

Assessing the Wounded Warrior Careers Program

Studying the transition of disabled soldiers returning home and the implementation of a career program

SUMMARY

The National Organization on Disability—a New York nonprofit that promotes the full participation of people with disabilities in all aspects of life, including employment—worked with the U.S. Army to develop, implement and assess a three-year demonstration program called Wounded Warrior Careers.

Using an intensive case-management approach, the program was designed to help severely injured veterans—as well as their families—transition from a military career to a civilian one and gain financial stability. The goal was to provide a model program for the rest of the military to emulate.

The National Organization on Disability hired Economic Mobility Corporation, New York, to conduct a formal assessment, including both interim findings—which provided feedback for mid-course corrections to the program—and a final report.

Key Results

The project team reported the following key results as of December 2010:

- The Wounded Warrior Careers program had served 243 veterans: 62 in Dallas, 74 in Colorado Springs. Colo. (near Fort Carson) and 107 in Fayetteville, N.C. (near Fort Bragg).
- Some 67 percent of program participants were in school, training or work—about double the rate for veterans who do not receive career services.

Key Preliminary Assessment Findings

The project director reported the following key preliminary findings, distilled from the ongoing assessment, to the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF):

- A multiyear commitment with intensive one-on-one support is necessary to ensure that wounded veterans transition successfully from the military to the civilian workplace and gain financial stability.
- Personal relationships and face-to-face contact between career specialists and veterans are critical to building the trust needed to influence career planning.
- The career-support service must also assist key family members who often are primary caretakers or breadwinners.

Funding

From November 2007 through December 2010, RWJF supported this project through a grant of \$500,000. The program received more than \$4.5 million in additional funding from 25 sources. See the Appendix for details.

CONTEXT

By 2007, more than 4,000 service men and women had been killed, and more than 30,000 injured, in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan—mostly soldiers in the U.S. Army. In response, Congress established the U.S. Army Wounded Warrior Program, to help the more than 1,500 soldiers with the most severe injuries make the transition from military to civilian life.

The program works through caseworkers, known as advocates, who help soldiers and their families with critical challenges, such as reintegrating into their communities, adapting their homes to meet their needs, and accessing medical and psychiatric care.

However, leaders in the Wounded Warrior Program soon realized that they also needed to help wounded veterans embark on a civilian career. "The civilian workplace requires a great deal more initiative, self-motivation, creativity and work, with far less direction and prescription," explained Carol Glazer, president of the National Organization on Disability and the project director.

To address this need, leaders in the Wounded Warrior Program in 2006 turned to the National Organization on Disability, which held focus groups with more than 200 wounded soldiers and their families to gather information about how to structure the career-development demonstration program.

THE PROJECT

The National Organization on Disability in New York worked with the U.S. Army to develop, implement and assess the Wounded Warrior Careers program, a three-year demonstration launched in 2008. Designed to serve 15–20 percent of the then 1,500 Army's Wounded Warriors, the program had two main goals:

- Developing effective ways to help soldiers in the Army Wounded Warrior Program pursue their career goals after they retire from the military
- Helping the U.S. Army, other military branches, and the broader disability employment field understand how to assist veterans in the Army Wounded Warrior Program meet their career goals

Features of the program include:

- *Proactive case management*. Assistance provided by career specialists from the National Organization on Disability.
- Family support. Since family members are often caretakers or primary breadwinners, the program works not only with veterans with disabilities but also with their family members.
- Long-term support. Career specialists continue to work with veterans long after the initial job or education placement, providing support to solve problems or develop alternatives if initial education or employment plans do not work out. See the sidebar on Dwayne Beason's work as a career specialist.

Assessment

The National Organization on Disability contracted with Economic Mobility Corporation to monitor the project, assist with program operations and produce a final assessment report, which will be disseminated to the Army, the Department of Defense and other partners in early 2012.

To conduct the assessment, Economic Mobility:

- Deployed software tailored to the program that allows career specialists to enter data
 on each veteran and family, including disability, income, education, job skills, marital
 issues, health needs, services received and career progress
- Interviewed career specialists
- Observed project activities during site visits
- Held focus groups with wounded veterans participating in the project
- Fielded two surveys of participating veterans—at the beginning of the project and at the beginning of the third year

See Findings for preliminary findings from the assessment.

Other Funding

The program received more than \$4.5 million in additional funding from 25 sources including the Ford Foundation \$1 million), the Dallas-TRIAD Fund \$606,594), Charles Stuart Mott Foundation \$500,000 and W.K. Kellogg Foundation \$400,000. See the Appendix for details.

RESULTS

The project team reported the following key results as of December 2010:

- Provided career-counseling services to 243 veterans—62 in Dallas, 74 in Colorado Springs, Colo. (near Fort Carson) and 107 in Fayetteville, N.C. (near Fort Bragg), as of December 2010. A total of 600 people—including family members—benefited from the services.
- Of the veterans in the program, 67 percent were in school, training or work. This is about double the rate for veterans in the Army Wounded Warrior Program who do not receive career services.
 - Some 75 percent of the veterans who were employed had remained in their jobs longer than 12 months, and a high percentage had secured employment that included benefits.
 - The veterans in the program reported a high level of satisfaction with the program and its services.
- Held five large meetings to disseminate information from the ongoing assessment. Attendees included leaders of the Wounded Warrior Program, veterans, members of Congress, and representatives from local and national nonprofit organizations and other federal agencies. Between 50 and 80 people attended each meeting.
- Addressed mid-course corrections to improve the demonstration program. These
 included:
 - An expansion of the demonstration project from three years to five years. "We believe more time is needed to make the career transition, address problems with first placements and assure that the intervention has a lasting effect," Glazer said.
 - Added one-on-one meetings between career specialists and local employers and educators, to provide accurate information about the symptoms associated with post traumatic stress syndrome and traumatic brain injuries. More than 75 percent of the veterans in the program suffered from one or both of these disabilities.

— Changed the way in which the National Organization on Disability hired career specialists. The organization hired a deputy director for the Wounded Warrior Careers program with expertise in recruiting, who implemented best practices in hiring. The organization then created an optimum profile of a career specialist—including job experience and behavioral traits—and matched prospective career specialists against the optimum profile. The organization also created a structured interview process designed to glean important information about job candidates.

Communications Results

- The project team produced a website on the program and a field manual for Army Wounded Warrior Program advocates.
- Project staff members regularly briefed more than 75 members of Congress and their staff.
- Staff members established relationships with senior officials (Secretary and Assistant Secretary levels) in the Departments of Veterans Affairs (where there is an emerging collaboration centered on vocational rehabilitation), Defense, Labor and Transportation, Veteran Service Organizations, and numerous state and local agencies.
- The program received coverage in *USA Today*, American Forces Press Service and other media.

FINDINGS

The project director reported the following key preliminary findings, distilled from the ongoing assessment, to RWJF:

- Wounded veterans—who tend to be young with limited financial resources or experience in the civilian labor market—need:
 - A multiyear commitment from an employment-counseling service
 - A personal relationship and ample face-to-face contact with a career specialist to build the trust needed to influence career planning
 - Expert help to navigate complex, fragmented benefits and services offered by agencies that are not geared to help severely disabled veterans
 - An assessment of their work history and a career-action plan that is holistic (i.e., focusing on the complete person, physically and psychologically) and that provides a detailed road map with relevant outside resources identified.
 - Ongoing help to plan and conduct an employment search
 - Basic education in financial management and literacy

- Cash to bridge short-term obstacles—such as the cost of computers, clothing, transportation and advance tuition payments—because agency benefits can be slow or unavailable.
- Employers want to hire disabled veterans, but often need help overcoming negative stereotypes. More information can help them understand the positive contributions that veterans can make because of their discipline, commitment to service, loyalty and problem-solving skills.

LESSONS LEARNED

1. **Use data to continuously refine your project**. The project team made mid-course corrections based on their own tracking data, preliminary findings from the ongoing assessment, and frequent feedback sessions with the Army. (Final Narrative Report)

AFTERWARD

In 2010, the Department of Defense and the Army asked the National Organization on Disability to quadruple the program to 12 sites, to serve 1,200 to 1,500 severely disabled Wounded Warriors, whose total had grown to more than 8,000. The military cited the program's effectiveness and the enhanced credibility of a larger program.

Also in 2010, Senator Michael Bennet (D-Colo.) introduced legislation (S.3887) to help fund a five-year expanded demonstration program. As of June 2011, Congress had not yet voted on the bill.

The program has continued to receive funding from the following sources:

- Charles Stewart Mott Foundation \$200,000
- Meadows Foundation \$135,600)

Bob Woodruff Foundation \$100,000

Prepared by: Robert Crum

Reviewed by: Linda Wilson and Molly McKaughan

Program Officer: Marco V. Navarro

Grant ID#: 062720

Program area: Enterprise Level

Sidebar

"FOR AS LONG AS IT TAKES": THE STORY OF DWAYNE BEASON

Ask Dwayne Beason where he saw action during his 30 years as a soldier, and the list is so long he has to take a deep breath first: "Operation Just Cause, Operation Urgent Fury, Operation Desert Shield, the Iraq War, Afghanistan."

"When I got out of the army, I was of kind lost. I had to reinvent myself," recalls Beason, a retired sergeant major, who went back to school to learn counseling skills.

He then heard about the Wounded Warrior Careers program and knew it was the place for him. "This job allowed me to get back to the military community, and I have the feeling that I'm giving back."

As a career specialist with the program, Beason maintains a caseload of some 135 veterans, and works closely with around 60 of them at a time. "Our one guiding principle has become like a motto for us: For as long as it takes." Beason and his colleagues provide assistance to the wounded warriors until they are established either in school, training or a job.

The severity of some of the veteran's injuries requires that Beason and his colleagues take a proactive approach. "We make the initial contact. If the individual is 100 miles from here, we go to them. We don't require them to come to us," Beason says.

One such client, Allen, hailed from a family with a long history of military service. Assuming that he would continue the tradition, he joined the military the first chance he got. But his military career did not go far. After too many brushes with improvised explosive devices, he developed severe post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The army discharged him because of the disability.

It was something that Beason could identify with. "There's a huge sense of loss and helplessness when you've been in the military for so long, and suddenly you're on your own." Toss PTSD or a severe injury into the mix, "and the despair can be overwhelming."

Fortunately, Allen was referred to the Wounded Warrior Careers program. Beason, assigned as his career specialist, immediately brought him to Washington to talk with other wounded vets and take some career-assessment tests. While working with Beason, Allen remembered that he had once toyed with the idea of becoming a veterinarian. But it was just a brief diversion, because his father reminded Allen in no uncertain terms that military service was his destiny.

As it turned out, however, veterinary medicine wasn't just some hazy childhood dream. Using the scores from the career assessment tests, Beason helped Allen see that he also had an aptitude for veterinary services. So Beason helped Allen make campus visits and get enrolled. With a GPA of 3.5, Allen is well on the path to becoming a veterinary technician.

"And who knows, once Allen has this wrapped up, it might lead to more school to become a veterinarian. He's very enthusiastic about this now."

It is the kind of story that plays out again and again in Beason's job. There is the veteran who, once rated as 100 percent disabled, is now enrolled in college to become a school counselor. Or the veteran who, after suffering a broken back and wondering how she would care for her two disabled children, now has completed her master's degree in social work.

"It is healing work," says Beason. "We don't want these soldiers to turn out like past generations of soldiers, like those from Vietnam."

APPENDIX

Additional Funding

(Current as of the time of the grant; provided by the grantee organization; not verified by RWJF.)

Organization	Amount
Aspen Community Foundation	\$7,500
AstraZeneca Healthcare Foundation	\$40,000
Bob Woodruff Foundation	\$100,000
Cannon Foundation	\$150,000
Charles B. and Florence E. King Foundation	\$75,000
Charles Stewart Mott Foundation	\$500,000
Chrysler Corporation Fund	\$10,000
Cumberland Community Foundation	\$30,000
Dallas-TRIAD Fund	\$606,594 in two grants
The Duke Endowment	\$150,000
El Pomar Foundation	\$300,000
Ford Foundation	\$1,000,000
Joyce & Donald Rumsfeld Foundation	\$110,000
Lockheed Martin Corporation	\$105,000
McCormick Foundation	\$270,000
MetLife Foundation	\$150,000
Rose Community Foundation	\$13,771
Starr Foundation	\$100,000
Meadows Foundation	\$135,600; \$24,480 in-kind
UPS Foundation	\$68,000
Wellpoint Foundation	\$5,000
W.K. Kellogg Foundation	\$400,000
Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation	\$150,000
An anonymous foundation	\$75,000

BIBLIOGRAPHY

(Current as of date of the report; as provided by the grantee organization; not verified by RWJF; items not available from RWJF.)

Communication or Promotion

Grantee Website

http://nod.org/what_we_do/innovation_pilot_projects/wounded_warrior_careers_demon stration. A website to educate the public on the Wounded Warrior Careers program. New York: National Organization on Disability.

Promotion or Communication

"Wounded Warrior Careers PSA." National Organization on Disability. www.youtube.com/watch?v=W81L4rKZIzM. Shown to 18,393 people at the Washington Capitals hockey game on Veteran's Day 2010.