

Veteran Hiring in Community Health Centers

Best Practices & Lessons Learned

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I. Report Overview

This Issue Brief draws from recent interviews with senior executives in health centers, as well as stories from recently hired veterans, to portray lessons for health center management in the development of their strategies to hire and retain veterans.

Veterans face many barriers to employment during the transition from active duty to civilian life: translating military experience into civilian work skills, accessing and connecting to community resources and programs, and finding available opportunities in the private sector.

This report summarizes approaches to recruit, hire and retain military veterans and provides perspectives and lessons learned from health centers coming from disparate geographic locations and serving different populations. The experiences of health centers located in Bangor, Maine; Beaufort, South Carolina; and San Antonio, TX – suggest that there are both common and unique considerations for health center leaders and staff.

Across the country, health centers and Primary Care Associations have stepped forward to help fill a gap, and introduce new and innovative ways to recruit, train and retain veterans entering the workforce. In 2011, the White House, the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA), and National Association of Community Health Centers (NACHC) announced an initiative in which health centers committed to hiring 8,000 veterans.

Health center expansion across the country demands that health centers further develop a skilled, trained and dependable workforce.

I. Successful Elements to Veteran Outreach, Hiring and Retention

HEALTH CENTER LEADERSHIP ENGAGEMENT

A baseline and essential element for successful veteran outreach, recruitment and retention efforts within health centers is the active engagement of the entire health center leadership team – the Board, Chief Executive Officer, Chief Operating Officer, and other members of the executive team.

Fundamentally, the health center leadership must understand the value gained from hiring military veterans, must be able to communicate within the health center and with external parties on this value proposition and how veterans fit within the health center's mission, and then must execute on a specific and customized strategy for reaching veterans. The principal leadership lessons that emerged from leadership interviews are:

- **Establish a Veteran Hiring Strategy.** Ensure the Board, executive team, and staff know that hiring veterans is a priority, and include them in the strategy development. Customize a staffing plan to the community's needs and veteran population in your service area. The VA provides this

information on their website: <http://va.gov/vetdata/veteranpopulation.asp>. Identify veterans already serving on the health center staff and bring them into the planning efforts. Finally, monitor performance against the strategy, and make course corrections where needed.

- **Identify and Catalogue Federal / State / Local Resources.** There are a range of services and resources available to veterans and to employers. There may be state laws that permit veteran hiring preferences, reduced tuition for training and GI Bill benefits that can accelerate certification and broad opportunities for career development, as well as grants and other benefits for employers, <http://www.americasheroesatwork.gov/forEmployers/HiringToolkit>.
- **Communicate the Strategy.** Develop a specific communication strategy for veteran hiring. The veteran community is filled with formal and informal networks, and accessing these networks requires a thoughtful approach. The next section in this Brief outlines some of the components health centers should consider as they develop this strategy.

OUTREACH STRATEGY

Many health centers are unaware of where or how to *efficiently* search for potential veteran candidates. Similarly, many veterans, particularly those just emerging from active service and transitioning to the civilian world, are unaware of health centers and the employment opportunities that may exist there.

Successful approaches health centers can use for finding qualified veterans include:

- **Identify military installations and veteran organizations** in the area, as well as other federal or state program offices. Here are just a few:
 - *Department of Defense / Military Installations.* Where applicable, identify the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) office on local military installations <http://www.militaryinstallations.dod.mil/MOS/f?p=MI:ENTRY:0>.
 - Military hospital or clinic commanders on an installation for retiring / separating staff with health-specific credentials. The entire TAP program offers helpful information for veterans and employers alike: <http://www.turbotap.org/register.tpp>
 - *Department of Veterans Affairs (Federal and State).* In the case of VA staff, personnel working for the Veterans Benefit Administration (VBA) are responsible for most of the vocational rehabilitation and employment services for disabled veterans, administer the educational benefits for all veterans, and provide other employment support services. In local communities, find out if there is a Veterans Center near you, using this VA resource: http://www.va.gov/directory/guide/vetcenter_flash.asp
 - *Department of Labor (Federal and State).* The U.S. DOL supports State efforts to assist veterans in finding employment. American Job Centers are the “go to” resource for veterans (<http://jobcenter.usa.gov/>). Job Centers usually have Local Veterans Employment Representatives (LVERs) who focus on working with employers and creating potential

employment opportunities for veterans. Disabled Veteran Outreach Program (DVOP) specialists are assigned to Job Centers and help all eligible veterans with their job search.

- Meet with veterans already serving on staff. They will be among the most important assets in navigating the local veteran community. They will likely understand the most influential veteran organizations and individuals in the community, and will shorten the time between strategy development and execution.
- **Educate about what health centers are in the community to do.** As health centers reach out to the organizations identified above, there is a good chance that the organizations may not know much about the health center (or what health centers do and who they serve). Ensure health centers bring resources and materials on any external visits – and the collateral should include both online resources for potential employees and veteran groups to reach the health center, as well as specific names, phone numbers and emails on the staff that individuals can contact.

CAREER DEVELOPMENT (ENTRY LEVEL ONWARD)

As veterans are brought on board, employer and employee alike should understand the health center's commitment to veterans' career goals.

Veterans come to their employer with many advantages including access to educational benefits (e.g, GI Bill benefits) that are above and beyond what the health center may offer. Veterans bring a variety of skills and experiences which they can apply to health centers- helping both the veterans and health centers to learn and grow.

In some cases, community colleges, colleges, or universities may have developed specialized programs that allow constructive credit for certain aspects of military service. The Montgomery GI Bill, for example, is available to all enlisted individuals in the Armed Forces who have completed their minimum service obligation. This is a valuable resource for helping veterans expand on their skills and obtain a degree (associate's, bachelor's or advanced) by attending a college or university.

CONCLUSIONS

Veterans are a special group of potential employees who will flourish in the mission-driven world of health centers. In discussions with health center leaders, they found veteran hires to be self-directed, leadership-oriented, and loyal to the mission. Though anecdotal, the health center leaders often found veteran retention to exceed the retention rates of other, non-veteran employees. And, in addition to their talent and drive, veterans bring resource support of their own to help sustain and advance their careers.