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Engaging Military Veterans in the Public Health Workforce: A Literature Review

*Produced by Trailhead Institute in partnership with
Amaka Consulting and Evaluation Services*

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Executive Summary

Trailhead Institute is the leading, supportive and empowering catalyst that enables communities to make important decisions and enact critical initiatives aimed at delivering healthier futures and more positive environments. Trailhead Institute's Workforce Programs & Initiatives (WPI) activate public and environmental health career entry pathways and innovative workforce sustainability strategies to help develop and advance the evolving public and environmental health workforce. With an approach oriented toward equity and inclusion, WPI efforts engage partners across multiple sectors and interdisciplinary areas that influence public and environmental health.

Military Veterans (Veterans) have long been a valued part of the American workforce, bringing their unique skills and experiences to every industry they touch. Recently, attention has turned to the ways in which Veterans help address critical public health and environmental health issues across the country. This highlights the need to better understand the experiences that Veterans hold when transitioning from military service to civilian life, and to examine what supports Veterans need in order to access, advance, and excel within the civilian workforce at large, and within the public and environmental health sectors, specifically.

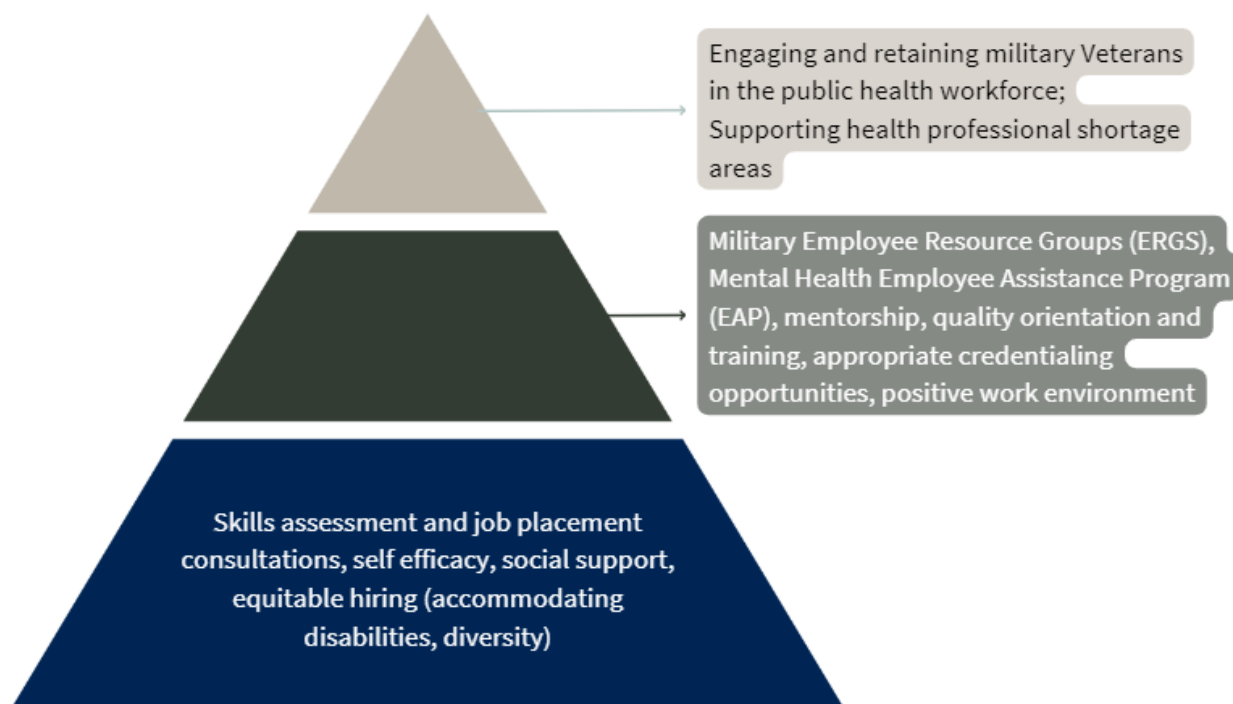
As evidenced throughout this literature review, Veterans face significant barriers when entering the civilian workforce, which leads to lower employment rates compared to civilians. These barriers include a lack of support, stigmas about mental health, financial restrictions, and inequitable workplaces for Veterans with disabilities. Despite these barriers, Veterans hold professional skills that are transferable to the civilian workforce. Additionally, research has shown that there is a return on investment on hiring Veterans into organizations within the civilian workforce. While there are programs that have been implemented to assist Veterans with transitioning into the workforce, there are still gaps that exist. Creating equitable work environments for Veterans with disabilities and educating hiring managers about the unique characteristics and experiences of Veterans are critical for practicing inclusivity. Additionally, theoretical frameworks demonstrating the relationship between the individual, workplace environment, and social support, should also be used to strengthen programs aimed at transitioning Veterans into starting a new job or career.

Understanding the lived experiences of Veterans and how that plays a role in their current overall health is important for creating a work life that is compatible to them. By ensuring Veterans have access to resources, support, and opportunities that align with their needs, the opportunity for a smoother transition into starting their work life post service is made possible. Research shows that Veterans have many valuable skills that make them ideal candidates for the civilian workforce, however there is limited research that explores the capabilities and value that Veterans can bring to the public health workforce. Trailhead, in partnership with Amaka Consulting and Evaluation Services (ACES), sought to design and explore an innovative literature review about engaging military Veterans in the public health workforce (see themes in Figure 1).

Creating equitable workforce programs that help Veterans transition into the civilian workforce is critical for ensuring that Veterans have access to resources, opportunities, and support that allow them to effectively transition into the civilian workforce. The challenges that Veterans face while transitioning into the work life is unique to each individual, and without the proper support, this can create further difficulties for Veterans. Programs should practice inclusion by creating work environments that are accommodating to the needs of Veterans who have mental or physical health disabilities.

While each individual is unique, Veterans broadly hold skills such as problem solving, critical thinking and team building, which are valuable assets in public health. Engaging military Veterans in the public health workforce recognizes the importance of these skills, and furthermore supports statewide equitable recruitment and retention priorities, with opportunities to develop meaningful career pathways as they continue forward in public health. In relation to the deBeaumont Foundation strategic skills (2022), Veterans can likely support data-based decision making, resource management, and strategic thinking. While further longitudinal study is needed, Veterans can likely thrive in public health preparedness, environmental health, communicable disease intervention, clinical public health roles, and others. By recognizing these skills and creating programs that give Veterans the opportunity to apply them to public health positions, public health programs can be a bridge for supporting Veterans to transition into the field. This also contributes to addressing public health workforce attrition, and, with proper planning, can also increase access to health professionals in shortage areas. With collaboration, the public health community has the capacity to intentionally create workforce development programs that center and support military Veterans.

Figure 1. Spectrum of Engaging Military Veterans in the Public Health Workforce



Introduction

The purpose of this literature review is to explain the valuable capabilities and skills that military Veterans hold, and how those capabilities and skills can be translated to public health work opportunities upon their transition into a civilian workforce. A study found the unemployment rate amongst Veterans was 13%, compared to the unemployment amongst nonVeterans at 10.9% (Frogner et. al, 2016). Additionally, it was found that Gulf War II Veterans have a 10% unemployment rate while non-Veterans have a rate of 6.4% (Stone, 2015). Over 60% of Veterans expressed that finding employment and adjusting to civilian life are some of the greatest challenges they experienced after completing their service (Stone, 2015). This gap can be attributed to a number of factors, such as: the lack of opportunity to apply their skills gained during their service once transitioning to civilian work life, stigmas associated with military service, and financial burdens that come with additional educational requirements (Ward, 2020; Snyder et. al 2016). Additionally, Veterans with disabilities face unaccommodating workplaces, as they often lack the resources and assistance to transition into the civilian workforce (Ruh et. al, 2009). According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 2022, 4.9 million Veterans had a service-connected disability, which emphasizes the importance of organizations accommodating the needs of Veterans with disabilities by creating inclusive workplaces (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). For example, disability service providers in workplaces must understand the American Disabilities Act (ADA) and Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act (ADAAA) standards in the development of programs created for Veterans with disabilities (Ruh, et. al, 2009).

Veterans have unique skills and knowledge acquired from their military service such as leadership, communication, and working in fast-paced environments, as well as an understanding of how to work in vulnerable communities (McCaslin et. al, 2020). They also have a high sense of resilience, loyalty, integrity, duty, and commitment to their work (Stone, 2015). Such skills can be beneficial in public health settings, as the skills learned in the military are transferable to an array of work fields.

According to the Public Health Foundation, the public health workforce aims to provide capacity building opportunities in public health to “enhance the training skills, and performance of public health workers” (*Workforce Development*, n.d.). Components of public health workforce development can include: 1) monitoring and projecting workforce supply, 2) identifying competencies on which to base curricula, 3) designing integrated learning systems, 4) promoting public health practice competencies, 5) conducting evaluations and research on workforce development efforts, 6) and ensuring support for lifelong learning (Sellers et. al, 2019). Veterans have the potential of bringing many of these strong skill sets to the civilian workforce, yet they continue to face difficulties in obtaining employment. Veterans often face financial burdens due to the lack of employment opportunities available to them, as well as lack access to resources such as health care and education (Snyder et. al, 2016). Furthermore, Veterans with disabilities can face even greater barriers, as the workplace often fails to accommodate their needs (Kilmer, 2019). Successful integration of Veterans entering the civilian workforce should include providing Veterans with training that builds on their military skill set, employment opportunities post-service, homelessness prevention, and mental health programs that support the transition of Veterans (Olenick, 2015).

Currently, there is a lack of research and programs that focus on assisting Veterans in transitioning into the civilian workforce. Moreover, there is a need for more comprehensive programs that address the unique challenges Veterans face when transitioning into the civilian workforce, such as stigmas associated with military service, financial restrictions, and lack of civilian workforce experience (Ward, 2020). This lack of data is concerning, as it prevents us from understanding the full scope of supports needed by

Veterans to support their well-being following their service, in addition to understanding the impact that Veterans can have on public health initiatives. Without this information, it is impossible to accurately assess the impact of Veterans on public health initiatives and to ensure that Veterans receive the support they need to succeed in public health roles.

There is also a need to understand the challenges faced by Veterans in the public health workforce. For example, Veterans may need to adjust to new work environments and understand the cultural expectations of public health. Veterans may need additional support and resources to address mental health challenges they may be facing as a result of their military service. More information is needed in order to identify gaps in this field and to ensure Veterans are properly supported in their roles. This information can also be used to inform best practices for recruiting and retaining Veterans as they enter this workforce upon completing their service. Overall, it is essential that more information is gathered exploring military Veterans in the public health workforce.

Current Status of Veterans Entering the Workforce

Gaps in Structures and Support

The process of Veterans transitioning from military service to civilian life can be both a challenging and stressful experience. Despite there being programs and initiatives designed to support the transitioning process of Veterans entering the workforce, gaps still exist in understanding the effectiveness of these programs and how Veterans can best adapt to meet civilian employment requirements (LePage, 2020). Researchers acknowledge there is still more that needs to be done in order to understand a transitioning process that is best suited for Veterans (Hunter-Johnson & Al-Asfor, 2021). While there is limited research that has been conducted concerning Veteran transition to the civilian workforce, researchers identify gaps and areas of concern in research that need to be addressed to better support the successful transition of Veterans to civilian life (Frogner et. al, 2016). One of the areas that requires further examination is identifying effective coping strategies for Veterans during the transition process (LePage, 2020). A study found that Veterans face challenges in understanding how their military skills translate to civilian employment and need support to identify transferable skills (LePage, 2020). There is a need for more support that identifies how these coping mechanisms can help Veterans navigate the transition process and support them in finding meaningful employment (LePage, 2020).

Another gap seen in research is the limited understanding of the factors that affect hiring decisions amongst military Veterans. Many employers at organizations sometimes hold preexisting biases and stereotypes about Veterans that could affect their likelihood of being employed (Ward, 2020). Research shows employers may view Veterans as lacking the necessary civilian work experience or having difficulty adapting to civilian culture (Ward, 2020). Additionally, gaps have been identified between transition programs and job retention for Veterans (LePage, 2020). Transition programs are effective in supporting Veterans during the initial stages of employment, since Veterans face challenges in retaining their jobs, especially within the health care field (Westcott, 2020). Other gaps are seen in Veterans' understanding of how their skill set fits within a job title or the needs of an organization once they enter civilian life (Ward, 2020). These reflections demonstrate the need to create a more inclusive approach to recruiting and retaining Veterans in the civilian workforce.

Inclusive Hiring for Veterans

Individual Factors that Affect Hiring

There are factors seen at the individual level that make the transition to civilian life difficult for Veterans. Veterans often face many challenges and barriers that can affect their ability to enter the workforce including stigmas surrounding mental health and disabilities, limited access to current transition programs, and a lack of understanding their own skill sets once leaving the military. A common barrier that Veterans face when seeking employment is the stigma around mental health issues (Stone, 2015). A study found that Veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan experience higher rates of mental health problems such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or depression, causing hesitancy in considering them for job positions (LePage, 2020). This also creates hesitancy in Veterans not wanting to disclose their mental health history, leaving employers uninformed (Stone, 2015). In the absence of awareness around inclusion, ADA, and ADAAG, stigmas surrounding mental health can discourage Veterans from seeking the help they need and create negative stereotypes about mental health issues among Veterans. Unfortunately, many employers are not familiar with the mental health issues Veterans may have experienced, and sometimes view them as a potential risk to the organization. This can lead to Veterans being denied jobs despite their qualifications and experience.

In addition to mental health stigmas, Veterans with disabilities also experience barriers to employment when entering the workforce. Veterans with a disability may face discrimination based on their conditions, which is often due to the stigmas associated with their condition or the lack of understanding about it (Ward, 2020). Some employers have a perceived notion that Veterans with physical disabilities have a lack of ability to perform job duties or concerns about accommodation costs, leaving Veterans with disabilities excluded from the hiring process (Ward, 2020). This creates an unfair disadvantage for Veterans, and it causes employers to overlook the skill and capabilities that Veterans can bring to their organization

Another factor that affects the hiring process for Veterans is the limited access to transition programs, which can help them make a successful transition into the civilian workforce. Upon leaving the military, many Veterans are unaware of the programs and resources available to them or how to properly market themselves, which can make it difficult for them to navigate the job market (Hall et. al, 2014). Having access to these programs provides support and guidance to Veterans on a variety of topics such as: resume writing, interviewing, networking, and job searching (Westcott, 2020). Additionally, transition programs can give Veterans the access to professionals who can help Veterans with their transition (LePage, 2020). Other resources such as financial assistance to Veterans are also seen in these programs, and are helpful for covering the cost of job training, moving expenses, and other costs that are associated with transitioning to the civilian workforce (Snyder et. al, 2016). Without access to these programs, Veterans are left without the resources, support, guidance, or financial assistance that are essential for creating a successful transition for Veterans.

Veterans often struggle with understanding the skill set they have acquired when leaving the military and entering the civilian workforce. Research shows that Veterans bring a unique set of skills and experiences to the civilian job market that many employers should consider valuable to their organization (Hunter-Johnson & Al-Asfour, 2021). Examples of this include their ability to learn new skills and adapt to new career paths, which exemplifies their determination and innovative capabilities (Ruh et al., 2009). It can be difficult to translate the skills and experiences gained in the military to the civilian job market, which is why Veterans need the guidance to properly apply this to the job market (LePage, 2020). Veterans gain so many skills during their service that are transferable and valuable to other sectors outside of the military job market.

In public health, communication skills are essential for effectively communicating with stakeholders, building trust in populations, working in collaborative environments and disseminating information to the public through communication channels (CDC, 2023). Such skills can be helpful for jobs in public health education or health communication. Leadership skills are essential for public health positions that may require management of teams, decision-making (CDC, 2023). Leadership skills can also be helpful for implementing public health policies and initiatives (*Core competencies for Public Health Professionals*, n.d.). Teamwork skills and the ability to work in teams allows for ideas to be shared, and respecting different points of view which are all important for achieving a common goal within the public health workforce (*Core Competencies for Public Health Professionals*, (n.d.)). Having teamwork skills includes the ability to listen and understand the opinions of others and collaborate with community members and organizations that may want to coordinate on similar public health initiatives (*Core Competencies for Public Health Professionals*, (n.d.)). Technical skills are also important in the field of public health, especially for roles that require the usage of technology to collect and analyze data, or interpreting data for important decision making (CDC, 2023). Having organizational skills is essential to the civilian workforce and can include the ability to organize and prioritize tasks or manage multiple projects or teams at once.

Organizational Factors

Organizational factors that hinder Veterans from finding employment can be a difficult obstacle when they transition from military to civilian life. A common issue that Veterans face when entering the workforce is the lack of jobs with an equitable hiring process. Generally, Veterans have higher unemployment rates and are less likely to be hired for a job after applying compared to their civilian counterparts (Frogner et. al, 2016). A report found that Veterans find difficulties transitioning between military and civilian workforce, with 50% of Veterans mentioning periods of unemployment after transitioning into the workforce (LePage, 2020). A few factors attributable to these statistics in addition to the discrimination are their inability to obtain access to resources such as resume building or support groups (Ward 2020). Resources such as these are important for increasing the likelihood of Veterans finding employment. In organizations, employers may hold stigmas that view Veterans as being less employable or allude to their physical disabilities as factors for offering employment (Stone, 22015). Many Veterans leave the military with physical injuries sustained during their service that make it difficult to secure jobs that demand physical labor. Additionally, mental health issues such as PTSD may impact their ability to adapt to or cope with the demand of some jobs in certain environments. (Stone, 22015). Many employers do not understand the physical or mental health conditions that Veterans may have, and also are concerned about their ability to accommodate the workplace to their needs (Ward, 2020).

Practicing Inclusion

Practicing inclusion is critical for any employer that wants to promote equitable opportunities for Veterans at their organization. It is important for ensuring that all employees feel valued and respected, and it enables organizations to diversify perspectives and experiences in their workforce (Hunter-Johnson & Al-Asfour, 2021). This is also important for helping Veterans gain a better understanding about organizational culture, which can be drastically different from their experiences in the military (Hunter-Johnson & Al-Asfour, 2021). Education and training programs that practice inclusion can be an effective tool to combat stereotypes about Veterans in the workplace (Stone, 2015). For example, by focusing on the value of diversity and inclusion, organizations can ensure that all employers and employees understand the importance of treating Veterans fairly (Stone, 2015). Organizations can use these programs to educate decision-makers about the unique skills and experiences that Veterans possess. In

addition to eliminating the biases and stereotypes that decision-makers hold pertaining to Veterans having the same skills or experiences, there is a need to eliminate grouping all Veterans into having the same experiences once leaving the military (Stone, 2015). A study suggested tracking Veterans' performance and publicizing their successes and contributions as a way to combat stereotypes about Veterans in the workplace (Stone, 2015). By doing this, organizations can demonstrate the value that Veterans bring to their workplace by highlighting their achievements and contributions, in addition to increasing representation of Veterans in the civilian workforce (Stone, 2015).

Capabilities, Competencies, and Skills

Professional Skills

Veterans bring a unique set of transferable and professional skills to the civilian workforce. These skills are often acquired through military training and combat experience which are both beneficial to the civilian workforce. In addition to technical skills, Veterans possess skills such as handling stress, functioning in teams, and organizational tactics that are beneficial to many industries (LePage, 2020). During their military service, it is common for Veterans to possess a high capacity for handling stressors. This is usually gained from being trained to perform in high-pressure environments and under challenging circumstances (McCaslin et. al, 2020). This skill is applicable to the civilian workforce as it can be helpful for staying calm and focused on stressful situations, making Veterans who hold this skill valuable to employers who are looking for candidates that are able to perform well under pressure.

As previously mentioned, Veterans are also known for their ability to function well in groups as a result of being trained to work collaboratively and effectively with others to achieve goals or successfully complete a mission (McCaslin et. al, 2020). This also aligns with Veterans having strong communication and leadership skills, allowing Veterans to have the capacity to take direction from others and lead groups (McCaslin et. al, 2020). Organizational skills are strong amongst Veterans and are often utilized when missions and tasks arise in the military. Leadership skills are also a valuable skill set that Veterans possess. During their service in the military, Veterans are trained to lead their team and often hold positions that require high levels of responsibility (McCaslin et. al, 2020). Such tasks require Veterans to learn how to make decisions and manage individuals. When it comes to particular fields of work, Veterans also have a unique understanding of the role of leadership in providing high quality health care. During their military service, many Veterans serve in medical corps or provide medical support in combat environments (Der-Martirosian et. al, 2019). Each of these skills are valuable to the civilian workforce, as many employers look for these abilities within their organizations.

The skills that Veterans hold also align with the Core Competencies for Public Health Professionals, which was established by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The domains for these core competencies include data analytics and assessment skills, policy development and program planning skills, communication skills, health equity skills, community partnership skills, public health sciences skills, management and finance skills, and leadership and systems thinking skills. (*Core Competencies for Public Health Professionals*, n.d.) As previously mentioned, many Veterans possess skills such as leadership, problem-solving, and effective communication which are transferable to public health job roles in these areas. When looking at the 10 essential public health services, the skill set of Veterans also aligns within these areas. The 10 public health services include: 1) assessing the health status of a community, 2) investigating, diagnosing, and addressing health problems affecting the population, 3) communicating effectively, 4) strengthening, supporting, and mobilizing communities, 5) creating and implementing policies and plans, 6) utilizing legal and regulatory actions, 7) assuring an effective system

that enables equitable access, 8) build and support a diverse and skilled public health workforce, 9) improve and innovate public health functions through evaluation and research, and 10) build and maintain a strong organizational infrastructure (CDC, 2023). Veterans are often highly trained and have experiences communicating, working with diverse teams, which can align with mobilizing communities or educating and empowering people about public health issues.

Health Careers for Military Veterans

Veterans hold a unique skill set that can also be utilized in a variety of healthcare related jobs. These skills are suitable to excel in the fields of nursing, physician assistant (PA), emergency medical technician (EMT), and other health profession roles. Their teamwork, attention to detail, and the ability to work in stressful situations make them well positioned for working in the healthcare field. Notably, some Veterans also receive healthcare training while serving in the military which makes them ideal candidates for these roles (Frogner et.al, 2016). Physician assistant (PAs) is another healthcare profession that aligns with the leadership, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills that Veterans obtain. Veterans who have teamwork skills are also qualified to work in these fields, as PAs work closely with physicians, nurses, and other healthcare professionals. While serving in the military, Veterans often work in settings that are similar to those that work in emergency medical services (EMS). Since Veterans possess skills such as adaptability to stressful and fast-paced environments, in addition to the ability to work under pressure, they are ideal for EMS positions (McCaslin et. al, 2020).

Additional jobs such as community emergency response teams (CERT), community preparedness, and the Medical Reserve Corps (MRC) all hold positions that are suitable for the skill set of Veterans. Veterans often have intensive training in areas that are relevant to disaster response work and hold experience in managing and leading groups; preparing and reacting to stressful or threatening work environments; and medical skills, in addition to training in foreign languages (McCaslin et. al, 2020). In the emergency response field, such skills are recognized and valued, which can create opportunities for Veterans to use the training they received during their service (McCaslin et. al, 2020). Veterans are often familiar with search and rescue operations, disaster medical operations, hazardous material, fire safety and more (McCaslin et. al, 2020). Although Veterans have skills that are transferable outside of the military, researchers acknowledge that more research is needed to better understand how these skills align with the current needs of civilian disaster response organizations (McCaslin et. al, 2020).

Benefits of Recruiting and Retaining Military Veterans

Researchers acknowledge that Veterans hold skills that are in high demand in the job market such as leadership, problem-solving, teamwork, productivity, and adapting to fast paced environments (Batka, 2016). An additional benefit to hiring Veterans is their strong work ethic and their commitment to achieving common goals (Hall, 2014). Veterans are often taught to hone these skills, as the military culture values dedication and discipline (Ruh et. al, 2009). Outside of the benefits to skill sets that Veterans offer, employers who hire Veterans may also be eligible for various tax credits and other incentives (LePage, 2020). These opportunities can help with offsetting the costs of training and recruiting new employees, making it more cost-effective to hire Veterans (LePage, 2020). Job retention within the workforce is an important component for maximizing the benefits of hiring Veterans. Research has shown that investing in retention strategies for Veterans is highly beneficial for employers, leading to lower turnover rates and reduced training costs (LePage, 2020). Employers who invest in hiring and retaining Veterans not only benefit from both their essential skills and experiences, but also contribute to the economic well-being of their organizations.

Addressing Health Professional Shortages

Military Veterans are a valuable asset to the public health workforce. However, given their lack of specialized civilian career knowledge on the resources necessary to navigate the job market and the resources available to them, it becomes complex for them to understand the benefits accessible to them (Snyder, 2016). In order for Veterans to understand the value in skills they hold, the role of career development professionals is critical for supporting Veterans as they navigate the job market and pursue a career outside of the military (Hunter-Johnson and Al Asfour). A key role of career development professionals is to help Veterans understand their benefits and how to access them. For example, career development professionals can provide information about the GI Bill, which provides education benefits to Veterans, in addition to other programs that can help Veterans pursue education and training in public health fields (Hall et. al, 2014).

With the growing demand for healthcare professionals, especially in underserved communities, Veterans may be well-equipped to fill these positions, in addition to those that are public health focused as many of their skills also align with public health competencies, and both fields serve similar populations. Having career development coaches within transitional programs, can also help Veterans translate their military skills and experiences to terms that focus on civilian terminology (Hall et. al, 2014).

Current Programs and Career Support for Military Veterans

Employee Resource Groups

There are processes and steps that have been implemented into the workforce to help Veterans with their transition into the civilian workforce. Employee resource groups (ERGs), also known as affinity groups, are employee-led and provide a community for employees who share common interests or experiences (Hall, 2014). Having this form of support has been suggested for helping Veterans who are dealing with the emotional and psychological impact of leaving military service, by significantly easing their transition (Ward, 2020). For Veterans, these ERGs can bring them together in the workplace, providing a sense of connection, network, and support system (Ward, 2020). In healthcare settings specifically, these tools have also been particularly effective with the increasing demands that are ongoing in this field (Olenick et. al, 2015).

ERGs are designed to provide a sense of community for Veterans and other minority groups in the workplace (Hall, 2014). Research shows that ERGs can provide a sense of belonging and support for Veterans, and provide connection to resources and programs that help them transition into the civilian workforce (Hall, 2014). In addition to reducing stress and anxiety that Veterans may experience while transitioning to the workforce, ERGs can also provide networking opportunities, peer support, and other career development opportunities. (Hall, 2014). Using ERGs have also been seen as useful for helping Veterans build relationships with other employees in their workplace and advance their careers, and reduce turnover rates particularly amongst minority and Veteran employees (Hall, 2014).

Equitable Working Environments for Veterans with Disabilities

Veterans with disabilities who are entering the civilian workforce often experience additional challenges. Researchers identify educational programs as playing a vital role in the transitioning process of Veterans with disabilities entering the civilian workforce (Ruh et. al, 2009). In such programs, it is important for there to be a combination of “engaged learning techniques, coordination of services, and the integration of technology,” that provide valuable support and align with the needs of Veterans with disabilities (Ruh et. al, 2009). Programs administered by the Department of Veteran Affairs, such as “*Coming Home to Work*” are designed to assist Veterans and provide transition services for Veterans with disabilities even during the process of recovering from their injuries (Ruh et. al, 2009). A study conducted explored the benefits and successes for postsecondary educational institutions and programs offering “comprehensive and individualized transitional services” in supporting Veterans with disabilities entering the civilian workforce (Ruh et. al, 2009). In educational programs, engaging learning techniques provides an educational experience that adapts to the training or learning gained during service and aligns that with real life benefits (Ruh et. al, 2009). This technique can also be seen as being applicable to providing on-the-job training for Veterans with disabilities transitioning to the civilian workforce (Ruh et. al, 2009). According to the Executive Vice President of Human Resources at Home Depot, companies should help Veterans transition to employment by “learning to navigate and coordinate [with] Department of Defense, Department of Labor, and Veteran Affairs resources” (Ruh et. al, 2009). In addition to these services, disability educators are also encouraged to collaborate with career offices to make similar programs available on campuses (Ruh et. al, 2009).

As many Veterans receive training in technology during their military service, they can play a vital role in advancement of technological opportunities. Veterans with disabilities who have received training with recent technology, have been able to demonstrate their capabilities of quickly grasping these concepts (Ruh et. al, 2009). Knowing this, opportunities where Veterans are able to have online accessibility, telework, and still gain professional skill development, have become increasingly important for creating equitable work environments for Veterans with disabilities (Ruh et. al, 2009). Additionally, researchers have identified that utilizing Disability Services (DS) offices is a valuable resource that can bridge the gap between the disability and career transition needs of students within these programs (Ruh, 2009).

Hiring Managers as Advocates

Research shows that educating hiring managers on Veteran characteristics can be a powerful tool in improving Veteran recruitment and retention (LePage, 2020). If hiring managers have a lack of understanding on the characteristics of Veterans, this can further perpetuate their beliefs in the stereotypes that often mislabel and devalue the capabilities of Veterans (Stone, 2015). Educating hiring managers on Veteran characteristics can also be an effective way for practicing inclusion in the workplace and work towards minimizing stereotypes or biases about Veterans’ abilities and skills (Hall et. al, 2014). Research acknowledges that organizations taking the initiative to educate hiring managers on the background of Veterans can lead to positive changes in the hiring process for Veterans (LePage, 2020). It can also be useful for helping hiring managers focus on the abilities and experiences that Veterans can bring to their organization and shift away from perceptions solely focused on their disability.

Quality Onboarding and Career Pathways

Increasing retention in workplaces is important for lowering unemployment rates and maintaining employment among Veterans. Employers are starting to recognize the importance and value of hiring

Veterans, but retention can sometimes be an obstacle. Within the first two years following service, retention rates are as low as 20% to 35% amongst Veterans (LePage, 2020). These rates are significantly lower than the general retention rates of non-Veteran employees which is approximately 77% (LePage, 2020). This difference in retention rates is often due to a lack of peer and social support, in addition to leadership support (Hall, 2014). To combat these obstacles, a study identified two recommendations, which included: using the social identity theory as a theoretical lens to help reduce Veteran turnover rates. This can also aid in saving employers money and improving the transition process for Veterans (LePage, 2020). The recommendations found in this study include: 1) having culturally competent hiring, and 2) including supportive practices that includes social/peer support, and supportive leadership (LePage, 2020). Examples of what the first recommendation would look like in the workplace include: job and skills matching; Veteran-centric onboarding; clear career progression; an established performance management plan; and ensuring an understanding of Veterans' health issues in addition to understanding how the disability laws protect Veterans (LePage, 2020). Examples of what the second recommendation would look like in the workplace include implementing programs that promote social support, in addition to support from leadership that promotes positive and healthy work-life balance (LePage, 2020). If organizations begin to implement such recommendations, these can improve the work experiences for Veterans entering the civilian workplace and the overall culture of an organization.

Self-Efficacy and a Supportive Working Environment

In the public health field, using theoretical frameworks are important for improving the health and well-being of individuals and populations. This closely aligns with the vision of Trailhead Institute which states that “Everyone has the opportunity to be healthy and live in a healthy environment” (Trailhead Institute, 2023). In research, theories have also been used to guide the development of programs or initiatives that aim to make the transition process of Veterans entering the workforce easier. Schlossberg's transition theory states that “transition involves an event that results in altered routines, relationships, roles or assumptions” (Ward, 2020). This theory suggests four factors – *situation, support, self and strategies* – play a role in one's ability to cope with challenges during the transition process (Ward, 2020). *Situation* refers to how individuals evaluate transition in addition to having a sense of control over occurrences. Researchers suggest that this component of the theory can also be applied to the difficulties Veterans encounter when they are transitioning from the military to the civilian workforce (Ward, 2020). *Support* refers to how positive feedback, caring, and affirmation have the potential to facilitate an easier transition for Veterans. Support can come from different aspects of a Veteran's life, but this theory ultimately looks at how different types of support are more likely to assist a Veteran with having a smoother transition process into the civilian workforce (Ward, 2020). In Schlossberg's theory, *self-related* factors look at how personal attributes and internal resources assist Veterans with coping during their transition process (Ward, 2020). In this theory, self-related factors have two components which include psychological resources (e.g. personality attributes) and individual characteristics (e.g. age, gender, socio-economic status, etc.) (Ward, 2020). This study explains how the self-related factors of this theory are essential and present a possible solution concerning how Veterans make use of psychological resources to cope with their transition into the workforce (Ward, 2020). The last component of this theory is *strategies*, which focuses on individual capabilities to manage the transition process in one's own control. There are three categories to this component, which include: “situation modification, stress management after the transition, and control of the problem's meaning” (Ward, 2020). This part of the theory is applicable to the various strategies that Veterans can adopt as they navigate through the difficulties of entering the civilian workforce (Ward, 2020). Overall, Schlossberg's transition theory exemplifies the different avenues that can be used to help Veterans cope in their workplaces once they transition.

The theory of workforce adjustment describes the relationship between individuals and their work environment and acknowledges that individuals and work environments are considered complementary to each other. Researchers describe this as important for understanding the challenges that Veterans face as they adjust to the workforce (Hunter-Johnson & Al-Asfour, 2021). In this study, it is recommended for researchers, scholars, and other practitioners to understand the differences in career development theories and how to apply them, as we live in a society where there are frequently changing work environments (Hunter-Johnson & Al-Asfour, 2021). While the skill sets that Veterans bring to the military may differ, researchers do suggest using this theory of workforce adjustment to gain a better understanding of the challenges and support systems that Veterans experience as this theory (Hunter-Johnson & Al-Asfour, 2021).

The social identity theory addresses how social identities can affect people's attitudes, behaviors, and feelings of belonging within groups (LePage, 2020). A study utilized this framework to better understand the challenges faced by transitioning Veterans into the workforce. Researchers found that using this theory created a new approach for advancing current practices that focus on Veteran's transition and found that it can help organizations with achieving military cultural competency, which is considered, "the understanding of the uniqueness of Veterans' perceptions, attitudes, and workplace behaviors, including how they differ from civilian employees" (LePage, 2020). Having military cultural competency within an organization can help employers better understand the unique skills, needs and culture of Veterans, which can better equip organizations with the knowledge they need to develop supportive programs that are effective for Veterans who transition into the workforce (LePage, 2020).

Program Examples – Related Credentialing and Transition Assistance

While there is still a need for more research and programs implemented that assist Veterans with their transition to the civilian workforce, there are existing programs that do aim to do this. Within the healthcare field, programs such as the MEDEX Northwest Physician Assistant (PA) Program provides educational programs that allows Veterans to apply their advanced skill set to the healthcare system (Brock et. al, 2011). For Veterans who may want to enter the medical field, this program provides Veterans with access to the training opportunities that are critical for the PA field (Brock et. al, 2011). A study was conducted to gain a better understanding of how the MEDEX Northwest PA program can gain a better understanding on ways in which this program can serve in providing a consistent pipeline for qualified applicants to PA, by ensuring that Veterans with healthcare training are able to apply their military medical training in the civilian PA workforce (Brock et. al, 2011). Through this study, this program was able to explore: 1) the impact of military service on training one's motivation to apply to their PA program, 2) the perceived opportunities for or barriers to civilian health care training for Veterans, and 3) the perceived impact that bachelor degree prerequisites have on their willingness to apply to apply to PA training or the profession in general (Brock et. al, 2011). While there is an increasing need for people entering the civilian healthcare workforce, the restrictive prerequisite or certification processes can often be both daunting and a challenge for Veterans who want to enter this field (Brock et. al, 2013). Programs such as these can alleviate barriers that may prevent Veterans from accessing training programs that equip them with the necessary skills to become a PA.

Team Rubicon is another program that exists to assist Veterans with transitioning to the civilian workforce. This disaster response volunteer organization has a large representation of Veterans, therefore they know how to effectively engage Veterans (Der-Martirosian et. al, 2019). Some researchers argue that volunteering provides Veterans with a sense of satisfaction and camaraderie, by giving them the opportunity to serve others after serving in the military (DerMartirosian, 2019). By allowing Veterans to

apply their skills gained during service in the context of disasters, Veterans can find a new sense of purpose and foster connections to their respective communities while volunteering (Der-Martirosian, 2019). Involving Veterans in community preparedness and response has been proven to increase resilience during disasters, by allowing Veterans to tap into their skills and knowledge gained from life experiences (Der-Martirosian, 2019). While working in community preparedness environments has been seen as beneficial for Veterans, researchers acknowledge that there is a need for further research that identifies opportunities to engage Veterans in these workplaces (Der-Martirosian, 2019).

The Transition Assistance Program (TAP) was created to help Veterans who are leaving military service transition into civilian life (Batka & Hall, 2016). This program was established through the partnership between the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Department of Labor (Hall et. al, 2014). It was designed to assist military members in obtaining a civilian career or transition into the civilian workforce. This government assistance program offers transitional assistance to improve the employment outcomes of service members once they depart from active duty (Batka & Hall, 2016). It incorporates an outcome-based curriculum called Transition GPS (Goals, Plans, Success) to provide training that builds skills that ensures that military members are career ready when leaving active duty (Batka & Hall, 2016). The program was redesigned in 2013 to reflect a focus on building skills for Veterans that support their long-term outcomes (Batka & Hall, 2016). TAP also provides Veterans with resources on “building resilience, financial planning, translating their training, education, experience, and skills into civilian career goals and jobs (Batka & Hall, 2016). While these programs are designed to help the transition process for Veterans, researchers do acknowledge that limitations do exist within this program, as Veterans have complained about these institutions not providing adequate information (Ward, 2020).

Engaging Veterans in the Public Health Workforce

There is ample opportunity for organizations and employers to create a more streamlined hiring process and meet the needs of Veterans as they transition into the civilian workforce. For example, there is a general lack of accessibility to job opportunities for Veterans and with the collaboration of employers and policy makers, programs can be developed that specifically target the employment needs of Veterans. There is a need for innovation to provide Veterans with the necessary resources and support they need to help them navigate the complexities of the workforce in the areas identified in this literature review. This can include providing them with informational sessions, workshops, mentorship programs, or other resources that can help Veterans understand their benefits and the opportunities available to them. ERGs and mentoring programs in the workplace have also been identified as another valuable tool in supporting Veterans transition into the civilian workforce. Mentoring groups can provide Veterans with the opportunity to gain a mentor that can provide guidance and support in navigating a new work environment and identify various resources or supports available to Veterans. Mentoring programs can potentially aid in reducing stress and provide a sense of hope and motivation for Veterans. For Veterans, this would typically involve Veterans connecting with experienced Veterans within their work field, which can aid in Veterans building relationships and fostering a sense of community within the workplace. Additionally, creating a work environment that is supportive and welcoming to Veterans is essential for practicing inclusivity in the transitioning process for Veterans and even once they have settled into a job. These strategies can also aid in maintaining Veteran retention rates, if employers begin to focus on implementing retention strategies that specifically target Veteran employees. Employers can also consider partnering with Veteran service organizations (VSOs) to provide additional resources that can better support Veteran employees.

Organizations practicing inclusion are also important for making Veterans feel comfortable and valued in their workplaces. Examples of this include hosting seminars or workshops that focus on the different

contributions that Veterans can bring to the workforce, and how their diverse experiences and skills are beneficial to a public health organization.

It is evident that organizations need to be more intentional in ensuring that Veterans are included as valuable contributors to the public health workforce. Additionally, Veterans with disabilities need to be prioritized and accommodated more in the civilian workforce; and organizations need to ensure that employers are taking the necessary steps to promote diverse work environments. An example of this is to make sure that job postings are open to all qualified candidates regardless of their disability, race, and/or ethnicity (adherence to laws around protected classes).

Inclusivity in the workplace may involve implementing regular practices that equip employers and other staff members with training that address implicit biases, specifically towards Veterans or their health conditions. For example, providing training and educational sessions to managers or supervisors in mental health issues that Veterans may have experienced during their service. This can help employers better understand the issues that Veterans may be experiencing post-service and provide them with the support and resources that they need.

Affinity groups can also be created to encourage open discussion about mental health issues, which can be helpful for making Veterans feel more comfortable talking about the issues that they are dealing with and even feel motivated to seek professional help. Organizations can also provide mental health services and resources as a way to make it readily available to Veterans in their workplaces. These practices can help the overall inclusivity of an organization and help employers and other staff members unlearn any perceived beliefs they may have towards Veterans.

The experiences that Veterans have with working in health-related fields such as medicine, emergency preparedness, data analytics, or nursing, can be translated into the public health careers, as Veterans may have had a good understanding of the health needs of the military population and how to address them. Engaging Veterans in the public health workforce is essential for ensuring that Veterans are able to take advantage of the skills and experiences they have gained while serving in the military, and ensures that Veterans have an active role in improving public health outcomes for the Veteran community at large. Improving access to education and training, streamlining licensing requirements, and providing Veterans with the necessary resources and support can help with alleviating the barriers that Veterans face when entering the civilian workforce (Snyder et. al, 2016). Engaging Veterans in the public health workforce is beneficial as Veterans are able to translate and repurpose the skills and experiences that they gained during their military service and apply them to public health practice.

Moving Forward

Creating equitable programs that help Veterans transition into the civilian workforce is critical for ensuring that Veterans have access to resources, opportunities, and support that allow them to effectively transition into the civilian workforce. The challenges that Veterans face while transitioning into the work life is unique to each individual, and without the proper support this can create further difficulties for Veterans. Programs should practice inclusion, by creating work environments that are accommodating to the needs of Veterans who have mental or physical health disabilities, including supportive ERGS or access to EAPs (employee assistance program that includes counseling). Employers should recognize and value Veterans because they hold a diverse array of skills that align with a myriad of job duties, especially within public health.

Ensuring that future transitional programs equip employers with the proper training that allows them to better understand the characteristics and experiences of Veterans, can be helpful for allowing them to unlearn stereotypes that are often inaccurate and limit the opportunities that Veterans can bring to the workforce. Creating public health programs that encompass these factors are important for the overall health and well-being of Veterans and help create a smoother transitioning process for them. In addition to benefiting Veterans, creating transitional programs can also be financially beneficial to employers and their organizations.

More than 20 statewide Colorado Public Health Workforce Collaborative members together identified four focus areas in *RESTORE: The Colorado Blueprint for Innovative Public Health Workforce Development*. The Blueprint guides the development of unique and innovative workforce development action plans across the Colorado public health community. The focus areas are offered as evidence-informed strategies to develop, advance, modernize, and transform the public health workforce.

Currently, the Collaborative aims to build and sustain a skilled and diverse public health workforce that reflects the communities they serve and prepares an inclusive public health ecosystem to produce positive and equitable outcomes. We have a chance to build a stronger workforce that is innovative and responsive to our communities. The future of public health starts now, and we need a skilled and competent workforce to propel us forward.

Engaging military Veterans in the public health workforce supports statewide equitable recruitment and retention priorities, with opportunities to develop meaningful career pathways as Veterans continue forward in public health. While each individual is unique, Veterans hold skills such as problem solving, critical thinking and team building, which are valuable assets in public health. In relation to deBeaumont Foundation strategic skills (2022), Veterans can likely support data-based decision making, resource management, and strategic thinking. While further longitudinal study is needed, Veterans can likely thrive in public health preparedness, environmental health, communicable disease intervention, clinical public health roles, and others. By recognizing these skills and creating programs that give Veterans the opportunity to apply them to public health positions, public health programs can be a tool that bridges the gap for allowing Veterans to transition into this field. This also contributes to addressing public health workforce attrition, and, with proper planning, can also increase access to health professionals in shortage areas. With collaboration, the public health community has the capacity to intentionally create workforce development programs that center and support military Veterans.

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