



The Our American States podcast—produced by the National Conference of State Legislatures—is where you hear compelling conversations that tell the story of America’s state legislatures, the people in them, the politics that compel them, and the important work of democracy.

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States Build Paths to Employment for Disabled Vets | OAS Episode 78

Welcome to “Our American States,” a podcast of meaningful conversations that tell the story of America’s state legislatures, the people in them, the politics that compel them, and the important work of democracy. For the National Conference of State Legislatures, I’m your host, Gene Rose.

As we approach Veterans Day in 2019, we felt it would be appropriate to highlight a new report released by the National Conference of State Legislatures. It’s called: “A Path to Employment for Veterans with Disabilities,” and it examines an extensive array of employment services and benefits designed to improve the lives of military veterans with disabilities.

We’ll find out what obstacles these veterans have when they compete and apply for jobs and find out what state legislatures are doing for the disabled men and women that have fought so bravely for our country.

Our guests today are Jim Reed and Jennifer Schultz, who wrote this report. They both staff the Military and Veterans Affairs Task Force at NCSL.

Time Marker (TM): 01:07

Gene: Jim, let’s start with you. Tell us what prompted this report.

Jim: Thank you, Gene. The task force that we staff has been around for 10 years and has had an in-depth interest in helping military veterans, and one of the areas that we’ve talked a lot about over the years is employment. And so, in conjunction with this task force and a project we have with the Department of Labor, we put together about a dozen policy options where state legislatures have enacted policies to help veterans find and sustain employment after they finish military service.

And so, part of what’s going on I think with our members and all of us that work on this is there’s a feeling of indebtedness to each and every service member for their time in the armed

forces. And so, as they return to civilian life, we want to give them a hand and help them ease their way into the job market and other areas where legislatures can be helpful.

One of the reasons for this is there are, particularly with veterans that have a disability, there are obstacles they encounter in finding and keeping jobs. One is just simply the translation of their skillset from the military, in terms of training and education, into a civilian job and how that skillset is understood by employers in the labor market.

And another might be just some misunderstanding or lack of understanding of abilities and potentially even disability related issues and opportunities.

TM: 02:29

Gene: Looking over your report, I learned that disabled veterans have to be rated on their disability and that affects their job prospect opportunities. Can you explain this process for our listeners?

Jen: Sure. So when an active-duty service member acquires a disability or aggravates an existing one, they become eligible for compensation provided by the VA, and the amount of that benefit depends on their disability rating, which is a percentage that is intended to reflect the extent to which a person's ability to work is impaired.

The ratings range from 0 to 100% and round off to the nearest 10. And many state benefits and services are tied to the disability rating as well.

TM: 03:15

Gene: And Jennifer, what is the overall picture for disabled veterans in America? How many are searching for jobs and do we know what their overall success rate is?

Jen: We do. So there are over 18 million veterans living in the U.S. today and one-quarter of them are disabled from a service-connected disability. And that number is 41% for post-9/11 veterans. And many of those veterans from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have disability ratings over 60%.

I also have some information on the 10 most common disabilities that I thought listeners might be interested in. These are for newly discharged veterans and, in order and not in any medical terms they are: #1 is ringing in the ears, followed by knee issues, hearing loss, lower back or neck pain, limited arm motion, scars, ankle issues, posttraumatic stress disorder, migraines, and sciatic nerve pain.

I also have some data about the employment picture for both veterans and veterans with disabilities. The veteran unemployment rate peaked in 2010 at 8.7%, and that ranged up to 12% for post-9/11 veterans. By contrast, the veteran unemployment rate in 2018 was 3.5%. So the situation is greatly improved, but numbers are still relatively high for certain populations like young veterans at 5.7% and veterans with disabilities at 5.2%. And the rates vary by state from 1.4% in Iowa to 6.5% in Washington, D.C.

TM: 05:07

Gene: And your report also highlights employment preferences that are available for disabled veterans.

Jen: Yes. So in many states veterans can receive a preference in both public and private employment. The public employment preference usually involves adding points to the passing exam scores of veterans, so that they're ranked higher on the interview list. And 37 states, D.C. and Guam have procedures to prefer disabled veterans over nondisabled veterans.

That preference can also take the form of interview requirements, veteran-only positions and hiring goals.

Just a few examples. Texas has a 20% veteran hiring goal for each state agency, and to meet that goal they require employers to interview a certain number of veterans for each open position. That's dependent on the number of applicants they get. And they allow agencies to designate positions as veteran-only and then hire a veteran from within the agency without advertising. They also have veterans' liaisons within each agency.

Wisconsin has a hiring goal specifically for veterans with disabilities, and Nevada requires public employers to interview every disabled veteran applicant who is qualified.

So while the public sector veterans hiring preference has been around for a long time, it was only a few years ago that private employers got onboard. The hesitancy seemed to stem from a provision in the Civil Rights Act which essentially prohibited a veteran's preference without federal, state or local law authorizing it.

So Washington was the first state to authorize it in 2011 and there are now 38 other states that allow a private sector employer to give a preference to veterans, and that's in hiring, promotion and retention decisions.

Of these, 15 states extend that preference to the spouse of a disabled veteran or to the surviving spouse of a deceased veteran.

Gene: We're going to take a 30-second break and when we come back, we'll find out more about career development, job placement and other incentives state legislatures are taking to help our disabled veterans.

Music and Gene VO:

At NCSL's Capitol Forum, you are the voice of the states. Join us Dec. 10th through the 11th in sunny Phoenix, Arizona, to advocate for states on Capitol Hill and develop the states' agenda. Explore key state/federal issues, hear from experts and network with your peers from across the country. Visit www.ncsl.org/forum2019 for more information.

TM: 07:56

Gene: We're back with our discussion on how state legislatures are trying to help this country's disabled veterans find employment. We're talking with Jennifer Schultz and Jim Reed of NCSL. Jim, tell us what states are doing in terms of career development and job placement.

Jim: There are a variety of programs that help prepare veterans to enter or reenter the civilian workforce through personalized assistance and sharing of resources. One program that we looked at and wrote about in the report is in Tennessee where veterans with disabilities can take advantage of one-on-one services provided by the Department of Labor and Workforce Development.

The staff members there help provide career guidance and assist veterans developing a plan of action for their long-term employment. In addition, they receive priority access to job listings and resume assistance and interview coaching.

In California they have the CALTA program, California Transition Assistance program, which was launched in 2014 which builds upon an existing program with the U.S. Department of Defense that helps transitioning service members coming out of military service into the civilian workforce.

And the California program and some other states as well bring to bear the state resources and state-specific information so veterans can know about not only the federal assistance, but what the state has available as well. And this is in operation at 20 military installations in California.

There are a number of other states doing the same thing or similar programs in Colorado, Nevada and Virginia as well. There's also enacted legislation in several states that helps veterans on a career path in a particular career area, and some of these that we talked about in the report involve agriculture, the health care industry and cybersecurity.

Just a brief example in each one of those. In agriculture, there are dedicated programs in Connecticut, Massachusetts, South Carolina, West Virginia and Wisconsin that support veterans moving into agricultural careers.

In health care there is a pretty close connection between some of the training military service members get, say if they were a medic or in some kind of medical career in the military, that lines up very similarly to EMT or paramedic jobs. So in Ohio and several other states there's an expedited program where veterans can move into either a paramedic certification program or similar type programs to get a job more quickly.

And then cybersecurity would be another area that's a very fast-growing career field and there are urgent demands for a lot of the skills that military service members have developed, and at least four states including Florida, Massachusetts, North Carolina and Virginia have legislation that encourages employment of veterans in this field.

In North Carolina, for instance, they set aside \$500,000 to fund a two-year cybersecurity apprenticeship program for veterans that have at least a 10% disability rate.

TM: 11:05

Gene: And what about apprentice programs or on-the-job training?

Jim: We identified at least 13 states, and there are probably more, that do help veterans gain internships or apprenticeships or on-the-job training through a variety of approaches, and these include: industry specific incentives, the promotion and use of existing programs that might be out there already through universities or colleges, direct training and funding to organizations to provide apprenticeships, and then also tax credits for employers.

In the state of Washington, they specifically have a program that helps veterans with disabilities get internships and ultimately jobs with the Department of Transportation in Washington State, and these jobs are in the fields of engineering, construction trades, logistics and project planning.

TM: 11:56

Gene: Jennifer, another part of your report talks about occupational licensing. Tell us what that is and how states are reacting.

Jen: Yeah, so active-duty service members we know receive extensive training in a variety of occupational specialties and many of them have equivalents in the civilian workforce. But transitioning service members still need that state license in order to find a job. And despite all of their skills and experience, veterans often face long delays and costs to enter the workforce in a licensed profession.

Some of the policy options that we discuss in the report revolve around improving consistency in the recognition of skills at the board level, waiving fees for veteran applicants, expediting review of applications, and exempting veterans from the licensing process altogether, which is a new approach that some states have passed just in 2018/19.

To elaborate on that, in 2018 Utah passed a bill which allowed military spouses to practice a number of occupations in the state without requiring a distinct license in Utah. And the conditions on that were that they must hold a current license in good standing in another state and pay all applicable fees. And that's it.

Arkansas enacted similar legislation this year, but they expanded the scope to include veterans. That law requires licensing boards to grant automatic licenses to returning veterans who hold a valid license in another state. The law's definition of veteran includes several different discharge classifications and excludes only those with a dishonorable discharge, which is also important to note.

And Arizona also did this licensure by exemption; that's what we call it, in 2019.

TM: 13:56

Gene: And what about tax credits – are states using those to help disabled veterans?

Jim: Yes. This is offered in over a dozen states that we reported on in our document. And so basically that would be an income tax credit for private employers that higher one or more veterans.

Typically, an employer can claim a tax credit for the first and second taxable year in which they employ one or more qualified veterans, and these credits range from \$1,000 to \$15,000 per veteran depending on the state.

Three states in particular offer a larger tax credit to employers who hire veterans with disabilities, and these three states are Alaska, New York and West Virginia.

TM: 14:42

Gene: And Jennifer, are states taking specific actions to help female veterans?

Jen: They are. Almost 10% of veterans in the U.S. today are women and that number is rising every year. So at least 12 states recognizing this have established a female veteran program or named a female veteran coordinator to oversee state benefits and services for this population.

For example, Indiana created the Hoosier Women Veterans Program in 2014. That was one of the earlier ones. And that program assesses the needs of female veterans and the state, they review programs designed to meet those needs to ensure that they do, and they improve awareness just of all the various benefits available.

TM: 15:28

Gene: Thank you both for this great information. Can you tell our listeners where they can go to get more information about this topic?

Jim: Yes. This report is posted, along with a fair amount of other resources relative to military and veterans' issues, on the NCSL website, ncsl.org. You can find it there under our military and veterans research tab. You can also google it as well with those key terms.

We are continuing our work in this field with our task force that consists of state legislators and legislative staff who really have a heart for working on behalf of veterans in terms of state benefits and services. So that's where our work can be found, on ncsl.org.

Gene: We've been talking with Jim Reed and Jennifer Schultz, the authors of a new NCSL report: A Path to Employment for Veterans with Disabilities. Jim and Jennifer, thanks for being a part of "Our American States."

Jenn: Thank you.

Jim: We appreciate it. Thank you, Gene.

Music and Gene VO:

And that concludes this edition of our podcast. We encourage you to review and rate our episodes on iTunes or Google Play. You may also go to Google Play and iTunes to have these episodes downloaded directly to your mobile device when a new episode is ready. For the National Conference of State Legislatures, this is Gene Rose. Thanks for listening and being a part of "Our American States."

