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Strategies to Engage Military Veterans in the Public Health Workforce: An Executive Summary

Produced by Trailhead Institute in partnership with Amaka Consulting and Evaluation Services, LLC, Black Ladies in Public Health, and Informing Veterans and Dependents.

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A vertical close-up photograph of the American flag, showing the blue field with white stars and the red and white stripes. The flag is slightly out of focus, with a soft, warm light background.

Strategies to Engage Military Veterans in the Public Health Workforce

Introduction

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, Trailhead's efforts engage partners across multiple sectors and interdisciplinary areas that influence public and environmental health.

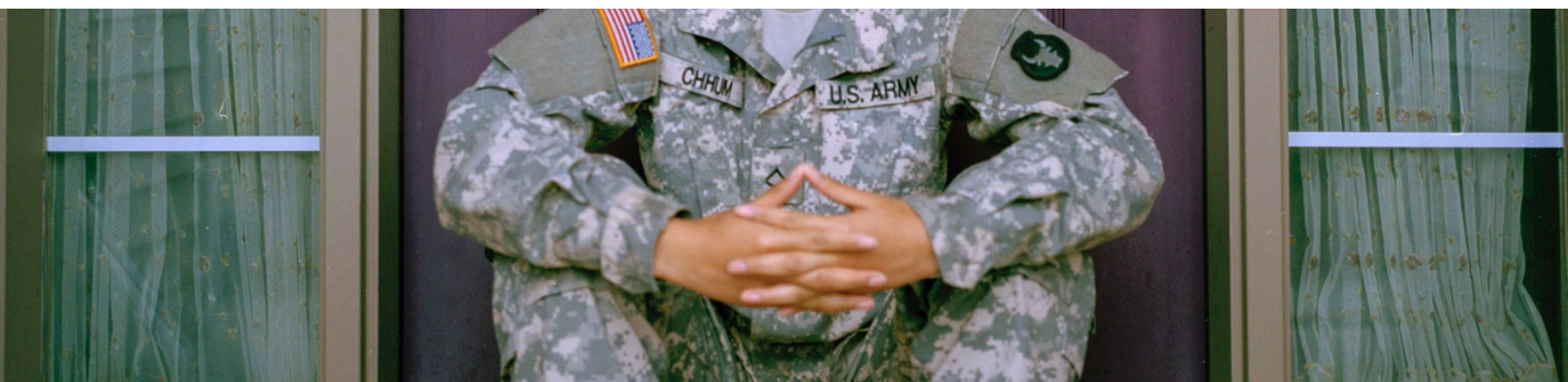
Facilitated by Trailhead, more than 20 statewide members from the Colorado Public Health Workforce Collaborative together identified four focus areas in [*RESTORE: The Colorado Blueprint for Innovative Public Health Workforce Development*](#). The Blueprint guides the development of unique and innovative action plans across Colorado. The focus areas are offered as evidence-informed strategies to develop, advance, modernize, and transform the public health workforce. Emerging from the Blueprint priorities concerning equitable recruitment was the opportunity to explore strategies to engage military Veterans in the public health workforce. Trailhead sought partnership with [Amaka Consulting and Evaluation Services, LLC \(ACES\)](#), [Black Ladies in Public Health \(BLIPH\)](#), and Informing Veterans and Dependents (IVAD) to increase capacity to implement this community-based engagement initiative throughout Colorado.

Executive Summary

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 thrive within the civilian workforce at large, and within the public and environmental health sectors, specifically.

Military Veterans (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 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.

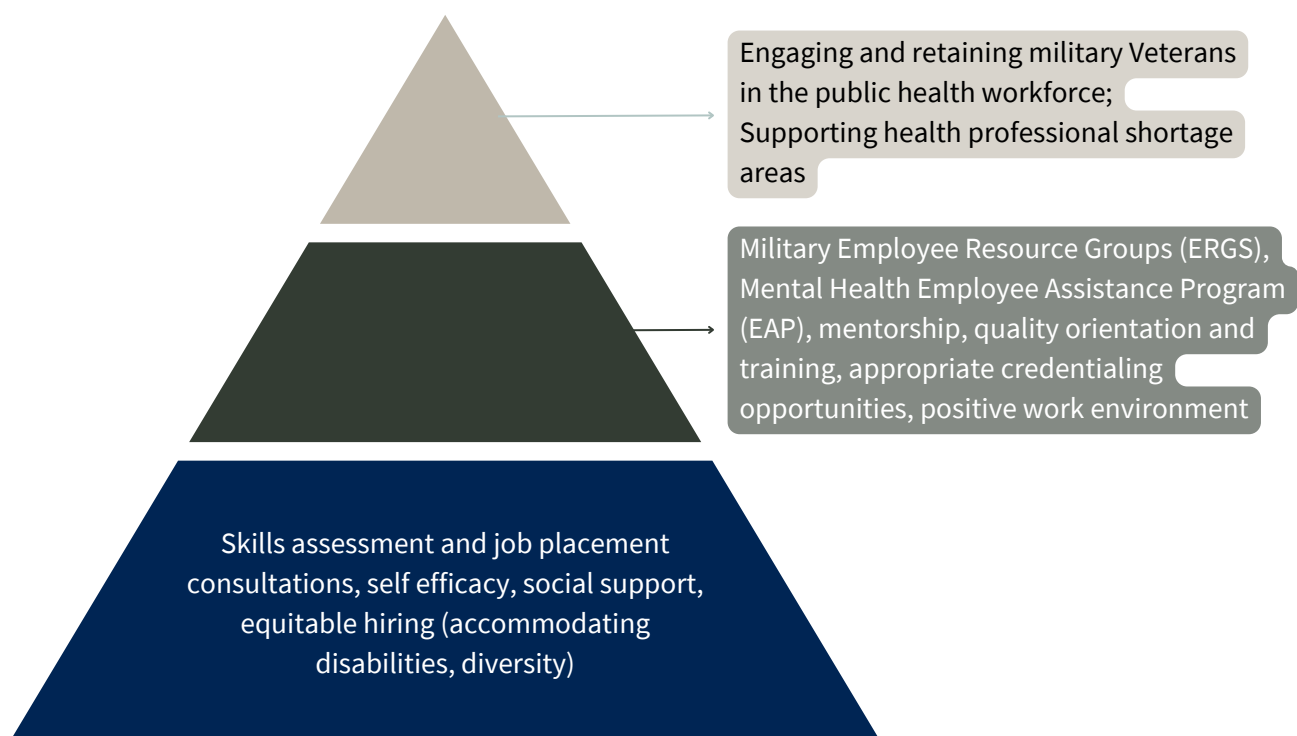
Understanding the lived experiences of Veterans and how that plays a role in their current overall health is important for creating a work life that is compatible to them. By ensuring Veterans have access to resources, support, and opportunities that align with their needs, the opportunity for a smoother transition into starting their work life 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 ensure Veterans have access to resources, opportunities, and support is critical for helping Veterans 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.

Engaging military veterans in the public health workforce supports statewide equitable recruitment and retention priorities identified in the Blueprint, with opportunities to develop meaningful career pathways for Veterans as they continue forward in public health. 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. 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 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.

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

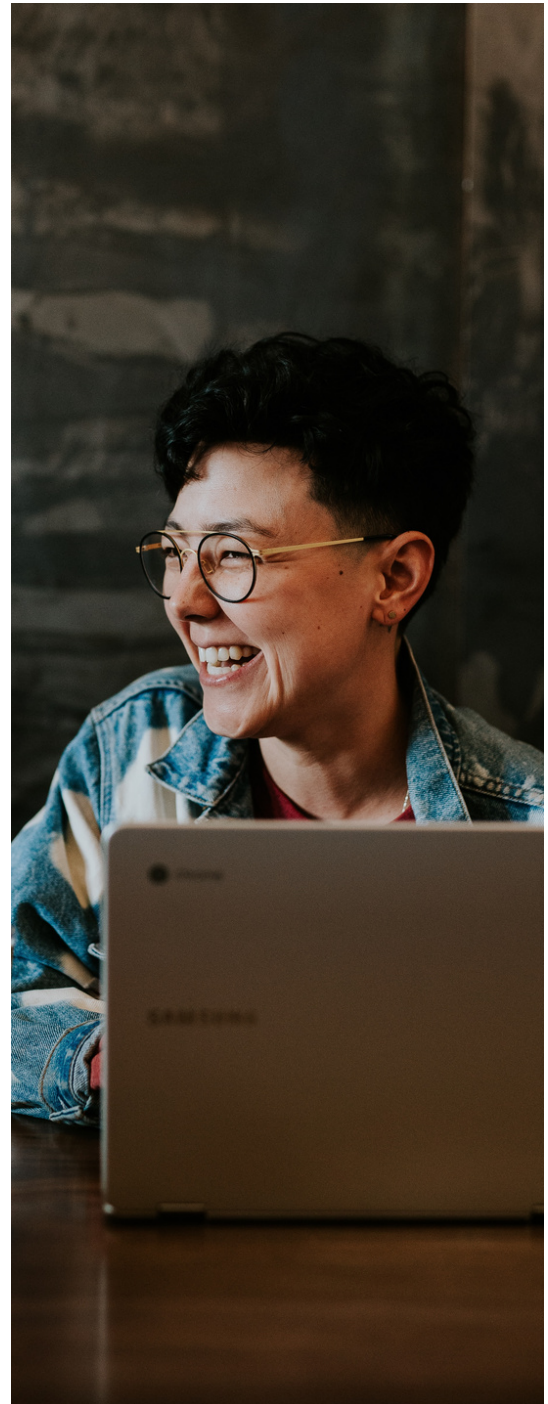


Colorado Environmental Scan Executive Summary

Experts in the public health and environmental health fields are joining forces to explore how we can better support and serve Colorado's Veterans and improve health outcomes for all, taking Colorado to new heights. This Colorado environmental scan addresses the following core questions:

- ▶ How can military Veterans meaningfully engage in the public health and environmental health workforce?
- ▶ How can the experience be supportive of Veteran interests and needs?

To support our understanding of how Veterans can meaningfully engage in the public health and environmental health workforce in Colorado, we were intentional about identifying programs, policies, and partners supporting the intersections of Veteran engagement, public health, environmental health, and workforce development. Contextualizing this phenomenon involved pursuing diverse ways of knowing. Mixed-methods approaches were used to collect data and get input from stakeholders. These methods included evidence-based literature from local, state, and federal agencies about Veteran considerations, a review of the current public health and environmental health workforce landscape in Colorado, a review of policies that affect the current state of Veteran support in the state, and focus groups and in-depth interviews with key stakeholders to get a more complete and nuanced picture of Veterans experiences.





Key Findings

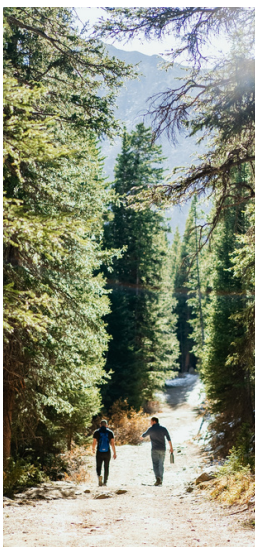
- Colorado is strongly suited for Veteran prioritization in public health and environmental health workforce.
- Veterans rely on other Veterans as sources of credible information and resources.
- Public Health efforts are often supported by Veterans through volunteerism and social affiliations outside of direct employment.
- Veterans in public health and environmental health do not see prioritization in the field.
- Incentives for recruitment and retention differ for Veterans.
- Discrimination and stigma may be exacerbated for Veterans, particularly in the workplace where it often goes unaddressed.
- Veteran concerns and motivations for belonging and economic stability mirror that of their non-Veteran population (within and outside of Colorado Veteran community).
- Innovation addressing workforce barriers must reach all Veteran communities.
- Public health and environmental harms, both "real or perceived", are barriers to recruitment of military Veterans into the workforce.

Veterans have unique opportunities to show up in the fields of public health and environmental health. They represent diverse identities, communities, and experiences that shape both individual and collective memories and the meaning of our national circumstances. The rhetoric at the intersections of public health, environmental health, workforce development, and Veteran communities often position Veterans as the recipients of service. This context rivals the reality of the Veterans' lived experiences of honor in service to the nation! The prevailing discourse surrounding active duty military includes a community of protectors with capabilities to lead, secure, and defend a nation, whereas Veterans narratives center on characteristics of identity, isolation, injury, inferiority, incompetence, invisibility, intolerance, and irrelevance. The challenge and benefits of meaningful engagement of Veterans in the field should begin with coordinated stakeholder support and a collective understanding of how and why such shifts in relations are expressed and upheld.

Current overarching disadvantages inherent to public and Veteran workforce training initiatives for the public health and environmental health sectors include a lack of understanding of the field, a lack of understanding of military and Veteran culture, underfunding, fragmentation, and overextension.

A Veteran-led and Veteran-centered community response to maximizing equitable recruitment, retention, and overall workforce and health outcomes should be developed through a collaboration and iterative process. Lastly, investment in actionable evaluation of processes and outcomes must support these strategies.

Our team of military Veterans and public health professionals is intentional about anchoring our efforts on values that emphasize shared purpose, trust, and impact. As such, we've developed the following priorities to guide our process throughout this collaboration:



- Center military Veterans, placing value in humanity, not labor.
- Honor military Veterans' knowledge and diverse ways of knowing.
- Acknowledge military Veterans as both contributors and beneficiaries of environmental and Public Health workforce capacity.
- Amplify the diversity of Colorado's military Veterans (including, but not limited to, Veterans representing all military components (with exception of Space Force), military rank, disability, as well as diversity of gender, sexual orientation, race, and career).
- Recognize the complexity of military Veteran relationships with institutions of public health and environmental health (histories of harm vs. potential for health, safety, and security).
- Utilize anti-stigma, anti-discrimination approaches as we carry out the environmental scan.

The country's awareness and understanding of public health and environmental health are rapidly expanding given accelerated access to issues spanning local to global significance. Complex concerns such as COVID-19, gun violence, and global warming continue to highlight the importance of investing in a strong public health infrastructure as well as the need to address the causes of long-standing health inequities. The environmental scan is an incredible opportunity to study Colorado's current public health workforce infrastructure with the aim of providing leverage point recommendations and long-range improvements for engaging military Veterans in the state's public health system.

The public health workforce serves as the first line of health promotion and disease prevention for the public. The specialties and health focus areas are expansive and welcoming to an array of backgrounds and experiences. Veterans who have benefited from training and development during their military service possess a wide variety of skills and experiences, as well as the motivation for public service. As such, there is great potential for leveraging a highly skilled and experienced Veteran workforce from a variety of disciplines and fields due to the diverse and dynamic missions of the U.S. military.

Veterans have served and sacrificed parts of their young adult years to serve the country. When they complete their service, it is often more challenging than anticipated for Veterans to re-enter civilian life and find employment. Public health organizations can significantly benefit from the enhanced recruitment and promotion of employment opportunities for Veterans within the sector.

This inquiry resulted in the establishment of a repository of assets for facilitating Veteran health and employment pathways within public health and environmental health sectors. Numerous resources offer comprehensive assistance to employers and Veterans.

However, many of the infrastructure advances intended to benefit all individuals, preferably those with the greatest need, will inadvertently and disproportionately benefit those with access to online resources, knowledge of complex search tools, and other health and social benefits. While not an exhaustive list, the resource repository includes roughly 350 supports for Veteran engagement with the civilian workforce in Colorado's public health and environmental health sectors.

Veteran Engagement Resource Repository

- Workforce - American Jobs Center (~50)
- Public / Environmental Health Academic Programs (~95)
- Health and social services (~50)
- Professional Development (~60)
- Resources for Colorado Vets (~55)
- Online databases of resources (~20)
- Policy Information (~20)



While an important tool for recruitment, retention, and advancement, workforce training is overstretched. Existing programs now fund a wider range of services for a broader set of participants than they used to. This means that, while all workforce funding is lower, the decline in spending on under and unemployed Veterans, especially for direct employment or training, has been even more severe.

Workforce training is also fragmented in several ways. State expenditures on employment and training are scattered among many agencies with different agendas. The support available to Veterans who need assistance is often lodged in agencies and programs that range from federal to local management and are disconnected from one another. Veterans participating in one program may not have access to the resources of another program, no matter how closely related the training is or how closely located the facilities are. Securing funds to support these initiatives is also made more difficult because of the reduction in resources and the wider distribution of the various funding mechanisms.

The delivery of workforce services is also fragmented geographically. Agencies might provide different services to a range of populations within specific locations. Moreover, the capacity of these agencies to provide information and services about available jobs and training opportunities across state and organizational boundaries remains unclear. Differences between federal and state agencies, especially over control of funds, can also limit the ability of separate entities to fashion coherent workforce strategies.

Furthermore, research indicates that even when Veterans are successful in securing employment, they are more likely to experience discrimination, negative stereotypes, stigma, identity distress, and a lack of adjustment. As part of their transition to civilian life, many Veterans struggle to integrate into the workplace for these and other reasons, which can sometimes result in their inability to maintain employment. The current employment and unemployment rates for Veterans are indicative of these issues, but the findings are not entirely solution-oriented. Organizations must identify opportunities to eliminate all forms of prejudice and stigma. Veterans should be included in all analyses of special populations for internal workplace culture assessments. These tactics, in addition to those established by Veteran personnel, should be employed to determine the retention factors of importance for Veterans.

While conducting focus groups to better understand the experiences of Veterans in Colorado, select themes emerged from our discussions related to identity, connectedness, and belonging. These include:

"Identity"

When considering career transitions, the Veterans acknowledged the importance of skills, values, and qualities that may be supportive of adequately reviewing applicant experiences vs. reliance on occupation names or specific degree preferences. Veterans consistently describe their military experiences as part of a collective identity.

"Invisible"

When probed to consider Veterans as colleagues, all support stakeholders assumed there were peers working in the field who were also Veterans, but admitted to the lack of necessary information to confirm the Veteran status of colleagues. Veterans' status was known solely based on the Veterans' public or personal disclosure.

"Intersectional Identity"

The appeal of the study was most realized through individuals who occupied multiple identities relevant to our understanding of the landscape. Three of the Veteran participants and one community stakeholder were employed to support Veteran-specific workforce or academic entities.

"Inferior"

There were five female and nine male participants affiliated with the military; all of the women Veterans cited differences in experiences for Veterans based on gender; none of the males made such distinctions.

"Isolated"

Veterans often detailed the many stressors that converged as a result of COVID-19, shifting plans to thrive after military service to accounts of Veterans fighting to survive.



Future Opportunities

The following represent actionable opportunities to effectively engage military Veterans in the public health workforce based on the Colorado environmental scan and national literature scan themes:

Promising Practices

- Assure quality onboarding, mentorship, and training of military Veterans in the public health workforce to support public health career pathways.
- Offer mental health support as an employer benefit through employee assistance programs (EAPs) and military Veteran employer resource groups (ERGs).
- Increase awareness of equitable hiring practices to engage military Veterans in public health, including prohibiting discriminatory interview processes that may reflect explicit or implicit bias against Veterans.
- Increase access to job opportunities and define new public health roles that align with community health needs, medically underserved areas, and health professional shortage areas.
- Design equitable incentives for recruitment and retention to support engagement of military Veterans in the public health workforce.

Career Pathways

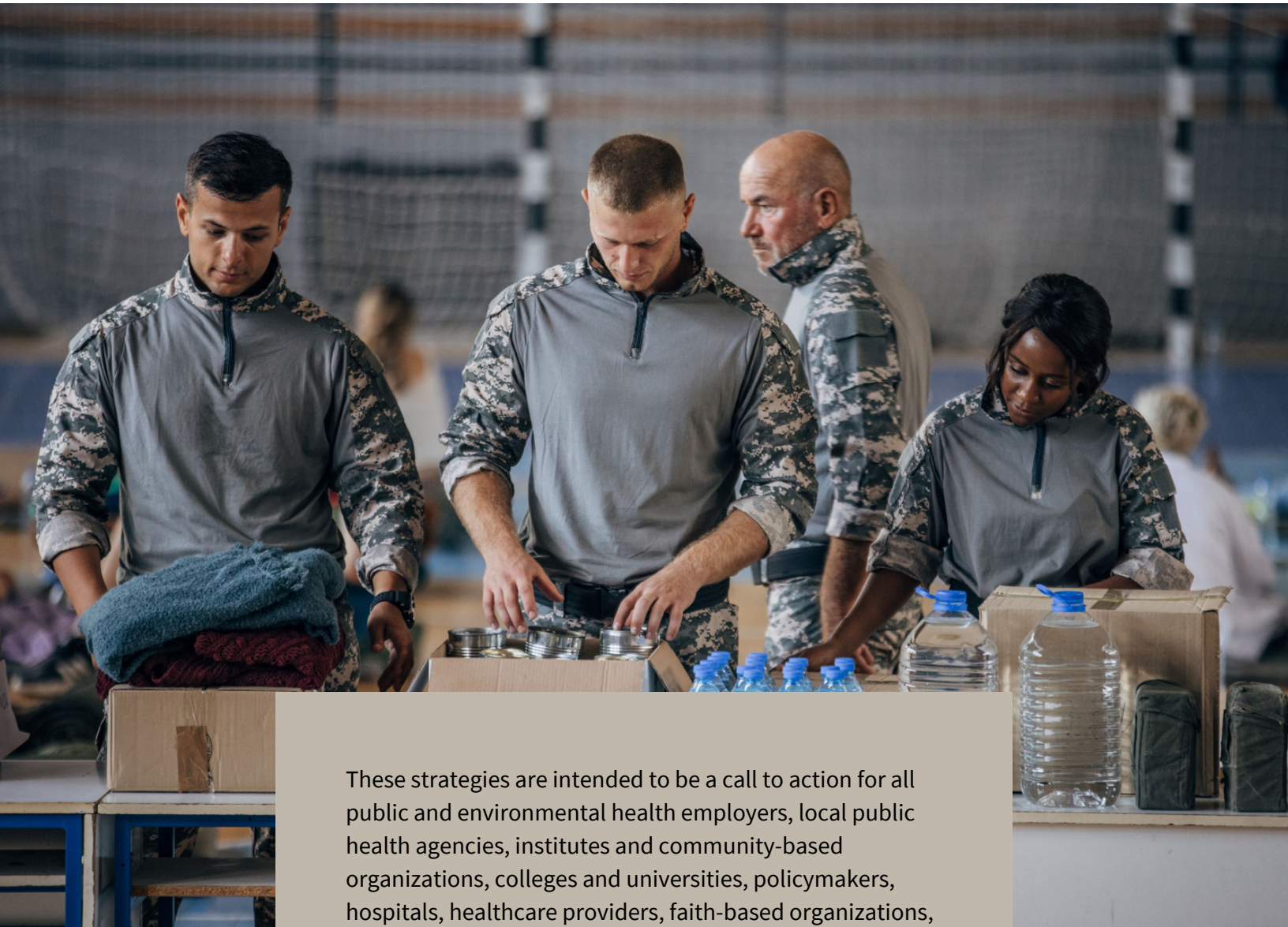
- Define public health certifications that may increase competitiveness of military Veteran job competitiveness and offer opportunities for career pathways in public health.
- Define Veteran skills and capabilities that align with core public health capabilities and services, and leverage existing resources that align the transferability of these skills.

Further Exploration


- Seek resources and partnership to increase access to healthcare and education as social determinants of health that impact the military Veteran experience and public health employment
- Seek resources and partnership to increase access to job technologies to address the lack of access to computers, other employment resources.
- Identify supportive systems and organizations to address for the lack of resources necessary to navigate the job market.
- Determine if there are any discrepancies between posted pay and actual pay, and determine hesitation of Veterans surrounding hiring experiences where incidents and issues may go unreported due to fears of compromising their application status.
- Explore how workforce development centers, transition centers, and public health human resources (HR) teams can better collaborate on designing and promoting opportunities.

Collaboration

- Engage a workgroup around defining core public health capabilities most relevant to military Veterans and qualities of job description to make it easier to translate skills and experiences.
- Lead public health convenings and communications that inspire innovation around addressing workforce barriers for Colorado's military Veterans.



These strategies are intended to be a call to action for all public and environmental health employers, local public health agencies, institutes and community-based organizations, colleges and universities, policymakers, hospitals, healthcare providers, faith-based organizations, schools, civic leaders, and members of the larger public health community. Colorado is strongly suited to engage and include military Veterans in the public health and environmental health workforce.



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