

Veteran Hiring in Community Health Centers

Case Studies and Recommendations

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Best Practice Profiles

The National Association of Community Health Centers (NACHC) conducted a series of interviews and case study analyses to explore effective strategies that have been employed at local health centers to recruit, train and retain Veterans re-entering the workforce. This Issue Brief describes best practices identified at 3 health centers:

- Beaufort-Jasper-Hampton Comprehensive Health Services, Inc. (South Carolina) provides perspectives on the value offered by veterans from both the employer and employee perspectives, and how to build good working relationships with their colleagues in the military and veteran communities in the Low Country of South Carolina.
- CommuniCare, Inc. (Texas) provides a portrait of executive leadership in action -- in developing and executing a veteran recruitment and development strategy, and developing strong ties with military and veteran colleagues.
- The Penobscot Community Health Care, Inc. (Maine) has identified a means to serve the broader veteran community's educational needs by qualifying for a state grant on employment training for Native Americans and veterans.

A. Beaufort-Jasper-Hampton Comprehensive Health Services, Inc.

Health Center Overview. Initially established to provide economic development opportunities for low income populations, Beaufort-Jasper-Hampton Comprehensive Health Services, Inc. (BJHCHS) has expanded its role, becoming one of the largest and most respected health care providers in the state of South Carolina. BJHCHS' mission is *"To provide quality, accessible and comprehensive health care services to the South Carolina Low Country Community"*.

Veteran Hiring. BJHCHS has successfully hired veterans in both clinical and non-clinical positions, and is focused on developing the career aspirations of its workforce. BJHCHS has worked with veteran hires to help them with continued academic advancement and/or training programs to further their careers. BJHCHS currently employs 20 veterans – about 10% of its workforce. Approximately two-thirds of the veterans are working non-clinical jobs.

Value Proposition. Interviews with the CEO and COO, Mr. Roland Gardner and Mr. Brandon Gaffney respectively, and three former veterans/BJHCHS employees provide personal perspectives on the approach and benefits gained from the BJHCHS strategy.

The BJHCHS executive team understands and appreciates the value of their military veteran work force. They've identified several key attributes of their military veteran employees:

- *An understanding of the mission.* "These are people accustomed to 'mission-oriented' objectives. And they bring the ability to quickly connect the mission with their own responsibilities," commented Gardner.
- *Initiative.* "They bring an approach to their jobs that makes our training and on-boarding process much easier," added Gaffney. "They have an intuitive feel for what needs to get done, and they go do it. They work well in teams. You can see their military experience coming through on the job, and it's appreciated." Their strong organizational and time management skills make them ideal candidates for further career development and supervisory responsibilities.
- *Loyalty to the organization.* The executive team remarked that the military veteran employees are not only exceptional hires; they also display greater organizational longevity, with retention rates that are almost double the rate of the non-veteran workforce.

Individual interviews with military veterans hired by BJHCHS shed light on the informal networking approach employed by Beaufort-Jasper. Interviews with three veterans – Ms. Marilyn Frazier, Ms. Sherike Deville, Ms. Latoya Parker—provided their own unique stories.

- Ms. Marilyn Frazier learned of BJHCHS through an informal network of veterans and colleagues in the community. After serving in the Marine Corps as an Aviation Operations Specialist, she joined BJHCHS in 2002 as Vehicle Operator in the Community Service Department. Her organizational and time management skills, cultivated as a Marine, helped guide her rise through the health center. She used her VA educational benefits to obtain an Associate’s degree in Business Administration and currently serves as the Executive Assistant to the CEO.
- Ms. Sherike Deville joined BJHCHS in 2002 as the Executive Assistant to the Chief Operating Officer. Following twelve years in the Army (as both an active duty member and Reservist), she found a career path at Beaufort-Jasper, that resettled in increased management responsibility. She now serves as the Property and Procurement Community Services Manager in charge of agency facilities, transportation, purchasing and facility maintenance. “My military skills prepared me for this role; they instilled strong ethical standards, self-discipline and tolerance -- valuable tools for being adaptable to any environment,” said Ms. Deville.
- Ms. Latoya Parker is one of the most recent hires by BJHCHS, having come aboard in July of 2012 as a Dental Assistant. Ms. Parker served in the Army for 8 years as a transportation specialist. She comes from a military family and her enlistment was part of her plan for as long as she can remember. The transition from military to civilian life was difficult for Ms. Parker. After struggling with her job search, she made the decision to go to college under the Montgomery GI Bill and become a dental assistant, “I gained discipline and perseverance from the military, and it has carried through to my life in the civilian sector at Beaufort Jasper.”

Strategies Employed / Lessons Learned.

- Cultivate the local veteran network. There are a number of veteran organizations that reach all generations of veterans, including American Legion, Veterans of Foreign War, Paralyzed Veterans of America, Disabled American Veterans, Iraq / Afghanistan Veterans of America.

- Talk to your existing military veteran workforce. Let them know the value you place in hiring veterans, and solicit their help in sharing information on job opportunities with other veterans.
- Establish relationships with any local military or veteran organizations. If your health center is located near a military installation, this may be easier than in other communities. But many locales will have veterans affairs offices located nearby.
- Understand the educational benefits that military veterans enjoy beyond your own health center educational/workforce development benefits. In many cases, potential veteran employees will be able to gain certification or other credentials with these government benefits, such as the GI Bill and other veterans education assistance programs.

Conclusion

BJHCHS has successfully hired veterans in both clinical and non-clinical positions, maintaining a commitment to the advancement of the individual into a long-term health center employee. BJHCHS has worked with veteran hires to help them with continued academic growth and training programs in order to meet their career goals. They also understand the importance of the “word of mouth” veteran network and encourage veteran employees to reach out and recruit other veterans.

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B. CommuniCare, San Antonio, Texas

Health Center Overview. CommuniCare Health Centers is a full-service primary healthcare system serving both Bexar and Hays counties in the San Antonio, Texas area. They are medical home to more than 25,000 people. CommuniCare offers an array of services including pediatric medicine, family medicine, senior care, women's health, podiatry, dental, behavioral health, minor surgery clinic, optometry and optical services, and pediatric speech therapy. They deliver care through 7 clinic locations utilizing integrative primary care clinical practice, highly trained healthcare providers, state of the art diagnostic equipment, and electronic health records. In 2012, the Joint Commission designated CommuniCare as a “Primary Care Medical Home”.

Veteran Hiring. CommuniCare is explicit in recognizing the value veterans bring to their organization, and promotes a veteran friendly workplace. Of CommuniCare’s 350 employees, 10% are veterans. While the standard healthcare industry turnover rate is 26%, at CommuniCare, the rate is 17% and only 9% among its veteran employees. The average employment period of veterans at CommuniCare is 6 years. It is worth noting that the high rate of health center retention among veterans has been identified by a number of those individuals whom we interviewed.

Value Proposition. CommuniCare’s commitment to veterans starts at the top. Paul Nguyen, CEO of CommuniCare, is a veteran himself – having served in the U.S. Air Force as a Medical Service Corps officer. Paul has built a large network within the military and veteran communities to recruit highly qualified veterans. He not only serves as a veterans’ resource for CommuniCare, but for health centers across Texas. Paul has developed and sustained this network in a number of ways:

- **Identifying the military network.** He established a process to regularly meet with leaders from the military and veteran communities. With four major military installations in the San Antonio area, along with a major VA presence, Paul schedules

regular visits with senior executives across Army, Air Force and VA communities.

- **Connecting with educational resources.** Paul is an adjunct professor at the Park University Lackland Campus, where he teaches a healthcare administration class. Many current and former service members use their GI Bill and other educational benefits to pursue associate's and bachelor's degrees, and the CommuniCare Human Resources department regularly makes presentations to the medical assistant division and others on campus about career opportunities at health centers in San Antonio and across the state. This has led to increased veteran hiring both at CommuniCare and at health centers in many areas of the state.
- **Connecting relevant concepts from military medical and health center operations.** CommuniCare has created a health care organizational model that is similar to the Department of Defense "Patient-Centered Medical Home" model, and has shared their model with their military counterparts – making it easier for potential military medical veterans to understand the health center organization and where they might fit in. In a similar vein, CommuniCare strives to be the provider of choice for veterans and their families - welcoming TRICARE beneficiaries, and accepting TRICARE payment. The health center's similarities with the DoD "patient-centered medical home" model also assists with this outreach and education.
- **Create networks of organizations within the veterans' community including military bases and Veterans Affairs, and participate in events that connect to veterans and their families.** By actively seeking out opportunities to interact with veterans and developing strong relationships with veterans' organizations, CommuniCare has developed a direct hiring line to highly qualified applicants.
- **Promote from within and provide appropriate training to help your employees move up the ladder.** This is the fundamental organizational model within the military, and one that military veterans look for – continuing career advancement and growth. CommuniCare has a 12-month management training program designed for entry level employees to move up the career ladder.

Strategies Employed / Lessons Learned.

- Get to know the names, faces and responsibilities of the local military and veteran community. Set a schedule to visit with them and invite them to visit you.
- Connect with your local community college or university. If adjunct teaching roles are available, see if someone from your leadership team can teach a course. While this is true in any circumstance, many younger service members and veterans are taking advantage of their GI Bill and other educational benefits to advance their careers and their post-military service employment opportunities.
- If you are delivering services in a military community, become a TRICARE Participating Provider, and invite military beneficiaries to use your services – increasing your visibility and their connection with your mission.
- Ensure your veteran population can see their opportunities for growth and advancement.

Conclusion

CommuniCare understands the value of veterans and works to create a corporate culture that is attractive to veterans as they transition from active duty to civilian life. The CEO has made an organization-wide commitment to recruiting, hiring and retaining veterans. He has created a direct pipeline for veterans by seeking out and maintaining important community and military connections and a thorough understanding of “word of mouth” promotion among veterans. The result of this effort is 10% of all of CommuniCare’s employees are veterans with an average employment rate of 6 years.

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C. Penobscot Community Health Care, Inc., Bangor Maine

Health Center Overview. Penobscot Community Health Care, Inc. (PCHC) was incorporated in 1997 as a non-for-profit in Bangor, Maine. PCHC now operates 16 sites and serves over 54,000 people. PCHC is a top quality health care organization that has received multiple national awards, and has been regionally and nationally recognized as a leader among the nation's Community Health Centers. PCHC has been repeatedly cited for quality of care, patient outcomes, and technological leadership.

Veteran Hiring. In December 2012, Penobscot applied for and received a grant from the Maine State Department of Labor to develop and implement a job training program for unemployed and underemployed veterans and Native Americans. This was later expanded to include other groups of unemployed individuals. The job training program focuses on CPR, medical terminology, electronic health record keeping and core competency training. An advisory committee consisting of neighboring health centers, hospitals and other health care providers helps individuals who complete the training find employment, either within their organizations or with community partners. By the end of June 2013, PCHC “graduated” 38 individuals, including 1 veteran and 3 Native Americans, all with jobs waiting for them.

Value Proposition. PCHC is now a certified employee-training vendor for the State of Maine, and has committed funds from the State to expand this program. The State of Maine plans to develop similar training programs in other business sectors in order to increase job skills for unemployed and underemployed citizens. PCHC reached out to many local veteran support entities including the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), National Guard and the Department of Veterans Affairs (both federal and state), as well as Native American community organizations. While the number of veteran and Native American participants was low for the first cohort, PCHC was able to establish strong relationships and lay the groundwork within the community that will lead to increased participation and employment in future trainings.

PCHC developed strong relationships with the local community colleges and technical schools to develop training and certification programs for their employees. This enables at-risk employment groups (e.g., Native Americans and veterans) to continue working while pursuing educational and career advancement.

For employees hired into the health center, PCHC is committed to promote from within and has developed a clear career ladder program to advance employees from entry level to secondary positions and higher up. They offer a variety of training and certification programs including an 80 hours medical billing and coding certification course and Microsoft office certification, leading to increased employee retention and job satisfaction.

Strategies Employed /Lessons Learned.

- Determine if your existing training and outreach programs can be revised or expanded to reach veteran populations specifically.
- Work with your State and local authorities on special training programs that you might be able to lead.
- Persevere. Although the Penobscot story is still in its infancy, they now have a track record on which to build, and are creating awareness of the health center operations throughout the state.

Conclusion

Working with the state of Maine and other funding organizations, PCHC developed a training model to help unemployed and underemployed Veterans and Native Americans become more competitive in today's work environment. PCHC established a strong relationship with local community colleges and technical schools to help train and educate unemployed veterans in a variety of fields. The process of creating and implementing the training program caused PCHC to reach out to Veteran and Native American organizations and laid the groundwork for further cooperation and partnership.

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