

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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**USC Social Work**  
*Center for Innovation and Research  
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## Exploring the Economic & Employment Challenges Facing U.S. Veterans:

A Qualitative Study of Volunteers of America Service Providers & Veteran Clients

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### Study Background

Commissioned by Volunteers of America (VOA) as part of an ongoing effort to better understand the needs of their veteran clients and continuously improve veteran services, the purpose of this study was to explore the economic and employment challenges facing U.S. veterans today and identify best practices for helping impoverished veterans find and retain stable, living-wage jobs. Three approaches were used to examine these challenges and best practices, including a comprehensive literature review, one-on-one interviews with VOA service providers, and focus groups with VOA veteran clients.

### Employment Challenges and Risks for Unemployment

#### 1. Unpreparedness for Civilian Employment

Interviews with both VOA service providers and veteran clients revealed a lack of preparation for finding civilian employment when leaving the military to be a large contributor to veteran unemployment. This included unrealistic expectations for the kinds of job opportunities veterans qualify for, as well as salary, the veteran perception of having to ‘start over’ as a civilian, and difficulty understanding how military experience translates to civilian employment.

#### 2. Unaddressed Mental Health and Substance Abuse Issues

Unaddressed mental health (most often PTSD and/or depression) and substance abuse problems manifested themselves in several ways in relation to employment. Described by both VOA service providers and veteran clients, these included the impact on motivation to find and keep employment, difficulty placing veteran clients with mental health or substance abuse issues, and the ability to keep and find success in a job.

#### 3. Continuation of Military Identity

VOA veteran clients described their inability to relate to civilians, discomfort around civilians, and difficulty adapting to civilian employment culture. Veteran

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clients often attributed their comfort with VOA programs to the support they received from peers with similar experiences and a shared military identity.

#### **4. Criminal Background and/or Dishonorable Discharge**

Along with the unique challenges that come with finding veterans employment, a criminal background or a less-than-honorable discharge creates additional barriers, particularly the unwillingness of employers to hire these veterans and lack of available jobs.

#### **5. Stigma Associated with Hiring Veterans**

Both VOA service providers and veteran clients described a reluctance on some employers' part to hire their veteran clients. This was most often attributed to concerns over issues of mental health, long gaps in employment history, and an unwillingness to hire those with a dishonorable discharge and/or criminal background.

#### **6. Veteran Client Age**

Although some employment barriers are relevant to all VOA veteran clients, older and younger VOA veteran clients each have their own specific barriers that must be addressed.

#### **7. Availability of Appropriate Jobs**

Both VOA service provider interviews and veteran client focus groups revealed the lack of available jobs that are appropriate to veteran skills and experience, and that also pay a living wage, to be a significant barrier for veteran employment.

## **Resources and Policy Recommendations**

**1. Establish a civilian “re-training” program for new veterans accessing VOA services.** Develop an evidence-based “re-training” program for veterans using VOA services that clearly articulates some of the unique challenges that may affect military veterans in the transition process.

**2. Expand VOA’s holistic model of support to “first contact.”** VOA’s holistic model of supporting veterans in need of housing, employment, health, and disability support is an exemplary model that can be expanded to veterans as a prevention and early intervention program by initiating a comprehensive veteran assessment at first contact with VOA.

**3. Create an employment program for veterans with less-than-honorable discharges.**

**4. Establish veteran support services and programs that recognize that recent military veterans may have needs different from older veterans.**

## **VOA SERVICE STRENGTHS**

- **Development of and engagement in multi-agency community collaboration**
- **Connection of veteran clients to information**
- **Use of peer support**
- **Holistic strategy to addressing veteran client needs**
- **Follow-up and follow-through after veterans find employment**
- **Requiring accountability in veteran clients**
- **Use of evidence-based practices**

**5. Participate in a campaign that enhances the value of military veterans.** VOA could take a leading role in working with other governmental and nongovernmental agencies in the development of an effective veteran communication campaign that works to dispel these myths and misperceptions, while acknowledging that veterans do require assistance and understanding in some areas.

**6. Strengthen communication of the VOA national network.** The continued growth and strengthening of this national network could help improve the dissemination of innovations and best practices developed and identified within VOA, as well as support the culture of innovation and information-sharing through webinars, conferences, and funding “pilot” projects to address enduring or challenging veteran issues.