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UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
VETERANS AFFAIRS COMMITTEE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
HEARING ON "GETTING VETERANS TO WORK AFTER COVID-19"

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Good morning Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Bilirakis and members of the committee. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you to discuss such an important topic at any point, but especially during this unprecedented crisis.

My name is David Porter and I am the Executive Director of Helmets to Hardhats, a national nonprofit program that connects transitioning active-duty military service members, veterans, National Guard and Reservists with skilled training and quality career opportunities in the construction industry.

Our veteran career building model is simple; we partner with the organizations representing each construction trade as well as the signatory contractors that manage the construction projects that these trades work on around the United States.

The construction industry is, by its very nature and ranking from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), among the most dangerous. To guard against the inherent dangers, promote first-rate work and uphold public safety, workers must receive the highest quality education and training. This is why we partner with and promote joint labor-management registered apprenticeship.

It is the gold standard for workforce training overall; and for construction. These world class, “earn as you learn” training programs allow an individual to work and go to a state-of-the-art training center at the same time. It is a debt free beginning to a career, because there are no tuition costs for the individual to be fully trained in their chosen craft. And, these apprenticeship programs are regulated and approved at both federal and state levels, so veterans can utilize their G.I. Bill benefits to supplement their income while they learn, both on the job and in the classroom.

Veterans who come through our program have access to over 1600 training centers and 20,000 instructors around the country. In fact, there is a registered apprenticeship training center in almost every congressional district. Finally, these veterans are guaranteed good wages, retirement benefits and health care for themselves and their families during and after their apprenticeship.

Besides being a benefit to the veteran, our program’s use of registered apprenticeship also benefits construction contractors and the communities across the country.

Contractors’ have a financial interest in registered apprenticeship because they, along with their trade partners, share the program’s training and facilities costs. In return, they are guaranteed access to a skilled workforce, and receive a good return on their investment. Research shows that for every \$1.00 that a contractor spends on training an individual, they see a profit of between \$1.30 to \$3.00. Finally, registered apprenticeship helps contractors recruit and retain a highly skilled workforce at a time when skilled labor in construction is difficult to find and maintain.

Communities also benefit. Local hire requirements are increasing in popularity, and apprenticeships expand the pool of skilled workers in cities and counties of all sizes, especially

in those where skilled workers are hard to find. Governors and mayors are constantly working to attract new business and development to their communities and tax bases, and a local skilled workforce is key to making their pitch.

Furthermore, through partnerships with community-based organizations and local governments, these programs provide a pathway to the middle class for historically underrepresented individuals in the construction industry. Finally, registered apprenticeship saves taxpayer money because these programs are all privately funded.

Helmets to Hardhats has found great success partnering with joint labor-management registered apprenticeship, but COVID-19 has thrown a curve ball at any veteran's employment search.

As you heard, registered apprenticeship is based on a two-part learning experience, on-the-job and in the classroom. Registered apprenticeship isn't like a college or university that only provides the classroom component. When local construction projects are shelved or shutdown, it not only means a loss of training veterans, but also unemployment.

We have been fortunate that construction was deemed essential in many states and municipalities when COVID-19 shutdown orders were put in place. Despite this, the industry still lost over 1 million jobs in April alone. For example, New York's year over year change in construction employment was minus 41% since the state shutdown non-essential construction.

Our main question is, will the jobs in construction, and in turn the career training opportunities for veterans, be there long-term?

Veteran unemployment has stayed between 3% - 3.5% over the past two years. However, the veteran unemployment rate for this June was 8.8%.

We routinely follow construction forecast models such as the month-to-month demand for architectural and design services. And right now, the outlook is not good. Proposals for design services are down significantly across most business sectors.

True to history, the construction industry seems to be following its usual pattern of an uneven recovery. When the Great Recession was deemed over by economists, construction unemployment remained in the double digits for years. New projects were hard to come by because lending was still tight, annual maintenance on public works was delayed and developers and owners were hesitant to use reserves to build.

But it doesn't have to be this way because Congress can help.

First, Congress should pass a monumental infrastructure jobs bill to create quality employment and training opportunities for veterans. Just as the Great Depression required a response of massive federal investment, so too will this COVID-19 economy. With interest rates at or near zero, now is the time to make a historic investment in infrastructure that will provide a positive rate of return for a generation.

Second, this committee can help by providing more access and visibility for programs like ours on military installations. Many installations only allow a few annual events to access transitioning service members, and installation entry requirements vary across the country. Furthermore, we don't have the resources to maintain offices on military installations from which to recruit; like colleges and universities do.

Once again, thank you for the opportunity to speak before you today. I look forward to your questions and working with you in the future on these and other issues of importance to veterans.