



U.S. CHAMBER OF COMMERCE FOUNDATION

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

ON: Examining 21st Century Programs and Strategies for Veteran Job Seekers

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

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

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

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

The 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.

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

**“Examining 21st Century Programs and Strategies for Veteran Job
Seekers”**

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

Good afternoon, Chairman Wenstrup, Ranking Member Takano, and distinguished members of the Committee. My name is Eric Eversole and I am the president of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation's Hiring Our Heroes program.

Founded in 2011, Hiring Our Heroes 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 in a 21st century workforce. The program accomplishes this goal in a number of different ways, which include hiring fairs, multi-day on-base transition summits, campaigns in partnership with sponsor companies and nonprofit associations, and a robust suite of online digital resources.

In March of this year, we celebrated our five-year anniversary, and we are proud to announce that since our program's launch, we have held more than 1,000 hiring events in the United States and around the world. From those hiring events alone, we've confirmed nearly 30,000 military veteran and spouse hires in the civilian workforce. This does not include the hundreds of thousands of other meaningful connections that our program has made for job seekers through our various other resources, such as workshops, training programs, our online properties and more.

The past several years have been a time of tremendous growth in the military hiring community, as private sector companies have admirably stepped up their hiring efforts for veterans and military spouses. When Hiring Our Heroes was first started more than five years ago, the employment outlook for veterans and military families was incredibly bleak. In many ways, the nation was in a crisis situation with regards to the employment struggles faced by so many individuals who had sacrificed so much for our country. However, with the business community meeting the challenge of finding jobs for this population, the unemployment rate for them has continued to drop precipitously.

This has resulted in what is currently the lowest unemployment rate yet for military veterans at approximately four percent. There are, however, segments of the military community which continue to struggle. For example, post-9/11 veterans under the age of 25 face an unemployment rate that is higher than the national average. Military spouses also face a high unemployment rate of anywhere between 20 and 30 percent, depending on the demographic. Couple that with the fact that more than 200,000 service members make the transition off of active duty annually, and it becomes very clear that there is still a great deal of work to be done.

We know that hiring veterans is not just the right thing to do for the country, but it makes good business sense. Veterans bring incredible value in both the tangible and intangible skills to companies who hire them, from extensive training backgrounds in their military occupational specialties to the less concrete characteristics such as loyalty, discipline, and a work ethic that is not rivaled elsewhere in the economy – all being crucial to a productive work environment.

We also recognize that this is not solely an economic issue for our country, but a national security concern. If young Americans believe that their service adds a stigma to them when entering the workforce and not an accolade, it will be more difficult to recruit high-quality people into the next generation of the all-volunteer force.

Background on Hiring Our Heroes

When Hiring Our Heroes was first created, we had a very simple mission – carry out traditional hiring events, and connect with state and local chambers to find opportunities for military job seekers across the country.

Although we know that some veterans and their families are still struggling, the landscape itself has changed, and we have had to adapt our operations in accordance with that change to continue our effectiveness in what we do. We've become more strategic in our approach and programs, and more focused on not only finding jobs for these individuals, but ensuring that they are finding the right jobs.

Knowing that part of this strategic approach encompasses a broad-based effort to engage the private sector, in 2012, together with Capital One, we launched the “Hiring 500,000 Heroes” campaign to secure half a million commitments by various employers to hire veterans and military spouses. Once businesses who joined this program committed, we worked with them to translate those commitments into hires. We're proud to say that in June of 2015, we surpassed the 500,000-hire mark for veterans and military spouses who were hired as a result of this initiative. Ultimately,

companies have committed to hiring a total of more than 700,000 veterans and spouses as part of this.

Hiring Our Heroes also developed and continued to improve our robust array of digital tools and online resources for both job seekers and employers. With support from our generous sponsors, including Toyota and USAA, we provide tools such as the Personal Branding Resume Engine, My Career Spark for military spouses, the Employer Roadmap, Fast Track, and others free of charge for all users, whether job seeker or employer. All of these state-of-the-art online tools are designed to ensure that our target audiences have easy access to the most up-to-date information and best practices when they enter into this unique and often challenging environment.

Lastly, we know that the military spouse population faces its own unique set of challenges when searching for employment. While a service member will typically only transition off of active duty once in his or her career, military spouses make multiple transitions while serving alongside their service member, making it all the more challenging to find stable and meaningful employment.

Our Military Spouse Program, which has been in place since 2012, is incredibly active in this community, engaging spouse-specific hiring fairs, networking receptions, roundtable discussions, workshops, and more.

Of course, we must recognize that all of our work is made possible by the generous donations of the companies on our Military Spouse Employment Advisory Council, to complement its counterpart, the Veteran Employment Advisory Council.

What Employers Can Do

Companies of all sizes approach our organization on a regular basis facing the issue of being incredibly enthusiastic about their desire to hire veterans, but not knowing exactly where to start.

For employers who are eager to get started but find themselves experiencing trouble navigating the complicated landscape of the military hiring community, we have a number of different programs and resources that they can engage and utilize. Our online tool Employer Roadmap is multi-faceted resource which gives companies a customized experience based on their experience level to help them learn best practices and programs for recruiting, hiring, and retaining veterans and military spouses. Information and guidance on how to develop complete military hiring strategies and military-friendly job descriptions, as well as understanding what the

military community brings to companies in the way of experience is easily available through this wide-ranging web site.

Our Business and State Engagement department is our direct link into the business community, and works to engage our partner companies, as well as our expansive network of state and local chambers across the country to ensure that they are constantly dialed in to our program and have the access that they desire to military job seekers.

With the economic landscape looking better in the last year to veterans, there are some companies who may assume that the entire problem of veteran unemployment has been solved and ask: “What else is there to do?”

To answer that question, it is worth revisiting that while great strides have been made over the last several years, there still exists a significant struggle for certain segments of the veteran population to find employment. We encourage companies to start military affinity groups within their organizations, as we have seen that mentors, resource groups, and personal relationships are key to breaking down barriers to success and critical to retaining veterans for longer periods of time. For some companies, this is a new concept, while others, such as Coca-Cola, have had longstanding veteran affinity groups and programs which date back decades. Also, as mentioned earlier, our belief is that it is imperative for companies to not forget about military spouses when developing these internal initiatives. Simply put, if you have a military hiring strategy that focuses solely on veterans, you only have half of a strategy.

Additionally, we cannot stress enough the importance for companies to market, promote, and most importantly “sell” their industry to the military community. Many military job seekers have misperceptions or outdated concepts of what a certain industry may actually look and feel like in the 21st century. While we encourage them to reach outside their comfort zone and explore job opportunities with which they may not be familiar, it is crucial for companies to be active in this space to ensure the job seeker population is educated on what being a part of a certain job field actually means. Our digital resource Fast Track is a place for job seekers to inform themselves on new and fast-growing industries, as well as a platform for companies to post their jobs in a live feed fed through the National Labor Exchange.

Our combined effort to focus on both the job seeker education as well as the employer side will continue as our program evolves in the months and years ahead. And we will continue to position ourselves as leaders in this community to the further benefit of all of our target audiences.

Partnerships

Creating and maintaining valuable partnerships for our program has been crucial to our success. Hiring Our Heroes is in a unique position in the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation to have influential connections to thousands of state and local chambers, which provides us with tremendously effective grassroots teams across the country to engage with military job seekers in their communities. The enormous impact that we have seen at every level has been extremely beneficial to our mission.

Our program has also been able to develop key partnerships with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, the U.S. Department of Labor, the U.S. Department of Defense and many of its services, as well as the Small Business Administration, in order to expand our messaging base and reach the service member and military spouse population, connecting employers to them wherever they are in the world.

The relationships that we maintain with other nonprofit organizations within this military hiring community have been integral to our success as well. Our work with groups such as the Institute of Veterans and Military Families, Student Veterans of America, Blue Star Families, Got Your 6, and many others has furthered our reach and strengthened our ability to provide networking and training opportunities for job seekers, and make valuable connections for them with employers who are hiring.

One of our greatest achievements of last year was when we partnered with the George W. Bush Institute's Military Service Initiative as well as a broad array of public, private, and nonprofit partners to create the Veteran Employment Transition Roadmap, a comprehensive guide for transitioning service members and military veterans to help them become better equipped to navigate the complex landscape that they will encounter when leaving the military to pursue new careers. This document, which is available in hard-copy as well as online, is unique in that there is nothing else like it that exists in this military employment space. It outlines best practices and checklists for job seekers to consider, as well as an overall list of resources that are available to them from across the public, private, and nonprofit sectors that are available to them when making this transition.

Moving “Left of Transition”

One of the key lessons we have learned over the last four years is that many of the challenges that military veterans face when transitioning off active duty is primarily due to a lack of preparation. Far too many service members have traditionally viewed transition not as a continuing process but as a single point in time when they simply pick up their DD-214 papers and leave the military. Not

surprisingly, in recent years, more than 50 percent of service members were unemployed within 15 months of leaving the military, with no clear pathway to economic success.

In 2014, a key effort of Hiring Our Heroes was our aggressive work to address this problem, by helping service members focus on moving left of transition, and starting the job search process earlier. When interfacing with service members, we compare this process to any evolution that they would encounter in the military. It is a process that requires a clearly-defined mission, preparation, execution, and ability to adapt and overcome as circumstances evolve.

Working with our public, private, and nonprofit partners, we launched a series of multi-day, on-base transition summits aimed at reaching and empowering service members long before their last day on active duty. These summits are essentially one-stop-shops for service members as they learn what economic opportunity looks like for them in today's workforce, with panel discussions from industry leaders, breakout workshop classes, networking receptions, and ultimately a hiring fair to conclude the event.

We are continuing this innovative approach to serving the military community throughout 2016, hosting 17 summits in the United States and internationally, providing job seekers with best-in-class resources for their transition process, and connecting them with employers (sometimes numbering in the hundreds) at each event that are searching for top military talent.

Another pioneering effort which complements our summits is our model of attaching hiring events to professional sporting events, creating an expo. This series of events was launched in 2014 in conjunction with major professional sporting events, such as NBA basketball or Major League Baseball games. All military job seekers receive free admission to the hiring events and tickets to attend the game and/or special event. We have seen great success with these as a means to attract attention to our program, capitalizing on the high-profile nature of the athletic teams or host organization to further our messaging reach with job seekers and employers.

Lastly, we have critically important training programs which truly set us apart in this hiring community. Our Corporate Fellowship Program is a 12-week evolution that prepares service members for separation from the military through corporate education, extensive on-the-job training, and networking opportunities. At the completion of the program, service members have increased their marketability tremendously, giving them an added edge in an increasingly competitive job market.

Just as these events are geared towards making sure job seekers understand the opportunities that are available to them, these are also services to our business population as well. We have learned over the years that companies want access to veterans and military families sooner in the transition process, and coming up with new and creative ways to make that possible is how we meet that demand signal.

Most importantly, while there are many groups and avenues that can be helpful in this effort, we recognize that it is incumbent upon job seekers to own their transition. There is a sea of goodwill that exists for transitioning service members and military spouses, but ultimately, it is their responsibility to start far enough in advance and dedicate the time and effort necessary to have a successful transition.