



U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation

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# Statement of Hiring Our Heroes, U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation

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**ON:** "A Grateful Nation: Maximizing Veterans' Success after Service"

**TO:** U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs

**BY:** Elizabeth O'Brien, Senior Vice President, Hiring Our Heroes, U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation

**DATE:** November 5th, 2025

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# **BEFORE THE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS OF THE U.S. SENATE**

## **"A Grateful Nation: Maximizing Veterans' Success after Service"**

**Testimony of:  
Elizabeth O'Brien  
Senior Vice President, U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation,  
Hiring Our Heroes**

Good afternoon, Chairman Moran, Ranking Member Blumenthal, and distinguished members of the committee. My name is Elizabeth O'Brien. I am an active-duty military spouse and senior vice president of Hiring Our Heroes (HOH), an initiative of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation. The Foundation harnesses the power of business to create solutions for the good of America and the world—anticipating, developing, and deploying strategies to address challenges facing communities today and tomorrow.

The covenant between our government and those who serve is sacred, but it cannot alone sustain lifelong success after transition. True success requires collective action: government, philanthropy, employers, and nonprofits working together to create clear pathways to opportunity. At HOH, our mission is to lead that collaboration, ensuring every veteran and military spouse not only transitions successfully but thrives as a civic and economic asset to our nation.

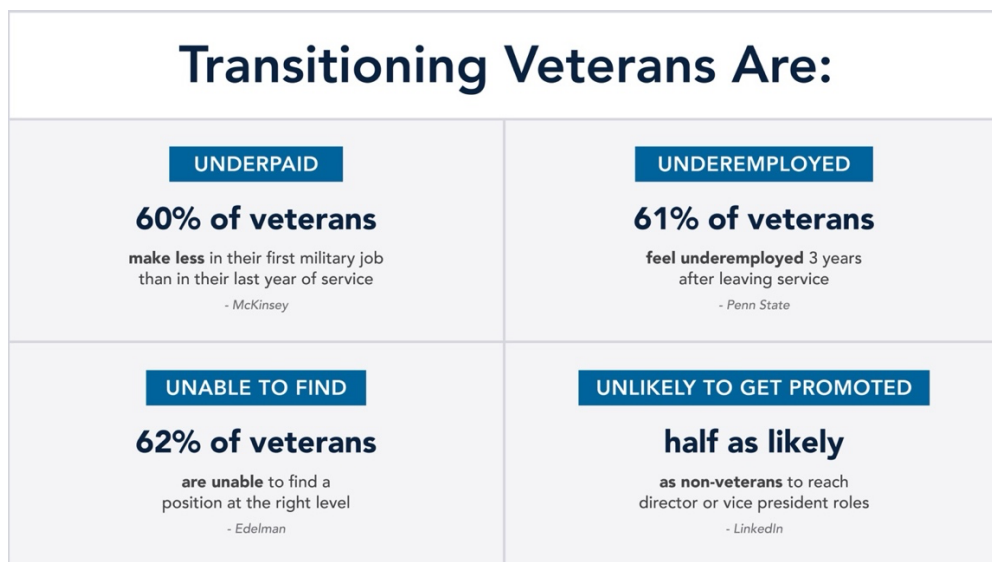
For more than a decade, HOH has delivered innovative solutions to tackle the longstanding employment challenges faced by transitioning veterans and military spouses. Working directly on military bases with a national network of employers, HOH has transformed how the military community finds jobs—and how companies recruit military talent. These efforts have made HOH the national leader in veteran and military spouse employment, now serving more than 80,000 people each year.

We believe economic opportunity is the cornerstone of a strong, sustainable all-volunteer force. Today's generation of young Americans want and need pathways into meaningful careers. Military service provides that pathway, but only if transitioning service members have the resources and skills to navigate their next steps. Just as colleges prepare graduates for careers, the military and federal agencies must ensure service members understand how to leverage their experience for civilian success. By taking care of this generation of warriors, we prepare them to be our nation's best future recruiters.

## Employment Challenges Faced by Transitioning Service Members

In 2011, veteran unemployment was a national crisis, with rates for young veterans soaring to 30%. A coordinated effort by the private and public sectors dramatically reduced unemployment, but those improved numbers mask a deeper challenge: underemployment and the struggle to find roles that match veterans' skills and experience.

Despite lower unemployment rates, research shows most transitioning service members face underemployment and career misalignment. McKinsey reports 60% earn less in their first civilian job than in the military,<sup>1</sup> and studies by Penn State<sup>2</sup> and Edelman<sup>3</sup> reveal over 60% cannot secure roles matching their skills or desired level. LinkedIn adds that veterans remain half as likely to reach leadership positions, underscoring persistent gaps in translating military experience into valued civilian roles.<sup>4</sup>



<sup>1</sup> Blackburn, S., Kim, M., Lewis, C., Oh, H., & Parry, K. (2023, November 8). From the military to the workforce: How to leverage veterans' skills. McKinsey & Company. Retrieved Mar. 15, 2025, from <https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/people-and-organizational-performance/our-insights/from-the-military-to-the-workforce-how-to-leverage-veterans-skills>

<sup>2</sup> Vogt, D., Perkins, D. F., Copeland, L. A., Finley, E. P., Jamieson, C. S., Booth, B., Lederer, S., & Gilman, C. L. (2018). The Veterans Metrics Initiative study of US veterans' experiences during their transition from military service. Retrieved Mar. 15, 2025, from <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2017-020734>

<sup>3</sup> Edelman (2024). 2024 Veterans' Well-being Survey. Retrieved Mar. 15, 2025, from <https://www.edelman.com/sites/g/files/aatuss191/files/2024-11/2024%20Veterans%27%20Well-being%20Presentation%20FINAL.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> LinkedIn (2023). 2023 Veteran Opportunity Report. Retrieved Mar. 15, 2025, from <https://socialimpact.linkedin.com/en-us/programs/veterans/veteran-opportunity-report>

Taken together, the research highlights systemic barriers: while technical skills like IT or mechanical expertise often transfer easily, soft skills such as leadership, resiliency, and teamwork are harder for employers to recognize and value, leaving many veterans underemployed and stalled in career progression.

These challenges make one thing clear: no single program or organization can solve them alone. RAND's recent analysis found 45 federal transition programs with significant overlap, yet less than 5% of funding supports employment assistance.<sup>5</sup> Layered on top are hundreds of nonprofit initiatives—the veritable sea of goodwill—creating a fragmented maze for service members and spouses. To truly move the needle, we must evolve from parallel efforts to collective impact.

## **The Veteran Employment Collective**

That is why today we announced that we're proud to be a part of the newly formed Veteran Employment Collective, a bold, national coalition designed to transform how veterans and military spouses navigate their career journeys. The Collective will unite veteran- and military-spouse-serving organizations, employers, and public-private partners around one mission: ensuring every member of the military community has access to meaningful career opportunities.

This initiative reflects lessons learned over the last decade: too often, service members and spouses encounter a maze of programs with no clear path to the right resource. The Collective addresses this challenge head-on through:

- A seamless referral and data-sharing system that connects service members, veterans, and spouses to the right resources at the right time.
- A coordinated approach that removes duplication, streamlines navigation, and ensures no one falls through the cracks.
- A data-driven framework that strengthens partnerships, enables transparency, and generates reliable information to measure impact and guide improvement.
- A shared outcomes model that illuminates how each partner's unique contribution builds collective impact across the ecosystem.

This is not another program; it is the next evolution of collaboration.

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<sup>5</sup> Kleykamp, M., Wenger, J. B., Elizabeth, H. R., Kubasak, M., Hubble, T., & Skrabala, L. (2024, June 11). Federal Programs to Assist Military-to-Civilian Employment Transitions: limited scrutiny and substantial investment in education programs. RAND. Retrieved Mar. 15, 2025, from [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RRA1363-12.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1363-12.html)

In the past year alone, Hiring Our Heroes facilitated more than 44,000 referrals to partner organizations, each connecting a veteran, service member, or spouse to trusted opportunities and support. This volume sends a clear signal: structured collaboration is not just beneficial; it is essential. Expanding this referral network in a deliberate, accountable way will allow for trackable outcomes and measurable success.

To achieve this, the coalition will include the most effective, data-driven nonprofits—organizations that deliver measurable impact, fill critical gaps, and step in where government programs cannot. This vision is supported by the private sector, where companies like USAA have long demonstrated leadership through targeted philanthropy and a commitment to expanding capacity across the ecosystem. Their investments exemplify how corporate partners can drive scalable solutions without reliance on government funding, ensuring sustainability, innovation, and responsiveness to real-time community needs.

The Collective's founding partners include:

- America's Warrior Partnership (AWP)
- D'Aniello Institute for Veterans & Military Families at Syracuse University
- FourBlock
- Hire Heroes USA
- Hiring Our Heroes
- NextOp Veterans
- VetJobs & MilSpouseJobs

Together, we are building a no-wrong-door system that allows transitioning service members, veterans, and military spouses to access high-quality career support regardless of where they enter the network. The key outcomes of this initiative will be:

- Holistic transition support that spans the service lifecycle from active duty through post-transition careers.
- Expanded employer engagement, powered by shared data and unified outreach.
- Increased trust among funders and policymakers, driven by transparent performance reporting.
- Elevated community impact, as duplication gives way to coordination and measurable results.

We believe this approach will fundamentally shift how we collectively serve the military community—moving from competition to coordination, from fragmented effort to shared success.

The future design of the Veteran Employment Collective includes expansion to selected nonprofit partners that address critical wraparound needs, such as childcare, mentorship, and localized community support. These systems sustain long-term workforce participation, reduce barriers for military families, and improve quality of life for veterans and spouses.

By connecting the organizations that deliver where government cannot or will not, the Collective aims to create a truly holistic ecosystem—one that ensures every member of the military-connected community can not only transition successfully but thrive in the communities they call home.

By aligning resources and leveraging the ingenuity of America's nonprofit and corporate sectors, the Veteran Employment Collective will create a seamless, transparent, and equitable employment ecosystem, ensuring every service member, veteran, and military spouse can transition with purpose, dignity, and opportunity.

## **The Importance of Employment Bridges**

Beyond addressing systemic fragmentation, our data shows that program-level innovation is equally critical to improving individual outcomes. Employment bridges—structured pathways that connect service members to civilian careers before separation—consistently deliver superior transition results. These bridges accelerate time to employment, improve job quality, and increase long-term career satisfaction. One of the most impactful examples is HOH's Fellows Program, a SkillBridge initiative serving both degreed and non-degreed transitioning service members.

SkillBridge is the only federal transition program that fundamentally redefines how service members prepare for civilian careers. Administered by the Department of Defense, SkillBridge enables service members to gain hands-on civilian work experience through internships and apprenticeships during their final 180 days of active duty.

For more than a decade, HOH has operated one of the nation's largest and longest-running SkillBridge initiatives—the HOH Fellows Program. This 12-week internship embeds transitioning service members directly into civilian companies, giving employers firsthand insight into how military experience translates into

workforce value. This experiential model ensures service members secure right-fit roles that fully leverage their skills and leadership.

The results speak for themselves. Over the last five years, HOH has connected more than 10,000 transitioning service member fellows with 2,500 employers nationwide. Eighty-eight percent of fellows receive a job offer within three months, with an average starting salary of \$110,000—more than twice the pay of an E-6 with eight years of service and 20% higher than an O-3 with six years of service. In contrast to McKinsey’s findings on post-transition salary declines, our data proves that experiential bridge programs lead to employment and compensation aligned with service members’ experience.

Beyond salary, our research reveals deeper insights into career quality and satisfaction. In HOH’s 2024 Strategic Insights Report, we surveyed 1,903 veterans who participated in the Fellows Program or another SkillBridge initiative, and 381 veterans who applied but did not participate. Key findings include:

- Time to employment was much faster for fellows, with 63% being employed within one month of transition versus 38% for non-participants.
- Fellows were far more likely to take a job for positive reasons (i.e., “great opportunity” or “great fit”) (59% for fellows versus 41% for non-fellows).
- Conversely, non-participants were far more likely to accept a job for negative reasons (i.e., “needed a paycheck” or “no choice”) (25% for non-participants versus 11% for fellows).
- Fellows were more likely to recommend service to future generations, with 61% saying they would recommend service versus 54% for non-participants.

While SkillBridge delivers exceptional outcomes before separation, many service members and spouses need flexible options that extend beyond active duty. The HOH Skilled Trades Academy meets that need, serving as an employment bridge that can be accessed before or after transition. This model pipelines military-connected talent into high-demand industries, offering stability, strong earning potential, and community-based careers.

## **Building America’s Future: The HOH Pathway to the Skilled Trades**

America is facing a critical shortage of skilled construction labor yet every year, 200,000 highly trained service members transition out of the military with unmatched discipline, leadership, and mechanical aptitude. Hiring Our Heroes (HOH) is uniquely positioned to bridge this gap with a workforce solution that benefits both industry and the military-connected community.

This summer, in partnership with Lowe's Foundation, Hiring Our Heroes launched the HOH Skilled Trades Academy, a six-week, hands-on, NCCER-aligned training program in partnership with Coastal Carolina Community College in Jacksonville, North Carolina. Designed for transitioning service members, veterans, and military spouses, the program builds immediate job readiness, provides nationally recognized credentials, connects participants with employers, and introduces them to entrepreneurial pathways within the trades. The initial pilot cohort includes eight veterans, marking the program's first step in demonstrating the model's effectiveness and scalability.

This pilot is more than a training program—it is a proof of concept for a national, replicable model that leverages HOH's SkillBridge authorization, expansive employer network, and community trust to meet regional labor needs and deliver measurable career outcomes. With the right partners, this model can launch within 90 days in any region and scale rapidly nationwide.

### **Why Now, Why This Program**

The need could not be more urgent.

- Construction demand is surging. The United States faces a historic shortage of skilled tradespeople across construction, manufacturing, and infrastructure sectors.
- Transitioning talent is untapped. Over 200,000 service members leave active duty each year, many seeking purpose, stability, and community-based career pathways.
- Veterans consistently express a strong interest in SkillBridge-style opportunities after separation, allowing them to gain civilian work experience, industry credentials, and professional networks as they establish new careers in the communities they now call home
- Military spouses face chronic unemployment—nearly 20%. The skilled trades offer flexibility, mobility, and viable careers that can move with the family.

Training military-connected Americans for skilled trades fills critical industry gaps while strengthening America's economic foundation. Today, there are 2.5 million

more job vacancies than available workers, costing companies \$5 billion annually in lost productivity.

## **Decreasing Friction, Increasing Opportunity**

Unlike SkillBridge, the HOH Skilled Trades Academy can be accessed before or after transition, making it a flexible solution for service members, veterans, and spouses. This community-based, employer-driven, non-government-funded program improves financial wellness and stability while easing long-term pressure on the Department of Veterans Affairs to address challenges like homelessness and underemployment.

Our goal is simple: ensure that any military-connected individual who wants to work in the skilled trades can do so, with the right training, credentials, and employer connections.

This initiative exemplifies the power of partnership: Lowe's Foundation, HOH, local chambers, community colleges, and employers across the trades industry coming together to build America's future workforce—one veteran and one family at a time.

## **Expanding the HOH Skilled Trades Academy**

America's workforce needs to extend beyond construction. The same resolve and discipline that service members bring can fill critical gaps in manufacturing, electrical/HVAC trades, and shipbuilding/maritime industries. For example, the manufacturing sector currently reports 409,000 job openings nationwide,<sup>6</sup> coupled with federal policy under Public Law 119-21, which commits to strengthening American manufacturing and aligning jobs with U.S. workers.<sup>7</sup>

In response, the next version of the HOH Skilled Trades Academy will expand to include manufacturing and electrical/HVAC tracks, aligning with federal workforce priorities and meeting urgent employer demand in high-growth sectors.

By expanding in this way, the HOH Skilled Trades Academy will:

- Provide transitioning service members, veterans, and military spouses with credentials and pathways in manufacturing and trades beyond construction.

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<sup>6</sup> National Association of Manufacturers (2025). Facts About Manufacturing. Retrieved October 31, 2025, from <https://nam.org/mfgdata/facts-about-manufacturing-expanded>

<sup>7</sup> 139 U.S.C. § 72 (2025). Public Law 119-21. Retrieved October 31, 2025 from <https://www.congress.gov/119/plaws/publ21/PLAW-119publ21.pdf>

- Leverage our existing SkillBridge authorization and employer network to meet regional labor supply needs, especially in high-growth sectors.
- Align with federal workforce and industrial policy by helping fulfill the promise of Executive Order 14005 and related manufacturing/industrial initiatives.
- Offer community-based, no-cost programs that increase financial wellness, career stability, and long-term readiness of the military-connected population.

This broadened scope underscores our belief that training and credentialing must follow labor market demand—and must be built with military-connected talent as the ready and willing workforce to fill those roles.

## **Poor Transition Outcomes and Military Spouse Unemployment**

As we strengthen pathways for transitioning service members, we must also address a critical factor influencing veteran outcomes: military spouse employment. Research—including a 2019 report from the University of Texas' Institute for Military and Veteran Family Wellness—shows that an employed spouse significantly buffers the financial and emotional stress of transition, giving veterans the time and flexibility to pursue right-fit careers or additional training.<sup>8</sup> In short, spouse employment is not just a family issue; it is a readiness and retention issue for the all-volunteer force. Yet military spouses continue to face unemployment rates six times higher than their civilian peers, a challenge that demands urgent attention and innovative solutions.

### **The Military Spouse Career Accelerator Pilot: Promising Results, Temporary Pause**

One of the most promising solutions is the Military Spouse Career Accelerator Pilot (MSCAP), facilitated by Hiring Our Heroes in collaboration with the Department of War and Deloitte. This pioneering three-year initiative connects military spouses with employers through 12-week paid fellowships, creating direct pathways to long-term employment.

Since its launch in December 2022, MSCAP has placed over 1,730 military spouses into internships, with a job offer rate exceeding 86%. More than 50% of these roles have been remote, addressing one of the greatest barriers to spouse employment: geographic mobility. These outcomes demonstrate that structured, employer-connected programs can deliver scalable solutions for a population that has faced chronic underemployment for decades.

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<sup>8</sup> Keeling, M., Borah, E. V., Kintzle, S., Kleykamp, M., & Robertson, H. C. (2019). Military spouses transition too! A call to action to address spouses' military to civilian transition. *Journal of Family Social Work*, 23(1), 3–19. <https://imvfw.utexas.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/2020-Military-spouses-transition-too.pdf>

This summer, the Department of War announced a strategic pause on MSCAP placements beginning October 6, with plans to resume in early 2026 as the program transitions from pilot to program status as Career Accelerator. While we respect the Department's commitment to a thoughtful, data-driven transition, the timing could not be more challenging for military families. The pause coincides with uncertainty surrounding federal funding and the potential for government shutdowns and furloughs, conditions that add financial stress for spouses already experiencing unemployment rates six times higher than their civilian peers. During this time, we have continued to prioritize programming for military spouses, increasing the number of our own professional development programming, Amplify, and have proactively continued to connect military spouses to employers.

As we look to 2026 and beyond, Hiring Our Heroes continues to develop innovative solutions to connect military spouses with meaningful career opportunities, and stands ready to support DoW's launch of Career Accelerator as it moves from pilot to program. Our priority remains unchanged: to ensure that military spouses have pathways to purposeful careers that strengthen both their families and the all-volunteer force.

## **Looking Forward**

As we reflect on the theme of this hearing, *A Grateful Nation: Maximizing Veterans' Success after Service*, gratitude must be expressed through action. Veterans are one of our nation's greatest civic assets, and their continued success depends on how effectively government, employers, philanthropy, and civil society work together to create pathways of opportunity. At Hiring Our Heroes, we see firsthand that while federal programs are foundational, it is the broader ecosystem—businesses, nonprofits, and local communities—that transforms transition into lifelong success. Our charge is to strengthen that ecosystem, ensuring that every veteran and military spouse can navigate it with clarity, trust, and purpose.

Through the Veteran Employment Collective, this group of best-in-class nonprofits is building the next evolution of collaboration—one rooted in shared data, coordinated referrals, and measurable outcomes that connect service members, veterans, and spouses to sustainable careers and stronger communities.

Through the HOH Skilled Trades Academy, we are demonstrating what transformation looks like on the ground: a scalable, hands-on model that addresses America's skilled labor shortage while creating new pathways for military-connected talent. This program proves that with the right partnerships, we can train the next

generation of builders, manufacturers, and technicians, meeting national workforce demand while strengthening local economies and family financial wellness.

And through the Military Spouse Career Accelerator Pilot, we have seen what excellence looks like in spouse employment: structured, employer-connected fellowships that deliver real results. As the program transitions from pilot to permanent, continuity must be prioritized, so this lifeline remains open, especially during times of uncertainty.

Collectively, these efforts represent a whole-of-nation approach. They show what is possible when government, employers, philanthropy, and nonprofits come together with a shared purpose: to ensure that those who serve our nation are never left navigating their futures alone.

As we look to the years ahead, Hiring Our Heroes remains committed to working alongside this Committee and our partners across sectors to drive forward transformation—one that ensures every veteran, service member, and military spouse can transition with confidence, contribute with purpose, and thrive with dignity.

## **Conclusion**

Over the last fourteen years, Hiring Our Heroes has been proud to serve over 1 million veterans, transitioning service members, and military spouses in communities across the United States and abroad—always in partnership with the private and public sectors. And with more than 200,000 service members transitioning annually, there is always more work to be done.

Hiring Our Heroes remains wholly committed to connecting veterans and military spouses with meaningful career opportunities and honored to serve on the front line of this movement. We will continue to unite our partners in a common mission to achieve fundamental change in the veteran and military spouse employment landscape.

Chairman Moran, Ranking Member Blumenthal, and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify. I look forward to answering your questions.