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Veteran Unemployment

When describing war-related disabilities in the 4th edition of *Social Problems*, sociologist and author John J. Macionis touches upon the issue of employment, an often overlooked casualty of a soldier's release from military service. Macionis asserts that veterans' "difficulty finding and keeping jobs...is one reason that 1.4 million veterans earn incomes below the poverty line" (446-447). He adds that "about 250,000 [veterans] are homeless for some time during any given year" (Macionis 446-447). The fact that so many of our nation's veterans are struggling with unemployment-related poverty and homelessness is cause for alarm.

In his article, "New battle zone: returning veterans battle for jobs", Jim Offner also expresses concern regarding the troubling issue of veteran unemployment. According to Offner, the U.S. Department of Labor reported in 2011 that the unemployment rate for veterans aged 18-24 averaged a whopping "30 percent – more than double the unemployment rate among non-veterans of the same age." He indicates that "as many as 250,000 recent veterans are [currently] searching for jobs across the country" (Offner). Unfortunately, the situation is about to get worse: National figures show that the number of veterans seeking employment is expected to increase dramatically to "400,000...in the next five years" (Offner).

The US government is well aware of the implications of so many of our nation's soldiers leaving military service. On March 15, 2012, Defense Secretary Leon E. Panetta told reporters that defense budget cuts, a strategic drawdown in Afghanistan and the recent withdrawal of combat troops from Iraq means "more veterans leaving service and seeking civilian employment

in the coming years” (Veteran Job Prospects Brighter, Panetta Says). Panetta went on to cite officials’ efforts to help alleviate the impending storm, but admitted that key to helping veterans “lies not only in government programs, but also in private-sector initiatives” (Veteran Job).

Crain’s Chicago Business states “there are many government and private-sector programs designed to help veterans get jobs or create jobs of their own” but asserts that “Corporate America can and should be doing more to bridge the veterans’ unemployment gap” (Veterans Need More Than Gratitude –They Need Jobs). According to veteran advocates, “corporate recruiters often don’t take into account the practical experience a soldier has picked up in the service” (Offner). So it seems clear that the government, private-sector and Corporate America *all* need to do their part if we ever hope to reduce the number of unemployed military veterans. Half measures will not effectively resolve this issue with any long term success.

The United States is good at training its soldiers how to fight but our nation doesn’t do a very good job of helping them reintegrate with society once their part in the fighting is over. By not employing veterans, we miss an opportunity to assimilate them back into civilian life on the most fundamental level. Having a job is vital to a person’s socioeconomic success, happiness and self-esteem, and veterans are no exception. We need to invest in our nation’s veterans. To do otherwise is to send a very poor thank you message for their service and the sacrifices they’ve made.

Even with the government, private-sector and Corporate America on board, veterans won’t have it easy in today’s competitive job market. In his article, “Plan Your Job Hunt Properly”, veteran John L. Horton draws on his own experiences to help service personnel hunt for jobs in the civilian world, but he doesn’t sugar coat the issue: “Finding work may be difficult for everyone, but it is pure hell for people leaving the military” (Horton). Cory Lange, a veteran

returning from Iraq echoes Horton's sentiments: "The job market is tight, and people are fighting tooth and nail for a job" (Offner). To make matters worse, veteran advocates acknowledge that veterans sometimes "have difficulty conveying combat skills to employers during interviews" (Offner).

Even if a veteran is lucky enough to be hired, there's no guarantee they will keep a job for long. In "FROM BOOTS TO BRIEFCASE: Conquering The 18-Month Churn", Emily King describes the experience of one company who hired veterans only to replace them within the first 18 months of employment. When the resigning veterans were asked why they left, the most common reason cited was "lack of cultural fit" (King 38). King, an expert on the transition from military service to civilian employment, says the company's story "is not unique" (38). She adds "the transition from military service to civilian employment can be a harrowing journey for veterans" (King 36).

Once the dust of the battlefield settles, how are our nation's military veterans supposed to go back to life as normal, especially if they cannot count on being employed? How are they supposed to integrate and relate to the civilian workplace when they come from such a vastly different culture and environment? The civilian landscape looks far different than the battlefield but both have their share of dangers and pitfalls.

It would seem, then, that the issue of veteran unemployment not just about finding jobs but keeping them. These can be far more challenging propositions for military veterans than civilians. Not only do veterans have to compete with civilians in a flailing job market where their skills and experiences may not translate well to potential employers, they often find it difficult to fit in once they are hired. According to King, Human Resource professionals tend to blame the low rate of veteran hire retention on a perceived "inability to let go of the military way of doing things" (38). The truth is, most civilian employers and co-workers expect veteran

employees to think and act like civilians once they join their ranks. This is not only unrealistic but also, in many cases, unlikely. Some civilian employers are simply unfamiliar with military culture and attitudes and need to be educated. Other employers harbor biases that prevent them from hiring veterans or making a concerted effort to retain them. How are veterans supposed to thrive when others judge them by the things they've done or are merely capable of doing?

King believes that the solution to retaining veteran hires "lies with learning and development" and adds that "some form of onboarding support is a necessity" (38). Training and development can help identify common issues shared by veterans, provide a forum for discussing expectations (military versus civilian), and help managers "learn to distinguish a performance issue from a transition issue" (King 39). Veteran hires need to know what they can "reasonably expect from the organization in terms of day-to-day activity, pace of work, autonomy, and career progression" (King 39).

Employers that hire veterans have an obligation to properly train and help them integrate into the civilian workplace. Veterans need to be given the tools to succeed. Encouraging team-building and fostering an atmosphere of open communication and mutual respect is a step in the right direction. Whenever possible, employers should make an effort to bridge the gap between existing employees and veteran hires.

Unfortunately, the dissimilarity felt by some veterans is compounded by the fact that they often leave military service with mental health issues such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which their civilian employers and co-workers may not understand or even fear outright. Whether temporary or long-term, these mental health issues affect a veterans' ability to remain employed full-time and can cause them to feel alienated from civilian culture. Little wonder then that veterans find themselves unable to relate to the civilian workplace or their new colleagues.

In *Civilian Employment Among Recently Returning Afghanistan and Iraq National Guard Veterans*, authors Burnett-Zeigler, Valenstein, Ilgen, Blow, Gorman and Zivin relate findings from a study they conducted on National Guard service members. They concluded that “veterans with higher levels of PTSD symptoms report greater levels of disability and are more likely to not be working because of disability rather than not working because of retirement. Additionally, a history of combat trauma has been found to be related to high rates of unemployment” (Burnett-Zeigler et al).

Burnett-Zeigler, Valenstein, Ilgen, Blow, Gorman and Zivin further clarify the issue thusly: “The literature on the impact of military service on employment suggests that Veteran status alone may not decrease the likelihood of working or decrease lifetime earnings. However, there is an extensive literature on the impact of mental health problems on work entry, retention, and productivity” (Burnett-Zeigler et al). Their recommendations based on the study’s findings are as follows:

Our results suggest that mental health status may not be strongly associated with entry into the civilian workforce post deployment...although better mental health status is associated with being employed full-time versus part-time. Expanded interventions are needed to assist younger, low-income Veterans in entering the civilian workforce, or education programs, regardless of their mental health status...Future initiatives should expand employment and education support services to include service members who are recently returning from deployments and who may require assistance in re-entering civilian life. These efforts would also be helpful to Veterans who may have had employment difficulties before being deployed, such as being underemployed or having unstable employment. These veterans may have had their more tenuous connection to the workforce further disrupted by deployment. Interventions that integrate both mental

health and vocational supports would benefit Veterans who are working part-time and full-time.

This study leaves little doubt that soldiers currently do not receive enough support to facilitate their successful reentry into civilian life and workplaces.

The argument could be made that much has already been done to alleviate the issue of veteran unemployment. By all accounts, “government and corporate agencies have accelerated their efforts to give returning military personnel assistance” (Offner). Congress passed a Vow to Hire Heroes Act in November of 2011 that “provides training and job placement assistance to returning veterans, as well as tax incentives to companies that hire them” (Offner). States are also doing their part; the Iowa Legislature proposed a bill that waives certain requirements for a commercial driver’s license if the applicant can demonstrate they had “practical truck-driving experience while on active duty” (Offner). Certainly, the government is optimistic. The Bureau of Labor Statistics reported in January that the jobless rate for veterans aged 18-24 “has improved more recently, dropping to 20 percent in January” (Offner).

Defense Secretary Panetta commends the private sector, stating “they really have put together a public campaign to raise awareness of veteran employment and create hiring incentives for vets” (Veteran Job Prospects Brighter, Panetta Says). *Crain’s Chicago Business* agrees. They contend that “several large employers already are leaders in this endeavor [bridging the veterans’ employment gap], implementing policies that get real results” (Veterans Need More Than Gratitude –They Need Jobs). They admit that larger corporations can set aside “time for mentoring, coaching and hitting military job fairs” than small businesses but added that “even small and mid-sized employers will have to make the leap” (Veterans Need) in order to turn the tide.

However, I think it's too soon to start congratulating ourselves on making some headway into the issue of veteran unemployment. Even at 20 percent, the unemployment rate for veterans is way too high. We also need to recognize that many employers don't make a concerted effort to hire veterans and, of those that do, most haven't a clue regarding the best way to retain them long-term. Much still needs to be done to educate potential employers and veterans. PTSD is not a condition that is going away, especially in light of the violence in Iraq and Afghanistan. Finally, the economy itself may prevent significant reductions in unemployment rates overall.

We know what needs to be done. Government, the private-sector and Corporate America all need to step up to the plate and work together to create a comprehensive web of programs and services that bring employers and veterans together and help them form mutually satisfying partnerships. Education and training for employers should be included along with tax incentives so they stand a better chance of retaining veteran hires. Prior to being released from military service, veterans should receive civilian job preparedness training and counseling for any mental health issues that might prevent a smooth transition. Let's stop having unrealistic expectations and lose our biases in favor of identifying ways in which veterans and the civilian workplace can complement each other. We need to show our veterans the same steadfast loyalty they demonstrated in service to this country. We owe them more than we can ever repay, but we can start by giving them a job.

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