforts to support our employees that transition from active duty to a reserve capacity by providing stability that helps them balance their continued national service with career aspirations and other aspects of civilian life.

The Company's efforts to support our veterans is about more than awards or accolades, it is about our earnest desire to help ease, what can often be, the difficult transition out of the military by providing a welcoming environment for colleagues with different backgrounds or experiences. Our Veteran's Advisory Panel Business Employee Resource Group is one way we continuously seek input from our veteran employees to help drive policy change within our organization and with external partners. Today the Veteran's Advisory Panel is one the Company's largest resource groups with over 500 members. The group provides essential support for employees and in recruiting and retaining veterans.

Consumers Energy employees are also active in Veterans in Energy - a national organization founded by veterans for the purpose of providing professional support for veterans working in the energy industry. Employee engagement through Veterans in Energy includes annual leadership trainings, peer-to-peer networking, benchmarking and best practices sharing, and advocacy on behalf of veterans' issues. Through engagement with Veterans in Energy, Consumers Energy employees have been instrumental in advocating for policy changes that have improve Department of Labor apprenticeship programs and demystifying the self-identification process for veterans so employers can have a better understanding of veterans in the workforce.

Consumers Energy has also recognized the importance of providing training and technical skills programs to help develop the highly skilled workforce needed for careers in energy. In partnership with the U.S. Department of Labor, the Company has registered seven different job roles to ensure that veterans can use their GI bill benefits toward apprenticeships that prepare them to work in gas or electric fields.

One way the Company has recruited potential, new apprentices is through electric and gas worker boot camp programs at our training center in Pottersville, Michigan. In partnership with the Utility Workers Union of America and Power for America, these training programs have, to date, helped prepare over 300 veterans for careers in electric and natural gas fields. Not only do these boot camp programs help connect graduates with high starting wage jobs, they also provide a pathway to placement in apprenticeship programs that can ultimately lead to careers in the energy sector with even higher earning potential. Each time we open a new boot camp the demand from applicants is significantly higher than the number of spaces we have to fill. We believe, and the demand for the programs affirms, that training programs are a win-win for veterans and Consumers Energy because the programs make the Company more attractive for job seekers while providing future employees with a pathway to essential and rewarding career opportunities.

Building a skilled, dedicated energy workforce isn't just in Consumers Energy's best interest, its vital to America's national interest. The demand for energy is growing at rate not seen in decades. Whether its increasing energy demands from data centers to power artificial intelligence or to support an American manufacturing renaissance, the nation's gas and electric utilities are making significant investments in our energy systems to ensure businesses have the energy supplies they can rely on to thrive. Meeting this moment is going to require more and more lineworkers and gas construction crewmembers. We believe that fostering the talent pipeline from the nation's military to careers in energy will be an essential strategy to fill these critical roles.

Even with all our past efforts and success, Consumers Energy recognizes there is more to be done to help serve the roughly 200,000 service members who transition out of military service each year. Through our past partnerships with state and federal agencies we've found many ways to help ease this transition, however we acknowledge there is always opportunity for continuous improvement. We believe that more can be done to strengthen the connection between Transition Assistance Program offices and companies in states that don't have the same proximity to our nations active-duty military installations. Because Michigan does not have large numbers of active-duty personnel it's been more challenging to make connections with the TAP offices. Additionally, we see more potential with the Department of Defense's SkillBridge program to make more direct connections between employers and prospective employees. However, SkillBridge is not accessible to all veterans and coordination with Transition Assistance Program needs to be improved. We believe that further funding for SkillBridge and making this platform more accessible for veterans will vastly improve engagement between veterans and prospective employers.

Thank you again for the opportunity to participate in this discussion. Consumers Energy stands ready, willing, and able to support policymakers in improving economic opportunity for our Nation's veterans.