TOPIC 1: ECONOMY

A 2018 Bureau of Labor and Statistics report indicated that veteran unemployment hit an all-time low of 3.8 percent. This should not be surprising. For almost a decade, many of America’s employers and veteran service organizations stepped forward with the mission to hire transitioning servicemembers, veterans, and their families. It’s not just the right thing to do; it’s the smart thing for business as studies show that 59 percent of employers reported that veterans perform “better than” or “much better than” their non-veteran peers. And experience, perseverance, and leadership top the list of desirable qualities that employers find attractive in veterans. But as we celebrate this achievement, we need to be wary of inaccurate assumptions, and we need to continue focusing our efforts on veteran employment.

The unemployment rate is certainly one indicator, but it alone is insufficient in addressing our warriors’ career interests, opportunities, and challenges. The number is derived from a questionnaire the Bureau of Labor Statistics sends out. However, the question is not specific. Meaning a veteran could work a full-time job, or it could mean they only work 10 hours a week or are a reservist and don’t have a civilian career. Finally, not counted are those who have just given up in trying to find work. We need a more meaningful way to measure veteran unemployment. This will provide a better picture of veterans who may need help transitioning from military-to-civilian life or feel unfulfilled in their current role. For example, a 2016 Hiring Our Heroes study found that 44 percent of veterans leave their first post-military job within the first year.

Part of the explanation is simple; veterans are not feeling fulfilled in their careers or workplace and are working in a position below their skill level. Reports indicate that 15.6 percent of veterans are more likely to be underemployed than civilians. Businesses have the power to change these statistics. As a starting point, organizations can:

- Consider joining the U.S Chamber Hiring our Heroes team and their nationwide effort to connect veterans, service members, and military spouses with meaningful employment opportunities
- Join the Veterans Jobs Mission and get to know their employer resources to develop employment startup guides and mentorship frameworks, all necessary to leverage veteran talent
- Organizations like Hire Heroes USA work to transform military service into civilian successes through personalized career preparation alongside resources for interested employers

Corporations also need to have a mature veteran hiring process, which includes onboarding and retention. To help mitigate misunderstandings and biases that may occur in the workforce, companies can do a better job of leveraging veteran talent through employee resource groups. Businesses should also consider implementing mentorship programs that help veterans understand the importance of establishing their value and “professional brand,” while also supporting and maintaining their team focus. The unemployment number of 3.8 percent is a result of the commitment of our nation to our veterans and the acknowledgment of the tremendous leadership and skillsets they provide. This number should be celebrated, but our mission is not complete. Sustainment should now be the focus with our sights set on meaningful career pathways for veterans and their families. When we fully leverage their continued leadership, we all benefit.
Table A-5. Employment status of the civilian population 18 years and over by veteran status, period of service, and sex, not seasonally adjusted

[Numbers in thousands]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employment status, veteran status, and period of service</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment rate</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The national unemployment rate is 3.6 percent (October 2019). Gulf War II veterans' unemployment rate is 3.5 percent. Currently, the unemployment rate for Gulf War II women veterans is 9.5 percent (up from 7.0 percent in October).

TOPIC 2: MEETINGS

On Monday, November 4th, the National Veterans Employment & Education Division attended the annual Veterans On Wall Street Symposium, hosted by Wells Fargo and in partnership with the Strategic Philanthropic Partner: Bob Woodruff Foundation, discussed different opportunities for collaboration with leading companies in the financial industry to include LinkedIn. The symposium included multiple works (Resume Writing, Interviewing Techniques, and Branding) to assist veterans seeking employment within the financial sector.

On Wednesday-Thursday, November 5th-6th, the National Veterans Employment & Education Division held the first Military Credentialing Roundtable as part of its Lumina Foundation credentialing grant. The Credentialing Roundtable meeting centers on organizing the core members to develop an agenda for 2019-2020 that results in an informed Military Credentialing Advancement Study, the cumulative output of the grant that builds on the Legion’s 2017 State of Credentialing report.

On Wednesday, November 6th, the National Veterans Employment & Education Division met with Bill Ashton and Matthew Underwood, Military Veterans Agricultural Liaisons, Office of Partnerships & Public Engagement, U.S. Department of Agriculture (The Department), to discuss how the Department and the American Legion can collaborate on providing resources that benefit veterans located in Rural America.

On Wednesday, November 6th, the National Veterans Employment & Education Division was invited to provide remarks regarding the Legion’s programing and benefits of membership at the US Department of Commerce’s annual Veterans Day Ceremony.

On Wednesday, November 6th, the National Veterans Employment & Education Division met with LSQ Funding, an alternative lender and resource for capital access for veteran small businesses. LSQ Funding is an independent lender that specializes in asset-based financing for growing veteran companies of all stages of business maturity throughout the country. LSQ Funding provides accounts receivable financing (revolving lines of credit), factoring, and asset-based lending.
On Thursday, November 7th, the National Veterans Employment & Education Division attended the New America lecture “What’s Next for Skills Training in America and What Can We Learn from Other Countries’ Efforts?”. The event featured the CEO of New America and Senior Advisors from the National Center on Education and the Economy and provided networking to build out the Credentialing Roundtable’s stakeholder feedback loop.

On Thursday, November 7th, the National Veterans Employment & Education Division met with the Navy League of the United States regarding their new economic development programs for transitioning servicemembers. As part of its mission focus, the Navy League of the United States enhances the morale of sea service personnel and their families through national and council level programs and provides a powerful voice to educate the public and Congress on the importance of our sea services to our nation’s defense, well-being, and economic prosperity.

TOPIC 3: EMPLOYMENT

CAREER FAIRS & ROUNDTABLES

The National staff attended The 2019 Veterans on Wall Street Symposium, which brought veterans and military spouses together with corporate leaders from the financial industry and beyond, government/military representatives, and veteran/military support organizations were also in attendance. The Symposium is designed to convene leading thinkers and stakeholders to discuss the transition into the civilian workforce with a targeted focus on career readiness. The Symposium hopes to elevate awareness and solicit broader attention to veterans’ employment initiatives, furthering the conversation, and amplifying concerted efforts and collective impact.

The staff was able to establish relationships as well as set up follows on meeting with some of these leading industries for future collaborations that will put The American Legion in a more advantaged position to assisting servicemembers, veterans, and their spouses in obtaining to economic well-being, to include increasing memberships. The staff was able to set up a follow on meeting with LinkedIn, which offered to provide the Legion with a “Train the Trainer” class, this would allow the staff to help and teach servicemembers, veterans, and their spouses on how to effectively create a LinkedIn page.
Three-point-two-percent of United States veterans are unemployed, according to the Department of Labor. While this may seem like a small percentage with a steady decline over the past few years, it still means that hundreds of thousands of veterans are without a job. According to pewresearch.org, there are currently 20.8 million veterans in the United States. Using the Department of Labor’s statistics, we can calculate that around 665,600 veterans are unemployed. However, agencies, like the U.S Department of Agriculture (USDA), are providing beneficial tools and programs for former service members so that the unemployment rate can continue its steady decline. The USDA works with organizations like the U.S Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to generate ample employment opportunities.

The USDA grants large loans to veterans to help them grow their respective businesses. Steven Clipp, a Navy veteran who writes for Vantage Point, states in his VA blog post, Veterans Have Opportunity to Grow with USDA and Farming Resources, “In 2018, USDA's Farm Service Agency provided $64.5 million in direct and guaranteed farm operating loans to Veterans.” Based on the millions of dollars issued to this particular population, the USDA is committed to jumpstarting agricultural sector careers. Clipp reinforces this idea by writing, “USDA is committed to assisting Veterans across the country to keep America’s food supply safe and secure.” The USDA seeks to leverage the qualities and characteristics inherent in service members and the skills gained during their service, by identifying, attracting, and ensuring veterans are successful.

Veterans and farmers share many common characteristics and values, such as dedication, courage, and resilience. The similarities in these career fields offer a smoother transition for veterans into a new employment opportunity, such as agriculture.

With over 40 programs and various financial tools such as cost-share assistance, funding preferences for engaging in conservation efforts, as well as loan and grant assistance programs, the USDA is committed to extending a financial helping hand to former military personnel in their pursuit of a post-service career. Steven Clipp writes, “Veterans looking to return home or start a new career on a farm or in a rural community have the tools and opportunities needed for success.” Clipp understands that the USDA’s implementation of these programs is a way to not only incentivize veterans to join the agriculture business but to take care of those who have served.

Bi-lateral success is the selling point. The USDA’s initiative to engage and support former military personnel in agri-business via loans and other programs is based on a win-win model. The more success the veterans have in farming, the more revenue and recognition will be generated for the agriculture industry. The USDA also perceives a significant opportunity with restoring communities and the engagement of the veteran demographic. Clipp quotes USDA Military Veteran Agricultural Liaison Bill Ashton, in his article saying;

“Nearly one-quarter of veterans, approximately 5 million, live in rural areas. They (veterans) can be a positive force for our communities. USDA is committed to making our programs accessible to help veterans start or grow a career and maximize the potential talent of this population.”
Contrary to common perception, the USDA doesn’t just recognize this talent in rural areas, but they also understand there are plenty of qualified veterans in urban areas. Veterans who live in a metropolitan area can access cutting edge technology that can make their transition into agriculture smoother. For example, new urban-based technologies such as rooftop farming and aquaculture farms (indoor hydroponic farms) are potential resources that the USDA can provide to veterans. These resources, along with several others, are detailed within USDA’s Urban toolkit.

This toolkit provides information regarding cost estimation, business planning, and risk management, as well as the technology needed to successfully farm in the city. This resource is just another example of the USDA’s commitment toward ensuring veterans are in the best possible position to achieve success no matter where they live.

Farming and agriculture are about giving back to the community, a value understood by former military members. According to Croplife.com, agriculture is listed as a 2.4 trillion-dollar industry. Former service members should consider agriculture as a new career path through which they can leverage existing skills to seek out opportunities and grow their futures.

**TOPIC 4: VETERAN HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS**

Despite positive news on the rate of veterans homelessness last year, advocates worry that continuing progress on the goal of ending the problem nationwide will only get more problematic in the coming years.

“The numbers are good, they continue to be positive, but they could be better,” said Kathryn Monet, executive director of the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans, which held its annual conference in Washington, D.C. last week. “I think we could be going farther than where we are now.”

Last fall, The Department of Housing and Urban Development estimated about 38,000 veterans across the country are without stable housing on any given night, a drop of about 5 percent from 2017 levels, and a reduction of almost 50 percent from 2010 estimates.

At the NCHV conference, leaders from VA and HUD praised those estimates as a sign that the federal government’s efforts on the issue remain on track, after a worrisome rise in the homeless veterans' population from 2016 to 2017.

In recent years, three states — Delaware, Connecticut, and Virginia — and 71 cities have announced a functional end to homelessness in their communities. The distinction does not mean that all veterans will avoid housing instability, but instead that local authorities have the systems and resources to quickly help those who do end up in financial trouble.

But they also acknowledged that the work to come on helping the remaining destitute veterans presents a host of challenges.

VA Secretary Robert Wilkie said many of the resources already provided by the federal government in recent years could not or will not help the remaining homeless veterans, because of their unique challenges.

“I recently was in west Los Angeles, where about 10 percent of the (nation’s) homeless veterans population lives,” he told the crowd. “I watched at dusk cars come into that beautiful, excellent facility, but veterans did not get out of the vehicles.”
“I was told that it was because they all had jobs. They were contributing to the tax base and the prosperity of America’s second-largest city. But because of government policies, there was no place for them to afford a decent (home).”

HUD Secretary Ben Carson promised the crowd that his administration is looking into ways to create more affordable housing nationwide, especially in rural and under-served areas.

Conference sessions focused on racial challenges in available housing programs and issues of recidivism among veterans who have received assistance. Monet said her leadership is focused on ensuring that enough resources exist to help women veterans with families — a traditionally under-served group — as well as older veterans.

“We have a graying population of veterans, and we need to start examining the partnerships we need to make to respond to that,” she said. “Our question now is what are we going to do in the next ten years to combat the problem.”

Monet said that’s where the issue of civic enthusiasm also becomes an issue.

In 2010, then-President Barack Obama and VA Secretary Eric Shinseki made a public push to end homelessness among veterans by the start of 2016. The effort ultimately fell short, but advocates praised the bold goal as a driving force and rallying point for a host of previously unconnected charity efforts.

Monet worries that some of that public focus on the issue is lacking today, despite strong words of support from leaders like Carson and Wilkie. This year’s conference focused on using data to better respond to local needs and challenges, to keep up the pace of getting veterans into stable housing.

“After almost ten years, we have a deep pocket of best practices that communities can follow,” she said. “So we need to be looking at that data, picking things that the evidence shows are working, and keep asking what can we do better.”

HUD’s next estimate of the veterans' homeless population is due out in the fall. Carson did not give a preliminary view of that calculation but called last year’s numbers encouraging.

“It is our mission to make sure that every veteran has a safe, quality, affordable place to call home,” he told the NCHV crowd. “We still have a lot of work ahead of us.”

TOPIC 5: SMALL BUSINESS

This week, work continued on The American Legion’s upcoming hiring events to be staged in Kaneohe (HI), Kailua (HI), Washington (DC), Hickam Air Force Base (HI), Schofield Barracks (HI), Phoenix (AZ)

As we move into November, a month of gratitude, the U.S. Small Business Administration begins the month by celebrating National Veterans Small Business Week, during Nov. 4-8. We take this opportunity to say “thank you” to our military men and women and the veteran community for serving our country.

Now entering its sixth year, NVSBW raises awareness of veteran business ownership and encourages local communities to support their veteran- and military-owned businesses.
At SBA, the Office of Veterans Business Development is devoted exclusively to promoting veteran entrepreneurship and supporting veteran small business owners and their families.

Veterans and transitioning service members can access customized entrepreneur curriculums, in-person classes, and online courses to aid them in their small business journey. SBA knows that these resources are valued by our service members’ community.

For example, veteran couple Mr. and Mrs. Richardson --- Don, a U.S. Navy vet and Sheila, a U.S. Marine Corps vet --- started their business, Aspen Communications, with two employees and revenues of $30,000 in 1999. The company focuses on structured cabling and fiber optics, computer networking, network security, surveillance, and phone and video conferencing.

Don and Sheila reached out for guidance along the way to the Small Business Development Center at Yavapai College and SCORE for assistance in addressing challenges unique to the business and federal contracting. SBDCs and SCORE are SBA resource partners that offer free one-on-one counseling to small business owners. Today Don and Sheila employ 20 and have revenues exceeding $2 million. Aspen is now a Service Disabled Veteran Owned Business with a federal 8(a) certification and located in a HUBZone (Historically Underutilized Business Zone).

SBA encourages veterans and transitioning service members to utilize SBA services. Here are five SBA resources available today to our country’s service members reach the American Dream of owning a business:

- **Transition assistance:** SBA and its resource partners support active duty and transitioning service members, veterans, and military spouses through Boots to Business, part of the Department of Defense’s Transition Assistance Program. Find a Boots to Business education and training program here: sbavets.force.com/s.

- **Entrepreneurial training:** On your entrepreneurship mission, you may need additional training to help you start, grow, or expand your business. Whether you’re a female veteran, service-disabled veteran, or looking to learn business fundamentals, you can tap into SBA’s entrepreneurial training programs for help. Resource partners include Women’s Business Centers that assist women in starting and growing small businesses; Small Business Development Centers that offer free, one-on-one counseling and low-cost training services; and SCORE a network of thousands of volunteer business counselors around the country that provides free in-person and online advice as well as educational workshops.

- **Access to capital:** It may be time to consider funding options for your business – whether it’s capital to start the company or funding to help you expand. SBA and its network of resources understand that funding and capital may be a barrier for veterans on their mission to start or scale up your business. The network of local offices, resource partners, and organizations is available to help entrepreneurs identify lenders and understand different financing options. SBA’s Lender Match is a free online referral tool that connects small businesses with participating SBA-approved lenders.
• Government contracting: Are you looking to pursue government contracting opportunities to help your business grow? At this stage of your mission, SBA and its partners can help you through the Veteran Federal Procurement Entrepreneurship Training Program, where you can learn how to navigate the complexities of government contracting. Learn more about government contracting here sba.gov/federal-contracting

• SBA district offices can connect you to local SBA resources, mentors, and training. Visit SBA.gov for more information and to find a regional office.

THE AMERICAN LEGION’S RURAL VETERAN INITIATIVE FOR SMALL BUSINESSES

On April 25, 2017, President Donald Trump established the Federal Interagency Task Force on Agriculture and Rural Prosperity Task Force through Executive Order 13790 to identify legislative, regulatory, and policy changes to promote in Rural America agriculture, economic development, job growth, infrastructure improvements, technological innovation, energy security, and quality of life, including changes that: (i) remove barriers to economic prosperity and quality of life in rural America; (ii) advance the adoption of innovations and technology for agricultural production and long-term, sustainable rural development; (iii) strengthen and expand educational opportunities for students in rural communities, particularly in agricultural education, science, technology, engineering, and mathematics; etc. The Legion has been invited to join the Task Force.

Also, the Department invited VE&E to participate in the “Community of Prosperity” Summits that are being hosted throughout the country. The USDA Office of Partnerships and Public Engagement (OPPE) seeks to foster community prosperity in rural areas. To achieve this goal, OPPE wishes to bring together partners who are key to the revitalization of rural America. The Summit will convene state, federal and tribal partners, land-grant universities, Hispanic serving institutions, tribal colleges, historically black colleges and universities, national development organizations, non-profit organizations, faith leaders, veterans, and other strategic partners to:

1. Assist communities in the development of local prosperity councils, create wealth and build assets
2. Illustrate successful practices for developing key partnerships
3. Connect attendees to USDA and other relevant federal programs
4. Model success for communities and future generation of communities

OPPE stated that housing is critical to turning around communities, which is in line with the Legion’s initiatives of ending homelessness among our nation’s veterans.
Additionally, the Department is assessing the broadband connectivity needs in rural areas, which is also a significant initiative of the Legion. OPPE stated that 25% of rural areas have dark fibers, fiber optic cable that has been laid in the ground but isn't being used. VE&E recommended that veterans be engaged with increasing the utilization of these dark fibers.

VE&E will continue to identify and collaborate with other partners to identify resources to provide to veterans located in Rural America.

TOPIC 6: EDUCATION

LISCENCING AND CERTIFICATION ROUND TABLE

Russell Dotson served 22 years with the U.S. Navy, active duty, and reserve. A decorated senior chief boatswain’s mate, he was deployed overseas six times, each for a year. In 2010, he saved two lives in a rocket attack and ground assault in Kandahar, Afghanistan.

His service took a toll. His marriage didn’t survive. His children worried about him — a lot. “I was gone for a year, home for a year, gone for a year, home for a year,” he says. “The whole family paid the price for that.”

When the Navy told Dotson that, if he would re-enlist for another four years, he could transfer his Post-9/11 GI Bill educational benefit to his daughter Paige and her brother for college, he didn’t hesitate. His children each would get two years of schooling paid, giving them a shot to be the first college graduates in their family.

Dotson, who’s from Michigan, didn’t know that the promised education would be yanked out from under them, that this gift would turn into debt-collection notices for his daughter amounting to $20,000 and growing.
The Dotsons are among military families on the hook for huge, unexpected bills for college they were promised would be covered by a government plan that for years has come under fire. Some children of veterans went to college, only to be told there was an error with their parents’ applications, and the funds would be cut off.

“A lot of time, they don’t even know something is wrong,” says Vadim Panasyuk, a senior manager with the nonprofit organization Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America. Panasyuk says he’s heard from more than 40 families who were shocked to find their GI Bill benefits canceled. One family was told: You now owed the government $60,000.

“It’s heartbreaking,” he says. “It ruins the financial stability of some of our longest-serving families. It’s folks that gave their all for their country — their youth, their health, everything.”

The Post-9/11 GI Bill, signed into law in 2008, covers veterans who served in the military after Sept. 11, 2001. It’s meant to pay college tuition, books, and housing for veterans, much like the post-World War II GI Bill that helped boost the middle class.

But there have been numerous complaints. Initially, much of the funding was going to for-profit colleges. Last year, some vets saw their housing payments delayed because of administrative glitches.

Being able to transfer the education benefit to your dependents has become an essential retention tool for military services stretched thin by deployments. Branches have enticed service members to agree to re-enlist for four more years by offering the chance to pass the education benefit to a child or spouse.

But the rules have tripped up some families.

In Russell Dotson’s case, his service record was beyond dispute. In 2010, while supporting a construction battalion in Kandahar during a ground assault and rocket attack on the base, he rushed to the site of an explosion, gave first aid to a NATO contractor, then used his bare hands to staunch the bleeding of a wounded Marine.

“His quick reaction in the face of enemy fire was undoubtedly crucial in saving the life of the U.S. Marine and contractor,” his superiors wrote of Dotson’s “decisive and selfless actions.”

Then, nearing the end of what he’d planned to have been his final four-year commitment — the re-enlistment he made to get the college benefit for his kids — Dotson, 51, says he met with his command’s career counselor to make sure all of his years of service added up. He says he was told he was good to go.

Soon after, his daughter enrolled in college in Chicago at DePaul University. Everything was going well until, toward the end of second-quarter freshman year, the government stopped making payments to DePaul for her tuition and housing. Even worse, they told her she had to repay what already was paid — more than $20,000, including interest. She ended up having to transfer to the University of Michigan, where she could get in-state tuition but still is working three part-time jobs, in addition to getting loans.
Russell Dotson says he learned, too late, that even though his command staff told him he could retire, the Defense Department used the date of his benefit-transfer application — rather than his re-enlistment date — to calculate his service time. That left him 89 days short. As a reservist serving one weekend a month, that 89 days meant all he would have needed to qualify was six days of weekend service. He says he had plenty of unused “authorized absence” days that could cover the six days — if Navy officials would switch his retirement date in their records. He says they have refused.

“They made a math mistake,” Dotson, now working as a corporate recruiter, says of the Navy staffer who advised him on what he needed. “I owed them six damn days.”

His uniform still fits. He says he would put it back on and serve the six days if the Navy would let him. “I don’t have $20,000 to give back to the federal government,” Dotson says. “And my daughter doesn’t, either. Yes, my career is my responsibility. I want to fix it. It’s six stupid days.”

Retired Lt. Col. Todd Grant got a similar shock after 23 years in the Air Force, including a final four-year re-enlistment so he could transfer his education benefit to his children. Grant, 49, a weapons system officer who lives in Virginia, was deployed seven times and flew more than 500 combat hours.

When Grant left the Air Force in 2016, the Defense Department confirmed in writing he had earned a total of four years of college to transfer to his children. But just as his son was entering the University of Central Florida last fall, the federal Department of Veterans Affairs said their funding was being cut — to only five months rather than four years of college — because Grant had gone to college in the 1990s under the previous GI Bill. Grant says he asked an Air Force counselor specifically about whether that would be an issue before he re-enlisted. “They said: ‘Yes, you’re eligible.’ And I said: ‘Are you sure?’ And they said, ‘Yes, you’re eligible.’ Being a good airman, I trusted my chain of command, and I trusted my service.”

Now, Grant wishes he would have not re-enlisted for those final four years, returned to civilian life, worked and saved for his college for his children.

“I know the rules have gotten convoluted, and that’s why I relied on the Air Force to tell me the real information,” he says. “I don’t want this to happen to anyone else.”

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Week Ending: 11/08/19