

TRANSITIONING TO THE CIVILIAN WORKFORCE: ISSUES IMPACTING THE REENTRY OF RURAL WOMEN VETERANS

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ABSTRACT

Women veterans seeking employment in rural areas often face several challenges, such as geographical barriers, limited employment opportunities, and a lack of childcare resources within their respective communities. This exploratory study builds on the 2001 report by the Women's Research & Education Institute (WREI), which outlined the effects of military service on women veterans' civilian employment prospects. In addition, it explores the specific challenges through a review of current literature, assessment of Bureau of Labor Statistics datasets, and the conduct and analysis of qualitative interviews. Addressing the needs of women veterans returning to rural environments for employment requires a three-pronged approach that includes measuring the effectiveness of current programs utilizing metrics specific to rural women veterans, revising programs to fit the needs of rural areas, and forming new partnerships to engage and educate rural employers on the value that women veterans bring to the workplace.

Women currently comprise 15 percent of active military personnel, 17 percent of Reserve and National Guard forces, and 20 percent of new military recruits (Bean-Mayberry et al. 2010). Many will return to rural areas to support their families and to seek employment. Several factors may motivate a woman veteran to reenter the civilian workforce, such as the inability to gain military promotion and the lack of desire for a long-term military career (DACOWITS 2008). Some of these factors also include continuing education, marital status, presence of dependents, caregiver role, social identity, and propensity to join a professional women's network (Calhoun, Beckham, and Bosworth 2002).

Women veterans seeking employment in rural areas often face challenges that differ from their urban counterparts such as geographical barriers, limited available positions, and a lack of childcare resources within their communities (Calhoun et al.

2002). These challenges may be further exacerbated by a complex set of issues, including untreated physical and psychological disorders such as post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) resulting from combat, Military Sexual Trauma (MST), or other traumas associated with military service, which can often delay the transition process (Marinaccio 2008; RAND Corporation 2008). Complex issues such as these must be addressed by transition programs that provide both practical and psychological support. While there is a growing body of research on active-duty servicewomen and women veterans, very little has been published on the transition experiences of rural women veterans reentering the civilian workforce (Bean-Mayberry et al. 2010; DACOWITS 2007, 2008, 2009).

This exploratory study builds on the 2001 report by the Women's Research & Education Institute (WREI), which outlined the impact of serving in the military, and its effects on women veterans' employment, unemployment, earnings, and occupational mobility (Manning et al. 2001). WREI researchers evaluated the effectiveness of veterans' employment programs; employment and unemployment status, nontraditional employment, and earnings of recent veterans; and Veterans' Preference. By law, veterans who are disabled or who served on active duty in the Armed Forces during certain specified periods or in military campaigns are generally entitled to preference over nonveterans in hiring practices and workforce retention during reductions in force at the federal level (U.S. Department of Labor VETS 2010).

The results of their findings indicated that women veterans face barriers to accessing specific programs and services, particularly those services exclusively targeted toward homeless male veterans (Manning et al. 2001). Furthermore, their research revealed that there were no clear metrics in place to determine whether government programs were successful in placing both men and women veterans into good jobs (Manning et al. 2001). Based on these results, their study recommended several initiatives, including: 1) the establishment of a Women Veterans Employment Research Committee; 2) the adjustment of the Fifth National Survey of Veterans, analysis of current population survey data; 3) the conduct of a longitudinal study of the Transition Assistance Program (TAP); and 4) the development of case studies that review the hiring practices of employers and unions (Manning et al. 2001). Besides reviewing employment trends, this paper addresses the specific challenges of rural women veterans transitioning to the civilian workforce, identifies gaps in existing reentry assistance programs, and ultimately recommends methods by which transition programs and services can evolve to meet the needs of this growing population.

BACKGROUND

General Trends In Rural Vs. Urban Unemployment

Rural and urban areas have experienced different rates of employment growth over the past couple of decades. From 1997 to 2003, more than 1.5 million rural workers lost their jobs due to the economic challenges experienced by mainstay industries (Glasmeier and Salant 2006). Even before the most recent recession started in 2007, unemployment rates were higher in rural areas than in urban areas (McBride and Kemper 2009). By February of 2009, unemployment rates of more than 10 percent, the highest recorded since 1983, impacted rural areas within 21 states across the United States (McBride and Kemper 2009). Table 1 provides a summary of the unemployment rates in both metropolitan and nonmetropolitan areas for 2007 and 2009 (McBride and Kemper 2009). As shown, rural areas experienced higher unemployment in both years compared with metropolitan areas. The average duration of unemployment for nonmetropolitan workers was 26.5 weeks in the fourth quarter of 2009, up from 17.8 weeks in the same quarter of the previous year.

TABLE 1. UNEMPLOYMENT RATES IN METRO AND NON-METRO AREAS, 2007 AND 2009

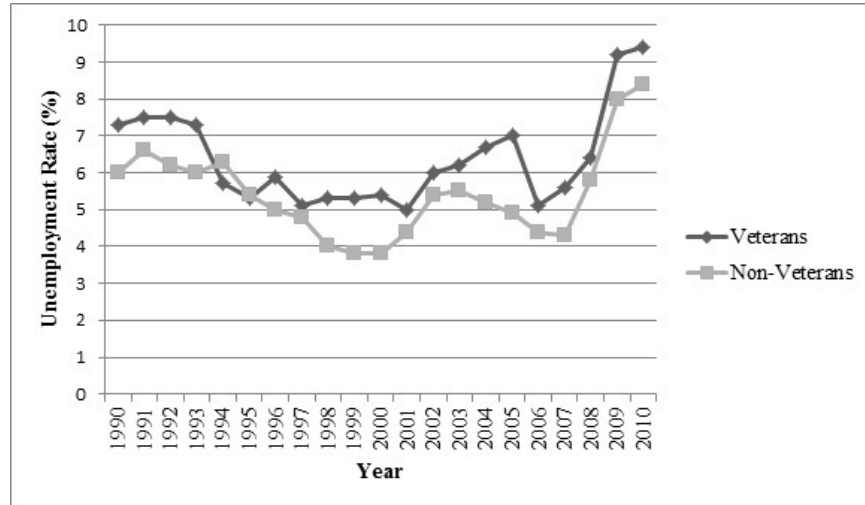
	2007	2009
Non-Metro	5.1%	9.8%
Metro	4.5%	8.7%
U.S.	4.6%	8.9%

Source: McBride, Timothy and Leah Kemper 2009.

General unemployment among women veterans. Historically, women veterans have had higher unemployment rates than male veterans. Additionally, unlike male veterans, who have lower unemployment rates than nonveteran males, women veterans have had higher unemployment than nonveteran men and women (U.S. Department of Labor 2010a). Figure 1 illustrates trends in unemployment for women veterans and nonveterans 18 years and older for the years 1990 to 2010 (U.S. Department of Labor 1990-2010).

Figure 2 provides unemployment rates for both veteran and nonveteran women in 2010 for those 20–64 years of age broken down by age group. Overall, women veterans have had higher rates of unemployment in all but three age groups. Furthermore, based on the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) data, women veterans in the 20–24 year-old age group have had an average unemployment rate of 12.5

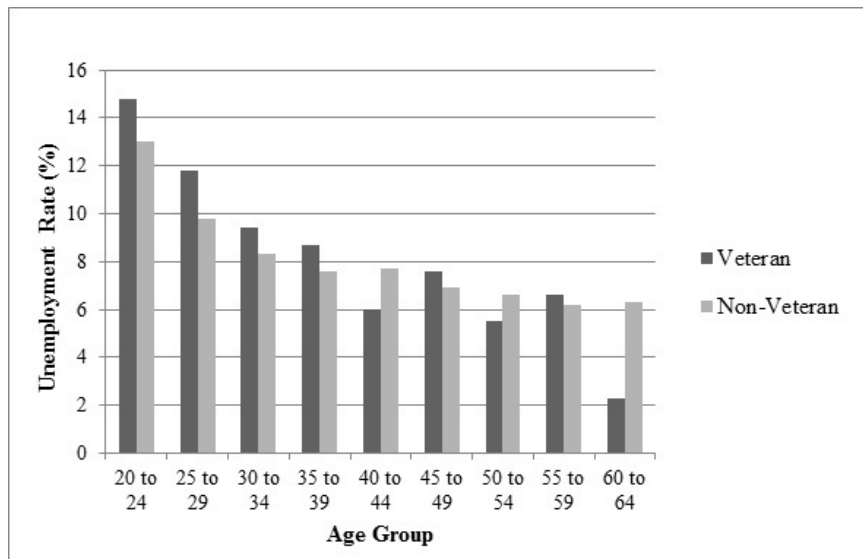
FIGURE 1. UNEMPLOYMENT RATE 1990-2010 – WOMEN, TOTAL VETERANS AND NON-VETERANS, 20 TO 64 YEARS OF AGE



Note: Unpublished data was used for years 1990-2005 and published data was used for years 2006-2010.

Source: Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey, BLS data 1990-2010.

FIGURE 2. UNEMPLOYMENT RATE 2010 – WOMEN, TOTAL VETERANS AND NON-VETERANS, 18 TO 64 YEARS



Source: Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey, BLS data 2010.

percent from 1990 to present, which is higher than most of the other age groups defined in these data sets (BLS 2010). These data reflect the challenges that often exist as young women veterans are less likely to have established contacts with employers and are often less settled due to deployments (Illinois Department of Employment Security 2009).

Challenges for rural employment. Compared with their urban counterparts, rural workers are often faced with unique challenges that make finding employment more difficult. First, local economies often rely on one specific industry, and second, the changing labor force environment and higher education requirements have combined to reduce employment options for rural workers. Although skilled and professional jobs, such as teaching, can be found in small towns, they are limited and require college degrees or other training to acquire a new skill set (Glasmeier and Salant 2006; Hively 2008). Low-skill jobs are often much more prevalent in rural areas, accounting for 42 percent of overall employment, and often pay less than similar jobs in urban areas (Gibbs, Kusmin, and Cromartie 2005; Glasmeier and Salant 2006). These factors are further complicated by limited access to well-paying jobs with benefits, longer distances to employment, lack of public transportation options, scarce educational and social resources, and fewer options for child care (Kalil and Zoil-Guest 2005). Difficulty in accessing gainful employment results in the underemployment typically prevalent in rural areas, particularly in the South (Findeis, Jensen, and Wang 2000; Findeis, Rauniyar, and Hsu 1996). Even employed rural workers can be underemployed—either earning poverty-level wages or being unable to find enough hours of work, or both (Findeis et al. 1996). Overall, rural women face more difficulties moving out of low-wage, part-time jobs and are more disadvantaged than rural men with respect to finding adequate employment (Findeis et al. 2000).

Those residing in rural areas often have limited public transportation options that restrict their access to outside employment and health care services (Brown 2004; Laditka, Laditka, and Probst 2009). Approximately 40 percent of rural Americans currently have no public transportation services at all, and another 25 percent have only minimal service (National Council on Disability 2005). When public transportation is available, it is often along a fixed route with a limited schedule, making it inconvenient or altogether unavailable to those wanting to run errands or visit family, or for those working weekends and/or night shifts (National Council on Disability 2005).

Besides having fewer transportation options, rural people are more likely to experience poorer health than their urban counterparts. This includes a higher

occurrence of chronic illness such as diabetes, cancer, heart disease and stroke, and mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, and substance abuse (Gamm et al. 2003). This is particularly true for rural women who experience increased stress resulting from their roles as mother, caregiver, head of household, and family mediator (Gerroir et al. 2008). Having more health issues is problematic given that rural individuals and families are less likely to have access to health insurance (even if employed), because they are more likely than urban residents to work in small firms, which are less likely to offer health benefits (Gamm et al. 2003; Ziller et al. 2003). Even if employed part-time, rural residents are typically not eligible for health benefits (Ziller et al. 2003), thereby further limiting their access to health care. Finally, life stressors and crises, such as homelessness, family violence, and incarceration or unexpected death of a family member were found among a sample of rural families as factors that impede the ability to maintain employment (Marinaccio 2008).

Background on Service by Rural Americans and Women

Rural Americans often join the military at higher rates than nonrural Americans. Although only 19 percent of Americans live in rural areas, more than 44 percent of military recruits have come from rural areas in contrast with 14 percent from major cities (Heady 2007; National Rural Health Association 2008). A 2005 Heritage Center for Data Analysis Report confirmed this overrepresentation of rural Americans in the military and explained that, because rural areas typically have a “less flexible, thinner job market” (Kane 2005:5), the military attracts more rural Americans to its ranks than urban Americans who have more access to job training and educational opportunities. According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), of the eight million veterans receiving care at VA facilities, three million live in rural areas (VA ORH 2010).

Women veterans are one of the fastest growing veteran populations (VA OPA 2011) and currently comprise more than 8 percent of the total veteran population at 1.84 million (VA OPA 2010). VA currently estimates that by 2020, women will constitute more than 10 percent of the veteran population (Women’s Memorial 2010). Following the introduction of women into the National Guard after World War II, female officers and enlisted women have been integrated into the Guard in growing numbers. Currently, there are 118,223 active duty women in the Reserves (19.6 percent) and 72,182 women in the National Guard (15.2 percent) (Women’s Memorial 2010).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Issues in Transitioning from Military to Civilian Work

The transition from the military to civilian workforce is a multidimensional process for women veterans. Not only do women veterans face the same challenges as male veterans reentering the civilian workforce, they also often return home to fractured and fragmented lives (Marinaccio 2008). The needs of women veterans mirror those of other women workers; they seek employment that offers fair compensation relative to their male counterparts, opportunities for advancement, benefits, and flexibility to balance work and caregiver roles (Business and Professional Women's Foundation 2007, 2008, 2009; Foster and Vince 2009). Women veterans may choose to separate from the military sooner than their male counterparts due to a variety of factors (DACOWITS 2009). Their desire to leave the military can be attributed to family concerns, needed support to cope with battle-sustained traumas from psychosocial to physical, and separation from their families and loved ones (DACOWITS 2009; Marinaccio 2008).

Education and Qualifications

Some women veterans lack work experience outside the military, thereby making it difficult for them to translate the skills and experiences gained from their military work experience to the skills required for civilian employment (Overman and Leonard 2010). Educational attainment also plays a key role in acquiring civilian employment. It has been shown that higher levels of educational attainment have positive effects on veterans' occupational status and income (Mettler 2005). Since the inception of the GI Bill in 1944, the educational benefits related to military service have motivated veterans to pursue higher education. The Post 9/11 GI Bill allows veterans to receive benefits for any approved program offered by a college/university in the United States that grants an associate's (or higher) degree. Data from the American Community Survey 2006 show that 72 percent of women veterans have some college experience, and that 40 percent of those had at least a bachelor's degree. About one-quarter of women veterans finish high school as the highest level of education and 4 percent have no high school diploma or equivalency (VA OPP 2007). If women veterans with limited education pursued a higher degree or completed high school, with the help of the benefits noted in the GI Bill, they would be more likely to see positive effects on their occupational status (Mettler 2005).

Social Identity

The transition from soldier to civilian is difficult for service members whose transition to the civilian workforce does not go smoothly. Male veterans may have more time to readjust after deployment, while women veterans who have families, or are single parents, face additional challenges as they are often expected to resume their roles as mothers and primary caregivers once they return to civilian life (IOM 2010). Women veterans describe the transition from soldier back to mother, wife, and/or caregiver as often being the most difficult life transition after deployment (U.S. Congress 2007), thus making the employment search process more arduous. Some of those challenges include readjusting to partners who have assumed new roles, re-establishing family roles, readjusting to children who have matured, and re-establishing bonds with spouses and children (IOM 2010).

Although women veterans feel pride in being wives and mothers, they may experience difficulties fulfilling traditional female roles. Some find that their unique military experiences are not well understood by the civilian community and report feelings of isolation and loneliness after leaving military service, recognizing that nothing will go back to the way it was before (Suter et al. 2006).

Along with readjusting to family life, many veterans have trouble finding jobs that compensate as well as the military, especially women veterans who are responsible for providing for their families and dependents. According to one single veteran mother trying to provide for her family, "I am having a very hard time finding a company to pay me enough to provide for my home and to pay for childcare. It is very hard as a single mother with no experience. My first and only job was the military" (Foster and Vince 2009:25). Although women veterans typically earn more than their nonveteran counterparts (\$31,340 vs. \$23,673 in 2007), they typically work longer hours throughout the year (Holde 2008; U.S. Bureau of the Census (USBC) 2008). This income difference can often be the result of experience and skills gained while in the military (USBC 2008).

Transition Issues Affecting Employability

Mental health or physical disabilities. According to the RAND "Invisible Wounds of War" report (RAND Corporation 2008), more than 26 percent of returning servicemen and women report symptoms of PTSD, anxiety disorder, or depression, often attributed to the dramatic physical, emotional, and cognitive injuries sustained in combat. Women veterans, particularly younger women, are more likely than men to develop a mental health condition (Foster and Vince 2009). Besides depression, substance abuse often occurs with women being treated for depression or PTSD

(Foster and Vince 2009). For example, among a sample of Operation Enduring Freedom/Operation Iraqi Freedom (OEF/OIF) women veterans who had positive PTSD symptoms, Nunnink et al. (2010) found that 47 percent screened positive for high risk drinking.

Many women veterans are also struggling with the effects of one or more episodes of Military Sexual Trauma (MST). According to the Department of Defense's FY 2009 Annual Report on Sexual Assault in the Military, there were 3,230 reports of sexual assault concerning military service members. Some estimates purport that 20–48 percent of women veterans have been sexually assaulted, and even up to 80 percent have been sexually harassed (Foster and Vince 2009). According to a study published in the *American Journal of Public Health*, 15.1 percent of women, and only 0.7 percent of men, who sought primary or mental health care at a VHA facility screened positively for MST (Kimmerling et al. 2010).

Facing a high incidence of MST and resulting mental health conditions, women veterans are at an increased risk for homelessness, particularly if they are also unemployed, disabled, and screen positive for an anxiety disorder and/or PTSD (Washington et al. 2010). In January of 2010, VA estimated that 131,000 veterans were homeless at any given point, and about twice as many were homeless at some point throughout the year (DOL 2010a). Nearly 5 percent of the homeless veterans are women, and VA estimates that this rate will continually grow up to 15 percent as the number of women veterans continues to rise (NCHV 2010). However, research on homeless veterans often excludes women because the numbers of homeless women veterans are low when compared with homeless male veterans, although evidence of male veterans' susceptibility to homelessness leads researchers to believe that women veterans are more susceptible to being homeless than nonveteran women (Gamache, Rosenheck, and Tessler 2003).

Civilian environment. As identified, rural Americans face unique challenges when finding work compared with those in urban areas. With opportunities for civilian employment more limited in rural areas, it can be even more difficult for rural veterans trying to find work that fits their background and skill sets. In addition, employers often have difficulty translating acquired military skills and experiences into civilian work. A survey by Military.com found that 61 percent of employers do not believe that they have “a complete understanding of the qualifications ex-service members offer,” and more than 75 percent of veterans entering the civilian workforce reported “an inability to effectively translate their military skills to civilian terms” (Military.com 2007).

Similarly, some human resource managers have concerns about hiring someone with military experience. Table 2 outlines some primary concerns of these human resource managers, as reported by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) (2010):

TABLE 2. IN YOUR EXPERIENCE, DO YOU THINK ANY OF THE FOLLOWING ARE CHALLENGES OF HIRING EMPLOYEES WITH MILITARY EXPERIENCE? ^a

CHALLENGE	PERCENT OF HR MANAGERS SURVEYED AGREE
Translating military skills to civilian job experience.	60%
Difficulty transitioning from structure/hierarchy of military culture to civilian workplace culture.	48%
Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) issues or other mental health issues.	46%
Amount of time spent adjusting to civilian workplace culture.	36%
Combat-related physical disabilities.	22%
Employees apply for positions in which they are underqualified.	18%

NOTE: ^aN=110-148, “not sure” responses were excluded
 SOURCE: Society for Human Resource Management.

While some veterans return home looking for employment, others, like National Guardsmen and reservists, enjoy some level of job protection while they are away. In an effort to promptly re-employ the thousands of non-career servicemen and women, and to protect the employment they had before deployment for up to five years, the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act of 1994 (USERRA) was passed (GAO 2007a). However, such employment policies do not always guarantee job security as those in the Guard and Reserve continually face extended tours and repeated deployments. In fact, those returning may not have a job if their previous employer no longer exists or if their job were phased out (Overman and Leonard 2010).

When USERRA rights are not met, veterans can file their issues and complaints with the Departments of Defense, Labor, and Justice, or the Office of Special Counsel. However, due to a variety of data and filing process barriers, veteran complaints often do not reach their intended agency (GAO 2007a).

Defining the Problem

Because of their rising numbers in both active and reserve military, it is imperative that government and nonprofit organizations have a firm understanding of how women are transitioning back into civilian life, particularly those in rural areas. After their service, these women return home to their previous and/or new roles within their families, communities, and workplaces. Often, however, these roles have changed for several reasons, such as job shortages or changes in marital status or family structure. Rural women veterans are more likely to face these and other challenges when transitioning back into civilian life because of the unique needs associated with being a rural veteran *and* a woman veteran. To develop better policy and planning practices across the government, including VA, Department of Labor, Department of Defense, and nonprofits including the American Legion and Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), additional research must be conducted. Overall, there has been minimal research addressing women veterans' unemployment resulting from a variety of barriers including small sample sizes, outdated information, and the lack of a systematic method for gathering data on the experiences in the civilian job market of men and women leaving the military (Manning et al. 2001).

This exploratory study identifies the specific challenges rural women veterans experience in transitioning from the military to the civilian workforce, analyzes gaps in existing reentry assistance programs, and highlights ways in which they can evolve to meet the needs of this growing population.

METHODS

To study this problem, a mix of methods was used including literature review, analysis of BLS veteran data sets, and semi-structured interviews. Several criteria were used to identify program offices contacted for the interviews. National program offices and nonprofits had to be experienced in veterans' employment transition and the state program offices initially identified were from the states with higher projections of enrolled rural veteran populations. The top five rural states were determined by examining those that had the highest percentage of rural/highly rural enrolled veterans as of FY10 (Fiscal Year 2010) divided by the projected general veteran population as of September 30, 2010 (VA ORH 2010). Rurality was determined based upon the following definition: "U.S. Census Bureau urban areas are defined as urban by VA. All other areas are defined as rural, except those non-urban areas located in counties with less than seven persons per square mile. Such areas are designated highly rural" (USBC 2009). The five states

chosen included South Dakota, West Virginia, Vermont, Mississippi, and Montana; However, snowball sampling was also used either when program offices did not respond to an interview request or when another agency was recommended to be better suited for an interview (e.g., Ohio National Guard).

Based on the literature review, an interview guide consisting of 11 questions was developed. Table 3 includes the interview protocol.

TABLE 3. INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR PROGRAM OFFICES

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1. In your opinion, what are the challenges for veterans in transitioning from military to civilian employment?
 2. What challenges do rural women veterans face in transitioning from military to civilian employment and why?
 3. What programs exist to help rural women veterans transition from military to civilian employment?
 4. How do you communicate to and encourage rural women veterans to participate in these programs?
 5. How many rural women veterans participate in these programs?
 6. Do you work with women veterans still serving in the Guard and Reserve?
If so, how does working with them differ from working with the discharged veteran population?
 7. How do you work with those rural women veterans at risk?
 8. How are employers being encouraged to hire rural women veterans?
 9. How do you follow up with those rural women veterans who have gained employment through your programs?
 10. How do you measure the effectiveness of these programs?
 11. As we end the interview, do you have any final comments you would like to share before I turn the tape recorder off?
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From December 2010 through January 2011, one experienced interviewer contacted 20 program offices by email and/or telephone. Sixteen program offices responded and were invited to participate. Program offices that provided interviews included the following: U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) VETS, Veterans Employment Coordination Service (VECS), Employer Services for Guard and Reserve (ESGR), National Association of State Directors of Veteran Affairs (NASDVA), South Dakota Department of Veterans Affairs (SD DVA), VA Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E), Mississippi DOL VETS, Montana DOL VETS, Women's Research & Education Institute (WREI), Business and Professional Women's Foundation (BPW), Arkansas DVA, National Association of State Workforce Agencies (NASWA), Mississippi Vet Center, Ohio

National Guard, and DOL Women's Bureau. Urban-based Goodwill Industries Houston was also included, because they had received four DOL grants focused on veterans including the recent Homeless Veteran Reintegration Program for women veterans and had a track record of serving women veterans. A total of 15 phone interviews were conducted with program offices and one additional interview with a veteran who was a former member of the Ohio National Guard and resided in a rural area. The 16 interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes each. In order to increase the likelihood of interview acceptance, the interviewer followed up by phone and email. Risks to interviewees were minimized by eliminating individual indentifying information from the recordings and transcripts and aggregating the final results so that no specific comments could be attributed to any one individual. Interviewees were assured that their participation was completely voluntary and that the anonymity of their responses would be ensured by limiting demographic information to gender and veteran status only.

All interviews were tape recorded after obtaining verbal permission from all interviewees. The recorded interviews were transcribed and reviewed for accuracy by the interviewer. The interviewer and a second member of the research team independently reviewed and coded five transcripts using open coding and identified recurring themes. The interviewer and researcher then jointly reviewed, discussed, and agreed upon coding for the transcripts and completed the final analysis. The interviewer then applied this master list of codes to the transcripts, reconfirming the accuracy of recurring themes, and noted that saturation had been reached at the 13th interview.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Of the 16 individuals interviewed, nine were women, six of whom were veterans. Interestingly, of the 16 interviewed, 11 were veterans with one still serving in the Active Guard Reserves (AGR). Interviewees had served in the: Army, Navy, Air Force, or Marine Corps. Because 11 of the interviewees were veterans, they had also personally experienced the transition process from military to civilian employment and spoke not only from their expertise in their given program office serving veterans, but also their experience as transitioning veterans themselves.

Barriers to accessing employment, education/training, and health care services were the primary themes that emerged from the interviews. Access challenges in transition from military to civilian employment for rural women veterans stem from issues that are specific to women, specific to veterans, and specific to rural areas respectively.

Challenges specific to women. Most of the respondents mentioned the challenges that women uniquely face in seeking and maintaining employment. These include their societal roles as primary caretaker for children (including single parents), gender-specific mental health issues resulting from MST and negative experiences during military service, self-perceptions that they are not veterans if they did not serve in combat, and lack of awareness by employers and the larger community that women are veterans and bring valuable leadership skills to the workplace. Comments included:

“Challenges for women are very different, mostly and primarily because they are the primary caregiver of their children and families...that brings on the childcare issues, [and] obviously the transportation issues...”

“The female homeless veterans and the female veterans are very difficult to find. They’re not as readily open to seeking services from the traditional military or veteran-related services because they had some negative experiences that went along with that.”

“Many of the services and various resources that have been designed and implemented have been designed and implemented, quite frankly, by men for men, and not necessarily taken into consideration women’s issues.”

“Women tend to either be married and go on to the married life, and then tend to forget that they’re still a veteran...when you talk to women veterans, they don’t know they’re veterans...they think they had to be in combat. I myself didn’t know I was a veteran...”

“A lot of the women veterans I come into contact with are working, the majority are single parents, so in addition to working they’re trying to raise their children alone, with minimal family support...”

Female respondents mentioned that women must be resilient and willing to persist by taking lesser jobs in rural areas until they can find jobs commensurate with their knowledge, skills, and abilities. It was also noted by respondents that there are few to no gender-specific outreach and communications programs, whether federally or locally funded.

Challenges specific to veterans. In addition to experiencing challenges unique to women, respondents also mentioned that women veterans face barriers to transition that are common to all veterans regardless of gender. These challenges include: lack of understanding or misperceptions by employers, the learning curve required to transition from military to civilian life, issues for National Guard and Reserve service members, and health issues.

Employer understanding and perceptions. Almost all respondents identified translating military to civilian skills as being a major barrier to employment. Employers who lack military experience are hard-pressed to translate military responsibilities and achievements into meaningful civilian terms. Perceptions by employers regarding veterans' skills, health, and commitment (particularly if they are still serving in the National Guard and Reserves) also affect employment opportunities. Comments from respondents included:

"Barriers include...perception of the private sector that all members of the military have PTSD or TBI or in some way falsely be a danger to their workforce. Also...that members of the military don't have the wide variety of skills and talent that an employer is looking for."

"There is reluctance on the part especially on small business to hire people who are in Guard or Reserve because they don't know if they can depend on them."

"The biggest problem is that some of the military experience does not equate to a civilian position. Even if it did, some civilian employers are not always aware of what goes into, for example, a commander of a unit."

Education and learning curve. Veterans themselves may create challenges for their transition. Some lack understanding of civilian culture and the skills needed to compete with civilian peers who may have had time to complete advanced schooling and credentialing. Others cannot access jobs because they did not develop networks outside of the military.

"I also feel when people get out of the military...I was in for 16 years...there is a disconnect. You come from a very well-oiled machine that everyone knows everyone else's responsibility, but when they get into civilian life, they sometimes are frustrated by the lack of organization."

"Others come out with valuable medical skills but aren't officially licensed. Some of the state licensing requirements are big impediments to veterans."

"What we try to impress upon everybody is to make successful civilian transitions, you need to also have networks that are non-military and non-veteran related."

National Guard and Reserve service. When asked if service members from the Guard and Reserves faced unique challenges, respondents responded affirmatively:

"Guard members and reservists in many respects face many more challenges under the USERRA because of their constant redeployment and in the time they take away from their civilian jobs especially OEF/OIF..."

"... Trying to balance their family life and meet those obligations to all three, so we kind of call it the three-legged stool. You have your [military] service, your

[civilian] employer, and your family and you have to find the right balance between [sic] all three of them to be successful.”

Health issues for veterans. Respondents also mentioned health issues resulting from service-related injuries, disabilities, and traumas, whether incurred within combat zones or during peacetime service. These included PTSD, Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), and other physical disabilities. Interestingly, women are more likely to decrease hours or be unemployed than men, except in age groups 55–64, one year after experiencing TBI (Corrigan et al. 2007).

Challenges specific to rural areas. Finally, respondents also identified challenges within rural areas resulting from rural geography and the economic recession that make it difficult for women veterans to transition effectively in order to find civilian employment.

Geographic limitations. Long travel distances and a lack of suitable public transportation were identified as barriers to accessing employment and supportive services such as health care and job training. Rural infrastructure constraints such as lack of connectivity; access to childcare and mental health resources; and limited industries such as coal-mining, construction, and retail services were also identified as challenges.

“It’s almost impossible...to find daycare...if the mother has to travel two or three hours in commuting time, that just adds on to the existing challenges of meeting the needs of the children as well as meeting obligations...as an employee in a business.”

“The government puts their offices in areas where they can reach the most people they can impact for cost benefit effectiveness and that sometimes makes it more challenging for a rural veteran to be aware of, and to receive, services available to them.”

Economic conditions. Respondents frequently mentioned federal and state budget cuts and unrecognized poverty and higher unemployment or underemployment in rural areas as being additional barriers to transitioning veterans.

“I think the pockets of poverty...need to be prioritized. We need to address that because it’s very difficult for a veteran to return home, female or male, to come back to 70 percent unemployment [in a rural area] that most of the world doesn’t even know about.”

“There are not as many jobs in rural areas as there are in urban locations. The hardest hit areas in an economic downturn...are in rural America. Veterans...have a much higher percentage that live more in rural areas as opposed to total American population.”

Most of the respondents acknowledged that the recession and economic conditions have magnified the challenges for all rural veterans, male and female, in transitioning to civilian employment. One suggested that he observed multigenerational veterans from rural areas returning to be close to family members, knowing in advance that their employment options will be severely limited. This may be particularly true for Native American veterans mentioned by one program office due to the higher number of these veterans (including women) returning to rural reservations. According to Lichter and Parisi (2008), poverty rates for America's Indian reservations are high with more than one-half of residents on some reservations being considered economically poor. One respondent believed that rural unemployment and underemployment are actually much higher than represented in data collected to generate funding and new programs.

To be counted on the state unemployment statistics, you have to have been qualified for unemployment, which means you've had enough wages earned the first four of the last five completed calendar quarters in order to qualify for the state figures. And on reservations...you have people who maybe haven't qualified for years or maybe never qualified for [unemployment] benefits.

According to Philip Martin (1978), employment and training programs allocating funds on the basis of local unemployment estimates are only as accurate as the underlying statistics. If these unemployment estimates are derived from unemployment insurance claims, Martin (1978) found that they decrease in accuracy as the size of the population sample decreases and when rural unemployment is underestimated, then rural funding needs are underestimated.

In addition to identifying barriers to transition, interviewees were asked to provide their perspectives regarding programs available to support rural women veterans in their transition from military to civilian employment. Federal, state, and other programs and resources are summarized in the following section.

Federal Programs

Respondents mentioned several federal programs focused on supporting veterans in their transition. These include the Veterans Benefits Administration's Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) Program, Veterans Employment Coordination Service (VECS) and the GI Bill, administered by VA; the Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program (HVRP) and Veterans' Preference

monitored by DOL VETS; Employer Services for the Guard and Reserves (ESGR) and Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Programs, managed by the Department of Defense; and finally the Transition Assistance Program (TAP), administered jointly by the Department of Defense, DOL VETS, and VA.

“Our [ESGR] 4,700 volunteers went out and briefed...over 164,000 employers on the federal law [USERRA] so that they would gain a better understanding and know how to implement those policies and practices...”

“The TAP was very good at giving a perspective as to what an employer is looking at and how to complete a job application, based on your skills in the military. They also did mock interviews with local employers who volunteered their time.” In addition to the aforementioned formal programs, the DOL VETS is also partnering with Chambers of Commerce and SHRM to reach employers and human resource professionals. Through America’s Heroes at Work, a website that they jointly sponsor with DOL’s Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP), DOL VETS educates employers to ensure they understand that veterans with PTSD and TBI can perform their jobs effectively. At the time of this study, DOL VETS had also just launched a pilot within rural areas of Washington State to conduct employment outreach through volunteers provided by the Corporation for National and Community Service. ESGR also recently launched a new program, the Employment Initiative Program (EIP), to assist service members with job training and connect them with tools to find jobs.

Although most respondents commented favorably on these federal programs and discussed general measures and follow-up required for federally funded programs, none identified outreach and communications strategies, measures of effectiveness, or follow-up methods developed specifically for rural women veterans. Several also identified weaknesses with these programs including the TAP, which is undergoing a major redesign at the time of this study.

Employment has always been relegated to the DOL and not seen as the function of [State] Department of Veterans Affairs. That is sad...if you are looking at the whole person...the job shouldn’t be over there in labor, they should be part of talking about the whole readjustment...the whole reentering the community.

“I would say Veterans’ Preference is not enforced outside of state employment as it should be. There are a lot of rural [employers]...they don’t use the point

system for their hiring so it is tough to give a Veterans' Preference if you are not on a point system.”

The measure of effectiveness for the VA and for the Army Wounded Warrior coordinator and for DOL might not be the same. The VA, I believe it's congressionally mandated to follow up on theirs in 18 months. Ours is one year. And so even on the very basics, how long do you keep track of someone after they've exited the program, there are different standards.

Concerns expressed by respondents were echoed in several reports by the U.S. Government Accounting Office (GAO) and/or VA Office of Inspector General (VA OIG). The TAP was identified as being underutilized and inconsistently administered to Guard and Reserve personnel due to their rapid demobilization. The Disabled TAP was noted as being untracked by VA at the time of the report (GAO 2005a, 2005b) and the VR&E program did not clearly define program performance effectiveness; most veterans discontinued the program and were not rehabilitated (VA OIG 2007). Although not directed specifically to the DOL, a recent GAO report regarding rural homelessness should be used in assessing the effectiveness of HVRP in rural areas given the findings regarding access barriers to homeless services for rural veterans (GAO 2010).

State Programs and Resources

In addition to federal programs, respondents identified programs that might be funded federally but administered at the state level. These programs included those funded through the DOL VETS such as Jobs for Veterans State Grants (Disabled Veterans Outreach Program (DVOP)/ Local Veterans Employment Representative (LVER) Program); the state DVA-funded positions such as Women Veterans Coordinators (WVC) and County Veterans Service Officers (CVSO); and career one-stop offices managed by state workforce agencies.

The best program that we have is...Jobs for Veterans State Grant (JVSG)... However, because of the federal funding formula not taking into account service delivery area, and Montana's got 147,000 square miles, they allotted the state enough money for 6.5 positions, which means that for each FTE [full time equivalent], that was over 22,000 square miles to serve per FTE. And the answer to that question is it's not doable.

Another interviewee expressed her enthusiasm for such programs stating that “the Women's Veterans Organization within our state has hosted a Women

Veterans Conference every other year and it is fantastic! They have outstanding speakers, and provide so much information to women veterans, from health issues to job information.”

Overall, respondents were concerned about the future effectiveness of some programs because states are funded and resourced differently; state Department of Veterans Affairs offices have different reporting structures (some with more power and influence than others); and most states are experiencing heavy budget cuts. In fact, one respondent had identified three state programs for veterans that had “dried up” due to lack of funding. Concerns regarding state budget cuts are well-founded as “rural economies are highly susceptible to state budget shortfalls” and “as state governments cut spending in response to looming budget deficits in coming years, rural America’s fiscal problems may also deepen” (Felix and Henderson 2010:1). State and local governments account for a larger portion of employment and earnings in rural than in metro areas creating further strains on unemployment if hiring freezes or staffing cuts take place (Felix and Henderson 2010).

Like the federal programs, there were no identified outreach and communications programs, measures of effectiveness, or clear follow-up methods specifically designed for tracking rural women veterans. The GAO identified opportunities for improvement in the separate performance measurement systems for the DOL’s DVOP/LVER programs (GAO 2007b).

Other Resources

Finally, respondents identified several additional resources that support veterans in their employment transition. Approximately one-third mentioned partnerships and activities by Chambers of Commerce, which sponsor “Hire A Vet” programs with member employers; two of the female respondents praised efforts by the BPW, which launched an annual national summit on women veterans in 2010 based on BPW’s research on women veterans’ transition; and online social networks such as Facebook, LinkedIn, and Together We Served. These programs were mentioned as methods for strengthening veterans’ networking ability. As one rural respondent, who had a 27 year career with the Ohio National Guard, concluded, “I was hired by my employer only because I was recommended by someone that I used to work with in the civilian work force before I entered the military.” If she had not used her local network, she would have commuted over 70 miles to find work commensurate with her experience and skills. Although these networking resources show promise, their effectiveness remains to be determined as formalized measures

must be implemented to determine whether rural women veterans are accessing the programs to gain and maintain viable employment.

Recommendations for Closing Program Gaps

As demonstrated through the literature review and results of the interviews, rural women veterans face significant challenges in transitioning from military to civilian employment due to their dual status as women and veterans attempting to find employment in rural areas. Although respondents identified programs that exist to address veterans' needs for employment transition, they vary in effectiveness and follow-up, are inconsistently measured and implemented depending upon federal/state/local funding and other resources, and are designed for the general veteran population rather than addressing gender-specific needs. Most respondents stated that they were not aware that rural women veterans were specifically tracked for their programs, and since programs utilize varying measures of effectiveness, their utilization by women veterans in rural areas is unknown at this time. The following six recommendations are proposed for closing some of the program gaps:

Consider redesigning jobs and expanding telecommuting opportunities. Government and nongovernment agencies at federal, state, and local levels should analyze current work practices and identify jobs that can be performed off-site in remote locations. In doing so, agencies may reduce costs by relocating certain positions to rural environments and reducing overhead. This redesign would also enable otherwise underemployed or unemployed rural women veterans, who need flexible work arrangements, the ability to access better paying jobs.

Establish and track rural employment metrics. During the interviews, most program offices acknowledged that although they monitored certain measures, they did not track rural women veterans who participated in their programs. As many agencies must report their results to federal agencies to receive continual funding, providing additional data on the participation and job placement of this population will enable resources to be allocated effectively to ensure equitable access to employment services by rural women veterans. Establishing these measures will also support effective follow-up.

Update current outreach, education, and communications to meet gender-specific needs. Although program offices described a variety of useful outreach and communications mechanisms currently in place to reach both veterans and employers, they are designed for the general population of veterans and may not meet the gender-specific needs of rural women veterans. Several of the female

interviewees praised women's job fairs, conferences, and professional networking forums specifically aimed at connecting women veterans to each other for mutual support and mentorship. Several also commented that employers are often unaware of the women veterans in their organizations and this may be an opportunity to educate them on the considerable leadership and organizational skills that they may offer.

Reevaluate and re-communicate the role and structure of the state DVA offices. Several state DVA offices referred the interviewer to the state DOL VETS offices indicating that employment was not a primary role of the DVA. Although several state Women Veteran Coordinators (WVC) were identified on the National Association of State WVC roster, when contacted, they were either unaware of their appointed responsibility, unavailable for follow-up, or did not return calls or emails. Although not mandated, the role of the state WVC is essential in ensuring that the needs of women veterans remain visible, and DVA offices for highly rural states should consider how to effectively implement this important responsibility.

Consider employment as essential to the health and well-being of veterans. During the interviews, several respondents mentioned the need for employment transition programs to address the needs of veterans holistically, including addressing mental health. To do so, it is recommended that program offices begin to adopt a veteran-centered approach to employment as yet another contributor to the overall health and well-being of the veteran population.

Form veteran-centered partnerships and collaborations. Another underlying theme of the interviews was the need for more consistency, coordination, and collaboration among all agencies, employers, rural communities, and veterans themselves in order to better serve the employment transition needs of veterans. Through closer partnerships at the federal, state, and local levels, scarce resources can be better leveraged, common measures adopted, follow-up coordinated, and employment services delivered.

CONCLUSIONS

Through this exploratory study, it is clear that rural women veterans face numerous challenges in access to employment, education/training, and health care services. These challenges stem from: 1) the unique experiences and health issues that they face as women; 2) the issues of access to, and knowledge of, employment services and misperceptions of employers that they experience as transitioning veterans; and 3) the geographical and economic challenges specific to rural areas where they are seeking employment. Although programs exist at the federal, state,

and local levels to support veterans in their employment transition, few are targeted to address the needs of rural women veterans and measure their access and utilization of these programs. In order to close the gaps in serving rural women veterans, program offices will need to develop consistent measures and follow-up methods, expand their partnerships to include organizations that more effectively reach rural women veterans, and educate employers on the value rural women veterans can bring to the workplace.

Study Limitations

Access to existing data sources. The data sources were often inadequate to reflect the specific population profiled in this report—rural women veterans. Information that was used to identify employment trends from the BLS were often based on unpublished data reported for national levels since rural level data were unavailable. Furthermore, the samples are often too small to provide statistically significant differences in unemployment between women veterans and nonveterans. Data on the National Guard and Reserves is difficult to find and is often reported inconsistently. Also, when identifying rates of PTSD diagnoses including those resulting from MST among rural women veterans, VA does not publicly disclose such figures, making it difficult to assess the rate of those affected.

Access to program offices for interviews. Several program offices such as the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) did not respond to the interview request. In addition, the scope of the interviews was limited to rural states where programs may not be as fully developed as in urban areas due to funding limitations. Furthermore, this study did not interview those agencies that work specifically with veterans to create their own business such as the VA Center for Veterans Enterprise (CVE) or the Small Business Administration (SBA).

In spite of these limitations, this exploratory study contributes to the current body of literature on employment transition for veterans by building upon the 2001 WREI study which did not address the issues and needs of rural women veterans. This study also sheds light on the unique challenges faced by this underserved and invisible population given the lack of literature on employment transition for rural women veterans. Although focused on rural women veterans, the program recommendations offered would benefit all veterans.

Future Research Recommended

From the foundation laid by this exploratory study, future research should focus on the following areas: 1) a larger qualitative study of rural women veterans and

their employment transition needs, as well as rural employer perceptions regarding the value of women veterans; 2) self-employment trends for rural women veterans, their utilization of small business programs sponsored through VA and SBA, and impacts of these programs on their success; 3) differences in access to, and use of, the GI Bill between rural female and male veterans and outcomes; 4) impacts of underemployment on rural women veterans, their families, and their communities; 5) differential impacts of job training, job placement, and job protection programs for veterans in rural vs. urban areas; and 6) the effectiveness of veteran employment policy formulation and funding for rural vs. urban areas. Studying any of these issues would contribute substantially to the literature on rural women veterans and possibly contribute to improving the quality of employment transitions for rural veterans as a whole.

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