

# Psychosocial benefits of employment and education for veterans with behavioral health concerns

Presentation to the advisory committee of the Virginia  
Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental  
Services by Dr. Alexa Smith-Osborne

5/18/2015

# Veteran Employment and Education National Data

- \* Employment – IAVA Survey
  - 53% of the respondents are employed
    - \* 45% are employed full time
  - 10% are unemployed
    - \* 62% of the unemployed have been unemployed for 27 weeks or more
  - 77% of the respondents have experienced a period of unemployment for a year or more
  - 39% were unemployed for three months or less
  
- \* Employment - BLS Data (July 2014)
  - National unemployment rate of 6.2% (more than 27 weeks)
  - Post 9/11 Veterans rate is 9.2% (males 8.8%, females 10.7%)
  - 18 – 24 year old Vets rate is 32.1% (males 37.3%, females 17.4%)
  
- \* Education
  - 62% of the respondents have used the Post-9/11 GI Bill (IAVA Survey)
  - 48% according to the *Washington Post*/Kaiser Survey
  - Approximately 51,000 service members have been wounded during OIF, Operation New Dawn (OND), and OEF, which indicates that a substantial portion of today's veterans may be enrolling in higher education with minor to severe service-related disabilities (SVA Million Records Project)
  - Nevertheless, most student veterans attending public universities do complete their bachelor's degree (71.7%) and complete it within 6 years (SVA Million Records Project)

# Virginia Data

- \* Out of an estimated 781,388 veterans in Virginia, approximately 5532 were served by DBHDS community services boards during July 1, 2013-June 31, 2014 (state data)
- \* Most of those (4,296) were engaged in mental health and substance abuse treatment, rather than emergency, ancillary, or developmental services.
- \* As of 2013, 86.16% of Virginia's veterans were employed full-time: a higher rate than the national average of 80.17%
- \* The VEC has local offices on 2 military posts/bases

# Military to Civilian Transition Options

- **Employment**

- **Self-Employment:**

- Self-employment—entrepreneurship is underutilized by state vocational rehabilitation departments (Yu & Smith-Osborne, 2009) and state employment commissions

- **DoD SkillBridge:**

- [www.dodskillbridge.com](http://www.dodskillbridge.com)

- **Education**

# The Research Shows the Benefits of Supported Employment and Education to the Transition

- Incentive therapies
- Sheltered workshops
- Compensated Work Therapy (CWT)
- Randomized clinical trials for PTSD and work restoration
- “I believed then, as I think now, that work can cure almost anything.” – Ernest Hemingway

# Benefits of Employment/Education

- Restores mastery and coping with demands
- Increases socialization and averts withdrawal
- Provides meaning in life lost or doubted in reaction to trauma
- Can have cognitive remediation effects for injured veterans
- Can aid in re-aculturating to civilian life and community

# Potential Problems with Unsuccessful Transitions

- Failure to reintegrate
- Unemployment
- Impact on families
- Increased psychological symptoms
- Cognitive deterioration
- Psychological impact on physical symptoms
- Increased levels of long-term disability
- Suicide

# RAND Corporation: Why is Veteran Unemployment So High?

- **Not** because of poor health – severe injuries are uncommon and compensation is available
  - **Not** because of who is selected into the military – employment gap decreases as veterans age
  - **Not** because of employment discrimination
  - **Not** because of skills mismatch
  - **But** because veterans are switching careers in a soft economy with more time needed for education and retraining for the switch to a non-military career and for the job search
- 
- Loughran, D.S. (2014). *Why is veteran unemployment so high?* The RAND Corporation.

# Challenges to Retooling for the Career Switch

- Combat-related PTSD affects up to 20 percent of service members in the global war on terror and is often persistent in their return to civilian life.
- Veterans' educational benefits are the largest federal program for student financial aid in America, and are important incentives to join the U.S. military service under the All Voluntary Force (AVF)
- As of 2009, more than 270,000 who served in Iraq and Afghanistan wars had enrolled in colleges. At UT Arlington, veteran enrollment reached 1,128 in spring 2011, more than double the number two years before.
- For the service members and veterans with neuropsychiatric symptoms or disorders, however, this compensatory mechanism may be difficult to utilize fully in the absence of special support and protective mechanisms. Thus, supported education interventions are being tested to address the needs of these college-bound service members (Smith-Osborne, 2012)

# Supported Education Can Give Access to Cognitive Assessment and Remediation Services

- Functional neuroimaging is being used for advanced assessment to support PTSD and TBI tx within the context of resilience-based supported education intervention programs, as well as to inform and monitor educational accommodations and certain lifestyle/behavior changes which support cognitive function
- Cognitive remediation using computerized exercises and manualized protocols for treating social pragmatics are also available to veterans via supported education programs
- These services are often not available through other delivery systems except to the most severe polytrauma injuries

# How Psychosocial Rehabilitation Helps

- Supported education and employment modalities share a focus on advancing the client's goals for a meaningful, productive “new normal” life trajectory
- Engagement in education/employment activities is viewed as therapeutic in itself
- Other treatment modalities (e.g., prolonged exposure or cognitive processing therapy and psychotropic medication) and goals are addressed in the context of that engagement, not solely in terms of the diagnosis

# Vocational Rehabilitation

- Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) offers vocational rehabilitation through Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) as well as the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) of VA medical centers and clinics.
- Primary website for information about VA resources is [www.va.gov](http://www.va.gov)
- Virginia DVS and DARS have a Memorandum of Understanding to work together to mutually enhance services to wounded warriors.

# Diagnostic Justification for Vocational Rehabilitation

- Competitive and other forms of employment are now included in classification of mental disorders
- Criterion F for PTSD
- Criterion B for Schizophrenia
- Traumatic Brain Injury - See Malec (2005)
- Treatment for mental disorders must include vocational rehabilitation

# Education and Employment for Veterans

- Behavioral health providers who are not career counselors can help:
  - Diagnose symptoms and problems
  - Suggest interventions
  - Recommend books and materials
  - Conduct follow up
  - Interact with family to provide additional encouragement

# Employment Challenges

- 69% said that greatest challenge in transitioning to civilian life is finding a job
- Greatest challenge in finding a job –
  - 62% - it's the current economic climate
  - 60% - explaining how military skills translate
  - 30% - finding comfort in a non-military environment
  - 28% - employers think veterans don't have adequate skills
  - 24% - employers avoid hiring veterans
- Prudential, Inc. (2012). *Veterans employment challenges: Perceptions and experiences of transitioning from military life.*

# Who is Unemployed and Why?

- Veteran unemployment is highest for 18 – 24 year olds
  - Less college preparatory high school education/family background due to the demographics of All Volunteer Force
  - Fewer employable skills and experiences.
  - Lack a job network that officers may have built up.
  - Able to access UCX and GI Bill (and might “double dip”)
- Might be **voluntary unemployment**
  - Vacation after deployment and using up pay
  - 44% of Veterans in Prudential survey were not ready to transition
    - 47% of them want to figure out what to do with their life
    - 45% need time to decompress
    - 46% need more education or technical training
    - 41% need more tools and support for a job search
    - 40% had mental health issues related to military service

# Benefits Veterans Bring to Employers

- Loyalty
- Selflessness and teamwork
- Respect for rank and authority
- Discipline
- Training and experience
- Accelerated learning curve
- Leadership at an early age
- Performance under stressful conditions
- Diversity exposure and experience

# Benefits Veterans Bring to Employers

- Respect for procedures
- Technology and globalization
- Integrity
- Conscious of health and safety standards
- Triumph over adversity
  
- **You may need to remind your veteran clients that they possess these and that these skills are in high demand**

# Resources about Employment

- Transition Assistance Program (TAP)
  - Transition GPS (Goals, Plans, Success)
  - Virtual curriculum <https://jkodirect.jten.mil> or via DVDs
  - Transition Office at each base
  - Military Life Cycle (MLC) in 2015
- Northeast ADA Center Tool Kits
  - [www.makingworkhappen.org/Veterans](http://www.makingworkhappen.org/Veterans)

# Resources about Employment

- Non-profit organizations
  - Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), Military Officers Association of America (MOAA), Paralyzed Veterans Association (PVA), and Disabled American Veterans (DAV)
- American Job Centers
  - [www.servicelocator.org](http://www.servicelocator.org)
  - Local Veterans' Employment Representative (LVER)
  - Disabled Veterans' Outreach Program (DVOP)
- Veterans Employment Center
  - [www.ebenefits.va.gov/ebenefits/jobs](http://www.ebenefits.va.gov/ebenefits/jobs)

# Resources about Employment

- Employer Assistance and Recruiting Network
  - [www.earnworks.com](http://www.earnworks.com)
- Job Accommodation Network
  - [www.askjan.org](http://www.askjan.org)
  - (877) 526 - 7234
- Federal government veterans preference
  - [www.opm.gov/veterans](http://www.opm.gov/veterans)
  - [www.usajobs.gov](http://www.usajobs.gov) lists all federal openings
  - Many states also have veterans preferences for jobs and programs to help them look for and get jobs

# How To Get a Job

- Concerns about military service
  - How to diffuse them
- Fears, uncertainties, and doubts (FUD) about disabilities
  - Hierarchy of disabilities
  - How to address them
- When and how to discuss a disability
  - How to discuss accommodations
- Self-employment—entrepreneurship is underutilized by state vocational rehabilitation services (Yu & Smith-Osborne, 2009), but the Veterans Entrepreneurship Bootcamp is a private program that is addressing this area (<http://ebv.vets.syr.edu/>)