

NATIONAL VETERANS EMPLOYMENT & EDUCATION COMMISSION

James A. LaCoursiere, Connecticut, Chairman
Joseph C. Sharpe Jr., District of Columbia, Director

This report covers the programs, activities and accomplishments of the National Veterans Employment & Education Commission, its two standing committees (Employment and Veterans Preference, and Veterans Education, Other Benefits & Homelessness), and the staff from July 1, 2021 through June 30, 2022. Since the commission and the committees always meet concurrently, all future references to the commission in this report will automatically indicate the inclusion of the committees.

The National Veterans Employment & Education Commission is chaired by James A. LaCoursiere (CT). The division consists of Director Joseph Sharpe Jr., Employment & Transition Policy Associate Quandrea Patterson, Employment & Education Policy Analyst Jacob Brostuen, Employment & Education Policy Analyst Matthew Brennan, Employment & Education Policy Analyst Adam B. Treece, Employment & Education Policy Coordinator David Proferes and Administrative Assistant Edwin Cruz.

National Veterans Employment & Education Commission

- Employment & Veterans Preference Committee
- Veterans Education, Other Benefits & Homelessness Committee
- Veterans Employment & Education Council
- Awards Subcommittee
- Employment Innovation Task Force Advisory Board
- Credentialing Executive Task Force Advisory Board
- Small Business Task Force Advisory Board
- Homeless Veteran Task Force Advisory Board

2021-2022 Meetings

During the period this report covers, the commission met for three regularly scheduled executive sessions. A list of those meetings follows:

- (1) The chairman of the commission addressed the National Executive Committee, held at American National Headquarters in Indianapolis and virtually on Oct. 6-7, 2021. A complete report on that meeting appears in the Digest of Proceedings of the National Executive Committee of The American Legion, October 6-7, 2021.
- (2) At the 62nd Washington Conference, held virtually on March 5, 2022, commission members and guests met to hear the latest on subjects of concern to them.
- (3) The chairman of the commission met May 4-5, 2022, in the headquarters office of The American Legion, in Indianapolis. A complete report of that meeting appears in the Digest of Proceedings of the National Executive Committee of The American Legion, May 2022.

Legislative Appearances

A vital part of the work of the National Veterans Employment & Education Commission is the preparation and presentation of congressional testimony as well as letters of support on issues affecting the economic well-being of America's veterans. During the period covered by this report, the commission staff testified before Congress and also participated in the preparation of testimony presented by other members of the Legion staff on several occasions.

The following is a synopsis of the congressional hearings and correspondence held from July 1, 2021, to June 30, 2022, on matters about the National Veterans Employment & Education Commission:

- On Nov. 17, 2021, VE&E Staff signed on a joint letter of support for H.R. 2196, Justice for Servicemembers Act, which aims to prohibit and nullify arbitration agreements made prior to disputes from preventing servicemembers and veterans from filing claims under the Servicemembers Civil Relief Act (SCRA) and Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act (USERRA); including joint, class action or collective action contestations.
- On Dec. 7, 2021, Joseph Sharpe, director, Veterans Employment & Education, testified before the House Veterans Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity regarding "Removing Barriers to Veteran Home Ownership."
- On Jan. 19, 2022, VE&E staff delivered a public comment before the Department of Education's Higher Education Negotiated Rulemaking Institutional and Programmatic Eligibility Committee.
- On Feb. 2, 2022, Joseph Sharpe testified before the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity, Committee on Veteran Affairs, discussing the Department of Veterans Affairs' Veterans Employment Through Technology Education Courses (VET TEC) and Veteran Rapid Retraining Assistance Program (VRRAP).
- On Feb. 11, 2022, VE&E staff met with staff from Congresswoman Mazie Hirono's office (D-HI) to provide an overview of the Vets First expansion to DoD proposal and requested the member's support upon further review.
- On March 8, 2022, VE&E Chairman LaCoursiere testified alongside National Commander Dillard regarding matters concerning Employment and Education.
- On March 30, 2022, VE&E staff submitted a letter of support for H.R. 7074, Quality Education for Veterans Act of 2022. The legislation offers the opportunity to make critical improvements to education course approvals by requiring uniform applications from higher-learning institutions and establishments. Additionally, the bill delineates notice requirements to educational institutions for risk-based and compliance surveys.
- On May 16, 2022, VE&E staff submitted a letter of support for H.R. 3469, Veteran Entrepreneurship Training Act of 2021, a bill providing statutory authority for the Boots to Business Program, which provides entrepreneurship training to individuals including veterans and active members of the armed forces, to be administered by the Small Business Administration.
- On May 18, 2022, VE&E staff submitted a statement for the record to the House Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity regarding "Pending Legislation."

- On June 8, 2022, VE&E staff attended a congressional hearing, “Military to Main Street: Serving Veteran Entrepreneurship,” held by the House Committee on Small Business.
- On June 14, 2022, VE&E staff attended a congressional hearing, “Are Governmentwide Contracts Helping or Hurting Small Contractors,” held by the House Committee on Small Business
- On April 19, 2022, VE&E staff met with the Department of Education to brief members on updated information regarding the Public Service Loan Forgiveness Program.
- On June 14, 2022, VE&E staff signed on a joint letter of support for H.R. 2196, Justice for Servicemembers Act, which aims to prohibit and nullify arbitration agreements made prior to disputes from preventing servicemembers and veterans from filing claims under the Servicemembers Civil Relief Act (SCRA) and Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act (USERRA); including joint, class action or collective action contestations.
- On July 20, 2022, Joseph Sharpe testified before the House Veterans’ Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity’s hearing to testify on student veteran-related issues and the ongoing implementation of the digital GI Bill.

Administrative Activities

The National Veterans Employment & Education Commission and its two standing subcommittees on Employment and Veterans Preference and Veterans Education, Other Benefits & Homelessness are responsible for ensuring that America’s veterans have the opportunity to provide with honor and dignity the economic necessities of life for themselves and their families. To achieve this goal, the commission and its committees work closely with governmental agencies and liaison to assist the organization’s members.

A staff responsibility is answering the large volume of mail and electronic mail that is received annually from veterans seeking information or assistance on issues that come under the commission's jurisdiction. While the staff can neither place individual veterans in jobs nor represent them in labor disputes, the staff does provide information, guidance and, when appropriate, referral. Besides correspondence from individuals, the staff also receives and answers frequent requests and inquiries from government agencies, members of Congress, congressional committees, private organizations and other groups regarding veterans' economic issues.

Employer of the Year Awards

One of the commission's major programs is its awards program, which is administered by the staff. Through this program, The American Legion pays tribute to those employers across the country who have established outstanding records in the employment and retention of veterans, workers with disabilities and older workers, and to exceptional members of the state employment security agencies.

Each year since 1969, the Legion's National Veterans Employment & Education Commission has sponsored an Employer of the Year Awards Program. This program seeks to honor those employers across the country that have established an outstanding record in the employment and retention of veterans. Before this year's Washington Conference, the chairman of

the National Veterans Employment & Education Commission, James A. LaCoursiere (CT), appointed a seven-person subcommittee to review all the nominations that had been received during 2021 in the Employer of Veterans Awards Program.

The commission's Awards Subcommittee met to select the following national winners:

- **Large Employer:** Berry Aviation, San Marcos, Texas
- **Medium Size Employer:** Shurmed EMS, San Antonio
- **Small Employer:** 5x5 Brewing Company, Mission, Texas

Employment Service Awards

Three awards, beginning in 1993, have been presented to the Local Veterans Employment Representative of the Year, the Disabled Veterans Outreach Program Specialist of the Year and the Employment Service Office of the Year. These awards are given in cooperation with local Job Service offices across the country to recognize genuinely outstanding veteran-dedicated staff members.

National winners are as follows:

- **LVER of the Year:** Christopher Garza, San Antonio
- **DVOP of the Year:** Geraldine Perry, Milwaukee
- **Employment Local Office:** Workforce Solutions Permian Basin, Odessa, Texas

Other Awards:

- **Employer of Older Workers:** Morris-Baker Funeral Home & Cremation Services Johnson City, Tenn.
- **Michael Guty's Homeless Veterans Outreach Award:** Department of New Jersey – Housing Our Heroes, Trenton, N.J.
- **Enhance the Lives of Disabled Person Award:** Grace After Fire, Houston

EMPLOYMENT & VETERANS PREFERENCE COMMITTEE

James Fratolillo, Massachusetts, Chairman

Joseph C. Sharpe Jr., Maryland, Director

The mission of the committee is to promote employment and training opportunities for veterans. To accomplish this, the committee works at the national level with Congress and various federal agencies. The committee does not place veterans in jobs, but rather relies on its network of employment chairpersons to assist individual veterans in finding employment. Their posts and departments appoint these employment chairpersons. Occasionally, departments also appoint them at the county and district levels. Additionally, this committee is charged with promoting veterans' preference throughout the federal government and ensuring that agencies continue to observe all veterans' preference laws.

VETERANS EDUCATION, OTHER BENEFITS & HOMELESSNESS COMMITTEE

Eric W. Measles, California, Chairman
Joseph C. Sharpe Jr., Maryland, Director

This committee is charged with ensuring that veterans' educational benefits provided by the federal government are sufficient and that every generation of veterans has substantially the same as, or better benefits than, the previous generation. Also, this committee is to ensure that all veterans receive the benefits to which they are entitled as recompense for their military service on behalf of a grateful nation while continuing to push for federal and local governments to allocate adequate resources to combat and ultimately eliminate veteran homelessness.

Federal Veterans' Economic Programs

The following is a brief overview of the commission's interactions with those federal agencies and their veterans programs, with which the commission works regularly. The National Veterans Employment & Education Commission addresses employment, education, homelessness and housing, and small-business concerns regarding veterans and their families. A synopsis of the meetings (and events preceding) follows:

Education, Licensing & Credentialing

The Veterans Employment & Education Division is devoted to ensuring that all veterans have the opportunity to utilize their earned education benefits to acquire the skills, experience and connections needed to pursue gainful employment. With the federal government spending \$12 billion a year on education benefits for veterans and their families, it is paramount to ensure proper oversight and administration of these vital programs. In addition to producing quality first-party research on the subject, the National Veterans Employment & Education Division routinely engages with subject-matter experts, policymakers, government agencies and other stakeholders to comprehensively examine and respond to veteran needs.

Since 2019, the National Employment and Education Division has continued to utilize grant funding from the Laura and John Arnold Foundation to produce content highlighting critical developments in veterans' higher education. Products from this grant include two published major reports detailing developments in expanding online education for veterans and an analysis of the novel Risk-Based Survey model (RBS) for GI Bill risk assessment in higher education.

In recent decades, the proliferation of online education has presented immense opportunities for veterans seeking to pursue a non-traditional path to achieving their academic goals. More than ever before, veterans utilize today's virtual environment to acquire the skills and credentials needed to gain workforce opportunities. The implications of this phenomenon and recommendations for reducing barriers to access to online education among veterans are detailed in the American Legion report "Opening Doors Online: Access, Accountability and Excellence in Veterans Distance Learning." This report is publicly available and can be downloaded in its entirety from the American Legion website.

Recent high-profile school closures and scandals have wasted taxpayer dollars and left veterans without reputable programs to seek employment. To remedy this, the Veterans Employment & Education Division has worked to advance the Risk-Based Survey model to ensure that only institutions of higher learning with reputable programs receive GI Bill funding. An overview of this innovative model and evaluation of the program's pilot efforts can be read in the American Legion report titled "Lessons for a Risk-Based Oversight Model Designed to Protect Students and Taxpayers." These findings can also be accessed free of charge from the American Legion website.

Each of these articles will receive accompanying op-eds introducing the reports and their main findings. Furthermore, each report will have a long-form article geared toward a public audience and published this summer on the American Legion website. The National Veterans Employment & Education Division will utilize the remaining funds from the Arnold Foundation grant to promote both landmark reports and hold a multi-day licensing and credentialing event at the 2022 American Legion national convention in Milwaukee.

The Veterans Employment & Education Division will also be promoting a resolution providing GI Bill education benefits to veterans who have received a discharge characterized as general under honorable conditions. The Veterans Employment & Education Division and Commission believe this extension of benefits is aligned with the original purpose and intent of the GI Bill and will help veterans separating from military service achieve gainful employment. Since between 7-8% of all discharges have fallen under this category in recent years, according to data provided to the division by the U.S. Department of Defense, this large group of servicemembers must receive the education benefits they are rightfully owed.

Additionally, the Veterans Employment & Education Division took a proactive approach to addressing the student veteran crisis that unfolded at the University of Arizona's Global Campus after the entity temporarily lost its GI Bill eligibility due to its acquisition of the embattled for-profit Ashford University in early April 2022. As a development that had the potential to impact approximately 5,000 student veterans within UAGC programs, the Veterans Employment & Education Division quickly coordinated with other veterans service organizations and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs to reinstate the institution's GI Bill eligibility. As of late April 2022, the University of Arizona's Global Campus is once again a qualified institution for GI Bill funding.

Held on March 5, 2022, over The American Legion's Washington Conference, the National Veterans Employment & Education Commission hosted an education panel discussion focused on new initiatives and opportunities to ensure veteran success in education and training. Participants included Nathan Arnold, senior policy adviser, EducationCounsel, LLC; Lauren Runco, director of strategy, Solution for Information Design, LLC; Elizabeth Belcaster, consultant, International Brotherhood of Teamsters; Steve Gonzales, senior vice president of government, military and veteran relations, Career Education Colleges and Universities; Christopher Madaio, vice president for legal affairs, Veterans Education Success; and Esmeralda Silva, president, Council of College and Military Educators. Panelists discussed new initiatives and opportunities available to veterans and resources that they provide to veterans and their families to ensure their success. Commission members engaged with the leaders during the question-and-answer period and highlighted their

concerns that all schools focus on providing quality programs that lead to gainful employment opportunities.

During The American Legion's 102nd National Convention in Phoenix, the Veterans Employment & Education Commission hosted speakers to inform attendees on new developments and current issues on veteran education.

Steve Gonzalez, senior vice president of government relations at Career Education Colleges and Universities (CECU), briefed commission members on CECU's innovation of skills training. The presentation focused on the Aviation Institute of Maintenance (AIM). In July, AIM purchased a new facility in Chicago's McKinley Park neighborhood. This facility is anticipated to be the organization's 14th and largest aviation maintenance campus with 137,000 square feet.

Dr. Joseph Wescott, national higher education consultant for The American Legion and national legislative liaison of the National Association of State Approving Agencies (NASAA), discussed a new model for higher-education quality assurance: the risk-based survey. He stated the current VA "compliance survey" does not prioritize state approving agencies (SSA)/VA resources on the institutions at risk for noncompliance or take a comprehensive consideration of the risk to student and program of education. The VA "compliance survey" lacks emphasis on program of education quality and student outcomes while concentrating primarily on payment accuracy. Wescott explained that the purpose of a risk-based approach is fivefold: to consider the probability and impact of potential risks, acknowledge that some schools pose less risk than others, review recruiting tactics and student concerns, review the institutions' financial stability, and create incentives to improve and address identified risks.

John Decoteau, the vice president of military and campus admission at Universal Technical Institute (UTI), discussed his organization's success with the Department of Defense (DOD) Skill Bridge Program, which allows transitioning servicemembers an opportunity to participate in employment skills training, on-the-job training, pre-apprenticeships and internships.

Last year, we stated in our report that The American Legion would use the \$500,000 grant from the Arnold Ventures Foundation to better engage in higher education policy, host more conferences for veterans' organizations and media on higher education, write more letters to policymakers, and better ensure that military and veteran interests are represented in civilian higher education discussions.

Though COVID has certainly impacted our ability to travel and most significant conferences have either been canceled or moved online, we have succeeded in engaging with relevant policy actors and stakeholders in higher education policy in D.C. and across the nation. We hired a nationally respected higher education consultant, Dr. Wescott, who has worked alongside John Kamin to fulfill our goal of expanding the influence and footprint of The American Legion in the areas of education and gainful employment. We attended and presented at the NAVPA Conference, the Student Veterans of America Conference, and attended virtually and presented at the NASAA Conference in Washington, D.C. Wescott serves as co-chair of the National Risk-Based Advisory Council, upon which Joseph Sharpe sits as a member. He also is a

member of the VA Veterans Committee on Education and is the policy group chair on the George W. Bush Institute's Veterans Education Task Force.

The American Legion VE&E staff have played a key role in drafting critical educational bills, including the Student Veterans Transparency and Protection Act of 2021, the Fly Vets Act, HR 5025, and other draft legislation written to assist veterans negatively impacted by the COVID pandemic. Realizing that veterans were forced to take their education programs online, the Legion worked with HVAC, SVAC and Student Veterans of America to encourage and craft legislation allowing veteran students to continue drawing their total housing allowance, even when forced to study online from home.

VE&E staff continues to play a vital role in the continued oversight of education institutions enrolling veterans using educational entitlements. The Harry W. Colmery Act of 2017, named after the former American Legion national commander and architect of the GI Bill, included provisions that required the establishment and implementation of risk-based surveys (RBS) in order to evaluate the quality of education at schools enrolling veterans and determine if taxpayers were getting a good return on their investment. This year, in the Isakson and Roe Veterans Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act of 2020 (Section 1013), Congress specified the minimum requirements for risk-based surveys and further determined that these types of reviews will begin in October 2022. It also mandates the establishment of a new national database to house RBS findings and other data. It provides the necessary financial support for the SAAs (State Approving Agencies) to perform these surveys. The surveys themselves shall follow a national model developed by the RBS Advisory Committee that Sharpe and Wescott sit on.

EMPLOYMENT & TRANSITION

During The American Legion's 102nd National Convention in Phoenix, the Veterans Employment & Education Commission hosted speakers to inform attendees on new developments and current issues on employment matters.

Adam Rocke, a retired Army colonel and senior director of external engagements of Hiring Our Heroes, addressed the VE&E Commission. Rocke discussed the veteran landscape, looking at the state of transition from employment and education; he noted that hiring events, Bridge Programs, and increasing diversity, equality and inclusion for veterans and military spouses were opportune areas to focus efforts on. Mentorship is essential for veterans and transitioning servicemembers, as they have difficulty communicating their skills and background. Career connectors can provide prospective job seekers with employment preparation, screening and coaching. Additionally, connecting to fellowship programs and receiving education and training to upskill is essential. The fellowship programs and digital tools referenced were: Corporate Fellowship Program, Military Spouse Fellowship Program, Veteran Employment Transition (VET) Roadmap, MilSpouse Roadmap.

Noel Gonzalez, a retired Navy captain and CEO of SkillMil, discussed the challenges veterans and transitioning servicemembers face due to how confusing the lifecycle of a Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) can be, due to mismatching skills due to improper MOS

translations. To rectify the issue of changing "military speak" to business jargon, SkillMil integrates military data and résumés with semantic matching algorithms to calculate the percentage match to the job description.

The National Veterans Employment & Education Division established the Employment Innovation Taskforce to bring together the public sector, private industry and nonprofit organizations to advance solutions for The American Legion to champion improved and quality employment with its federal agency partners. Likewise, the taskforce examines all aspects of the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) and credentialing in order to optimize TAP to ensure that servicemembers receive a seamless translation from military service to the private sector.

During the Feb. 23, 2022, Employer Innovation Taskforce Roundtable, private industry stakeholders highlighted a disconnect in base access between employers and transitioning servicemembers, with variability in Transition Service Program (TAP) officer support for employers making some installations more accessible than others. As a result, some servicemembers are not made aware of the different job opportunities out there for them. The private industry recommended that a standard practice come from VA to ensure employers are equipped with best practices to maintain steady contact with transitioning servicemembers (TSMs). In the interim, private sector taskforce members suggested that The American Legion hold events at posts adjacent to military bases to allow employers to connect with TSMs. Following the roundtable, the Veterans Employment & Education Division has worked to convene a Crisis Action Team with private sector task-force members and TAP officials to develop a national platform for defining how the TAP program should work for TSMs.

On March 5, 2022, during the Washington Conference, VE&E hosted an employment panel titled "Bolstering Veteran Federal Labor Market Competitiveness: How to Increase Veteran Hiring in the Federal Workforce Panel," moderated by Linda Rix, co-CEO of Avue Technologies Corporation. The panelists included were Darrett Lomax, HR specialist/selective placement program manager, U.S. Department of Homeland Security; and Saundre Easton-Fletcher, program specialist, United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The panel evaluated hiring system gaps federal executive-branch agencies face and explored best practices to bolster veteran employment. Initiatives that panelists addressed included: initiatives their agencies are undertaking to become more attractive to veterans, programs to train human resource staff on military experience translation, efforts to grant security clearance reciprocity, and credentialing programs to assist veterans in gaining access to career ladders and jobs.

CAREER FAIRS

The American Legion has been hosting and participating in job fairs since 2005, with the primary purpose of educating veterans about their benefits, providing veterans avenues for employment, and promoting The American Legion's mission "to enhance the well-being of America's veterans, their families, our military and our communities by our devotion to mutual helpfulness."

The American Legion has been invited to participate in over 12 Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Program (YRRP) events. On Aug. 14, 2021, the National Veterans Employment &

Education Division attended a YRRP event in Arlington, Va., with the Air National Guard Component. Over 135 Air National Guard servicemembers were present, 40 of whom engaged with the American Legion booth, and 12 applied for membership with The American Legion. American Legion Post 290 from Stafford, Va., provided an honor guard for the opening ceremonies. The YRRP is a Department of Defense (DoD) initiative to promote the well-being of National Guard and reserve servicemembers, their families and communities by connecting them with resources throughout a deployment cycle.

On Wednesday, Sept. 22, 2021, the National Veterans Employment & Education Division collaborated with the Texas Veterans and Workforce commissions to host a hybrid career event. The in-person component attracted 37 employers and 115 jobseekers, 25 of whom were members of Fort Hood's Soldier Recovery Unit. Twenty-three interviews were scheduled between employers and jobseekers after the event. The virtual fair attracted 249 employers and 258 jobseekers. Seven employers confirmed interviews with candidates.

The National Veterans Employment & Education Division of The American Legion once again collaborated with the Texas Veterans and Workforce commissions to host a virtual hiring event on Wednesday, March 9, 2022, through Premier Virtual. National Commander Paul E. Dillard provided video welcoming remarks to employers and jobseekers as they entered the event. There were 240 employers from various industries and 315 registered jobseekers who participated in the career fair. Jobseekers consisted of active-duty servicemembers, veterans, spouses and family members from across the nation. Almost 1,700 unique conversations between organizations and candidates were exchanged, with 11,366 messages sent. There was one immediate hire at the event. The employers and participants at this event were pleased with the outcome. The employers stated that the participants were professional and qualified. The participants liked that the employers were from different industries and were willing to hire veterans. Surveys to industry and attendees were sent out to assess further ways to improve future events. Two Job Seeker Prep workshops were conducted on Feb. 17 and March 3, with 38 individuals registering for the first workshop and 65 participants for the second. The workshops assisted jobseekers in using the Premier Virtual Platform, preparing for interviews, and tailoring and updating their résumés.

On June 13, 2022, the National Veterans Employment & Education Division and the Department of Texas hosted a series of workshops at Fort Hood for its Soldier Recovery Unit, transitioning servicemembers and military spouses. The workshops were designed to help veterans, servicemembers and their spouses find meaningful careers in the civilian workforce, expand their networks and gain the tools necessary to stand out throughout the hiring process. The following day, members from the National Veterans Employment & Education Division and the Department of Texas were present at Fort Hood's Mega Career Fair as a resource booth to educate servicemembers about their benefits. These Legionnaires discussed how The American Legion assists veterans with reintegrating into their local communities. Additionally, they answered servicemember/veteran questions about benefits, and described the Legion's programs as well as explained how to become a member. Seventy-two transitioning servicemembers, active-duty personnel and military spouses attended the workshops and American Legion booth.

On June 24, 2022, the Department of Puerto Rico held an in-person career fair at Fort Buchanan. To initiate discussions on job opportunities for the event, the Veterans Employment &

Education Division collaborated with the U.S. Chamber of Commerce (USSC) Hiring Our Heroes (HOH) program and held a networking reception the day before, on June 23, by providing an engagement reception between jobseekers and select employers. In conjunction with the career fair, the Veterans Employment & Education Division hosted résumé, financial literacy and social media branding workshops. The workshops assisted jobseekers in tailoring their civilian and federal résumés, gaining comprehensive financial planning knowledge, and achieving greater visibility to hiring managers through a well-formulated LinkedIn profile.

This event started with an opening ceremony, which included speakers Col. Tomika M. Seaberry, garrison commander of Fort Buchanan; Samuel Garcia Melendez, JVSG Veteran Program coordinator for Puerto Rico's Department of Labor and Human Resources; Noel Gonzalez, chief executive officer of SkillMil; Juan Abreu, deputy director of events and engagements for Hiring Our Heroes; and Carmen I. Rosario Diaz, commander of the American Legion Department of Puerto Rico.

There were 45 employers from various industries and 106 preregistered attendees, consisting of active-duty servicemembers, veterans, Guard and reserve members, and military spouses who participated in the career fair. The employers and participants at this event were pleased with the outcome. The employers stated that the participants were professional and qualified. The participants liked that employers were from different industries and willing to hire veterans.

VETERAN ENTREPRENEURSHIP

The Veterans Employment & Education Division seeks to foster an entrepreneurial ecosystem that allows veteran-owned small businesses to thrive in an ever-evolving economic landscape. The issues impacting veteran-owned small businesses are vast and complicated, so the National Veterans Employment & Education Division facilitates the American Legion National Veterans Small Business Task Force to define and execute best practices in developing small businesses and government procurement policies.

On Sept. 17, 2021, the Veterans Employment & Education Division convened a Veterans Small Business Taskforce Roundtable focused on addressing veteran-owned small businesses' emerging challenges. The 25-member roundtable reviewed current legislative priorities based on Legion resolutions on the small business policy before engaging in a dialogue on new issues of consideration. Members delineated five major issue areas to pursue via the formation of task force subcommittees: Cybersecurity, Access to Capital, Taxes, Verifications and VETs First Expansion. Each subcommittee will research and deliberate their respective issues to guide the task force about appropriate action steps to address the issue. Discussion surrounding the Work Opportunity Tax Credit also led to a proposed resolution advocating for an expansion in tax credits for private companies that hire or are looking to hire veterans.

VA recently announced the Department of Defense, Defense Logistics Agency (DLA) DMLSS integration as a stopgap measure to extend the runway for modernizing the medical-surgical supply chain under the large Medical Surgical Prime Vendor 2.0 (MSPV). This is causing

much consternation within the veteran small business community because the announcement coincided with the cancellation of small business contract solicitations under MSPV 2.0. Although DLA has assured VA and Congress that integration with DMLSS will comply with all VA procurement laws, the incentive to follow through does not exist. As a result, veteran small businesses will suffer, and VA's ability to effectively and legally modernize their medical supply chain will falter. The onus is currently on VA and DLA to develop a policy statement and implementable plan to adhere to VA's procurement laws.

During The American Legion's 102nd National Convention in Phoenix, the Veterans Employment & Education Commission hosted speakers to inform attendees on new developments and current issues on veterans small business matters. The meeting was attended by The American Legion's Small Business Task Force members, VE&E Commission and committee members, representatives from the U.S. Small Business Administration and other guests.

Larry Stubblefield, associate administrator in the Office of Veterans Business Development at the SBA, opened up the discussion. Stubblefield began his presentation by quoting Isabella Guzman, the SBA administrator: "Small businesses are the giants of our economy." Small businesses create two-thirds of all new jobs. Around 2.5 million veteran-owned businesses generate over \$1 trillion in sales regarding small businesses owned by veterans. SBA mentioned some COVID relief programs to support small businesses: the Paycheck Protection Program, the Restaurant Revitalization Fund and the COVID-19 Economic Injury Disaster Loan (EIDL). "We're looking to help small businesses recover and rebuild through the pandemic," he said, emphasizing those owned by minorities and located in rural areas. "Small businesses have had to pivot, and we at SBA have had to do the same thing."

Charles Fowler from GPS Global Inc. briefed the attendees on some issues related to the Vets First program. The Veterans Benefits, Health Care and Information Technology Act of 2006 gave the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) authority to allow verified veteran-owned businesses to compete for VA set-asides. However, \$800 million was awarded incorrectly to non-eligible companies, according to the 2020 Department of Defense inspector general's report. Fowler is pushing to pass legislation strengthening the ability for veterans to receive priority to seek and win these set-asides. The idea is to give the certification from VA to DoD to ensure the good companies are getting the procurement contracts. "That's what we're trying to get rid of," he said, referring to non-eligibles, "and open it up to the veterans who are doing the work and are the ones who are competing. And they are not competing against others who are not veterans and just got a pass-through."

Margaret Evangelista, director of the Veteran Business Outreach Center (VBOC) in Arizona, informed the attendees that there are 22 VBOCs nationwide funded by grants from the Small Business Administration (SBA). The program is designed to provide entrepreneurial development services such as business training, counseling, mentorship and resource partner referrals to transitioning servicemembers, veterans and spouses interested in starting or growing a small business.

Lastly, the National Veterans Employment & Education staff continues its relationship with the Small Business Administration (SBA) Office of Veterans Business Development to

increase participation in the Boots to Business entrepreneurial education and training program. VE&E is also promoting the establishment of at least two new Veteran Business Opportunity Centers to expand access to business training and counseling for veteran-owned small businesses. The VE&E collaborates with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to establish a procurement advisory board in order to: provide feedback on current VA procurement policies, procedures and practices, encourage competition at VA and ensure VA procurement officials are using best practices to maximize competition. Furthermore, VE&E is in the process of addressing small business development in rural areas. VE&E is currently identifying federal, state and local resources throughout the United States that veterans can access, such as business loan guarantees and counseling services.

On Feb. 18, 2022, the National Veterans Small Business Task Force met virtually with 25 members in attendance to discuss policy recommendations from the task force's five subcommittees (cybersecurity, access to capital, veterans preference, verification/certification and taxes). Members of the task force then presented their findings to the National Veterans Employment & Education Commission Meeting at the 2022 Washington Conference on March 5.

Based on task force recommendations, the Veterans Employment & Education Division has submitted resolutions for consideration that would (1) promote increasing the veteran small business procurement goals for federal agencies from 3% to 5% of total government spending, (2) formally endorse the transfer of the duties and responsibilities of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Center for Verification and Evaluation to the U.S. Small Business Administration to ensure efficient verification of veteran-owned small businesses, and (3) advocate expansion of Work Opportunity Tax Credit Program (WOTC) eligibility to include active-duty military spouses.

Under the guidelines established under the Veterans Entrepreneurship and Small Business Development Act of 1999, all federal agencies must set a goal of spending at least 3% of their annual budget on contract opportunities (both prime and subcontracting opportunities) for Service-Disabled Veteran-Owned Small Businesses (SDVOSBs). However, these goals have often been challenging for agencies to achieve, and veteran businesses are routinely underutilized within federal procurement contracting. Analysis conducted by the Veterans Employment & Education Division of data provided by the U.S. Small Business Administration provides the following critical insights:

- Only four government agencies of the 24 examined (17%) met both their prime and subcontracting goals in FY 2020 (Department of Homeland Security, Department of Labor, National Science Foundation and Social Security Administration).
- All other agencies (83%) either failed to meet their prime contracting goal, subcontracting goal or both.
- While 16 agencies (66%) did meet their prime goal of 3% of total spending, only eight (33%) met their subcontracting goal in FY 2020.
- Four agencies (17%), including the Agency for International Development (USAID), the Department of Agriculture, the Department of Education and the Department of Health and Human Services, failed to meet both their prime and subcontracting goal in FY 2020.

While there is still work to be done to ensure that agencies meet the current 3% threshold spending goal as mandated by law, the National Veterans Employment & Education Division believes that it is critical to ensure parity with other set-aside groups that have a 5% goal within the current federal acquisition structure. On April 1, 2022, staff met with Republican House of Representatives Veterans Affairs Committee Staff Director John Clark to discuss the ongoing issue of federal agencies routinely underperforming in meeting their contracting goals. Staff expressed a desire to hold a hearing highlighting the issue in the forthcoming months to illuminate the problem and develop solutions.

The Veterans Employment & Education Division also supports the transfer of the duties and responsibilities of the Center for Verification and Evaluation from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA). Currently, both agencies use their own independent programs to determine whether a small business is eligible to be classified as a Veteran-Owned Small Business (VOSB) or a Service-Disabled Veteran-Owned Small Business (SDVOSB). This has led to redundancies, overlapping claims of jurisdiction, frustration among business owners, and in some cases lost opportunities for veteran small business owners. This attempt to streamline the classification process will still allow VA to reserve the right to determine eligibility while utilizing the SBA's experience and existing infrastructure to administer the program more effectively.

Additionally, the Veterans Employment & Education Division is supporting legislative initiatives to expand Work Opportunity Tax Credit Program (WOTC) eligibility to active-duty military spouses. Given the frequent travel associated with military life, many military spouses find difficulties in achieving meaningful employment. Some estimates indicate that as many as 24% of military spouses may be unemployed. To remedy this issue, VE&E believes that expanding the WOTC program to cover military spouses would incentivize employers to find the benefit in hiring military spouses. Given the WOTC program already includes veterans as a target group, this expansion represents a natural extension of the current program.

The Veterans Employment & Education Division has also been diligently advocating on behalf of issues facing veteran business owners and entrepreneurs to lawmakers and government agencies. On March 18, 2022, staff met with staff from Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman Jack Reed's (D-RI) office to advocate for the inclusion of draft statutory language in the forthcoming 2023 National Defense Authorization Act that would expand the adoption of the Vets First contracting program to the United States Department of Defense. If implemented, this policy would provide untold opportunities for veteran-owned small businesses to work with the federal government in the years ahead while protecting the Vets First program at VA from efforts to undermine it.

Furthermore, the Veterans Employment & Education Division is engaging with the U.S. Small Business Administration and stakeholder groups to discuss the non-payment of subcontractors after receiving reports from veteran-owned small businesses that they have not been receiving the agreed-upon amount they negotiated with the prime contractor. The Veterans Employment & Education Division will continue to engage with the U.S. Small Business

Administration to address this issue and explore potential legislative options to protect subcontracting veteran-owned small businesses from being taken advantage of.

The Veterans Employment & Education Division is also working with veteran-owned small businesses that have lost their contract extensions to larger suppliers due to a negative trend that category management has had on the federal small business supplier base. Division staff connects these individuals with appropriate personnel within their customer's relevant Office of Small and Disadvantaged Business Utilization to assist the business owner in seeking a bid protest or other forms of redress. As an expanding practice, category management has dramatically reduced the number of new opportunities for small businesses by normalizing "bundling" as a standard operating procedure; wherein numerous contracts are consolidated into a large, exclusionary bid that poses significant barriers to entry for most small businesses.

Additionally, division staff is collaborating with other advocacy organizations to evaluate tax reform proposals that would expand opportunities for military spouses to contribute to retirement savings plans immediately without a required waiting period. Given the frequent relocation required for military families, many military spouses struggle to reach the necessary tenure to contribute to 401(k) and other retirement benefits as established under their employer's policies. This effort seeks to improve the quality of life for veteran spouses and provide economic stability for veterans once they reach the eligible retirement age.

The American Legion is concerned with the ongoing deterioration of the federal small business supplier base due to category management. Category management is a government-wide procurement framework that has the explicit objective of reducing the number of government contracts to improve efficiency in federal acquisition through agencies purchasing goods and services as a single enterprise. Consequentially, the number of small businesses doing work with the federal government has shrunk by 40% over the past decade. Category management attempts to drive down prices and establish a set of requirements that small businesses cannot feasibly compete with. This issue was highlighted in a congressional hearing titled "Growing the Small Business Supplier Base in Government Contracting." The exclusion of small businesses, reduced competition in the federal marketplace and fewer opportunities to perform option years are all adverse consequences of the category management framework.

The American Legion has received numerous reports from veteran small business owners that prime contractors have been shortchanging subcontractors. Through either altering contract requirements after an agreement was already made or simply paying less than the agreed-upon sum, prime contractors are taking advantage of veteran businesses for their own profit margins. Unfortunately, subcontractors who have faced these issues have little ability to seek redress from the federal government, and the consequences for non-payment are generally left to the discretion of the agency's contracting officer. The American Legion's National Employment & Education Division will be proposing a resolution condemning these morally reprehensible practices and will continue to support veteran-owned small businesses that experience this malpractice.

The American Legion continues to take a vested interest in ensuring that federal agencies meet their contracting goals for both prime and subcontracts in accordance with the Veterans Entrepreneurship and Small Business Development Act of 1999. Currently, all federal agencies

must aim to contract 3% of their total spending dollars to Service-Disabled Veteran-Owned Small Businesses (SDVOSBs). Today, many agencies continue to fail in meeting this goal, with notable delinquency in subcontracting compliance among federal agencies.

As indicated through an analysis of the U.S. Small Business Administration's annual procurement scorecard, only four government agencies of the 24 examined met both their prime and subcontracting goals in FY 2020 (Department of Homeland Security, Department of Labor, National Science Foundation and Social Security Administration). All other agencies either failed to meet their prime contracting goal, subcontracting goal or both. While 16 agencies did meet their prime goal of 3%, only eight met their subcontracting goal in FY 2020. Several agencies, including the Agency for International Development (USAID), the Department of Agriculture, the Department of Education and the Department of Health and Human Services failed to meet both their prime and subcontracting goal in FY 2020.

VETERAN HOMELESSNESS

The Homelessness and Housing portfolio maintained a small role in this year's Washington Convention. The focus for now is ensuring the Homeless Task Force Chairperson spreadsheet is updated with accurate names and phone numbers. Another goal is to ensure that pending appointments are filled so that the work of collaboration with Task Force chairpersons, the American Legion Auxiliary and the Sons of The American Legion can continue. The VE&E Division has an immediate goal to streamline processes and facilitate resources that bridge the gap in services to homeless and at-risk veterans in each state. By responding to data and forging relationships with major stakeholders, the VE&E Division is laying the groundwork for a robust Homeless Veteran Task Force that will be instrumental in the work of eradicating homelessness among veterans. The Secretary of Housing and Urban Development and the Secretary of Veteran Affairs have both committed to making ending homelessness among veterans a priority.

On April 12, 2021, a joint statement was issued by United States Secretary of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Marcia Fudge, and United States Secretary of Veteran Affairs (VA) Denis McDonough, affirming their commitment to end veteran homelessness. The statement was a call to end homelessness with a commitment to five key areas:

- Make ending homelessness a top priority
- Lead with an evidence-based housing first approach
- Reach underserved veterans
- Ensure the delivery of quality supportive services
- Increase the supply of and access to affordable housing

Since the Washington Conference, the VE&E Division has begun to work at supporting this goal by attending two Federal Advisory Committee (FAC) meetings. The first meeting was the Veterans and Community Oversight and Engagement Board (VCOEB) FAC meeting. In this meeting, Keith Harris, the senior executive homeless agent for Greater L.A., spoke about the West Los Angeles project and progress in housing homeless veterans. He also spoke about Secretary

McDonough's ongoing goal to house 38,000 veterans in permanent housing by the end of this calendar year. Dr. Steve Braverman, director of VAMC Los Angeles, spoke about updates and successes of the project starting with the opening of the Care, Treatment & Rehabilitative Services (CTRS) initiative in April 2020. This project started with a few tents in a parking lot and has now expanded to 120 tiny home shelters. Robert McKenrick, deputy director, VAMC spoke about the North Campus budget and its approval for 2021/2022 and the preparation of the 2023 budget. All funding requested has been approved and the funding has caught up to where there are no funding challenges.

Although there are no funding challenges, there were public recommendations to ensure that veterans remained the top priority. The VCOEB's final recommendation was that the VA secretary instruct the leadership of the Greater Los Angeles Veteran Affairs Administration to create a web-based dashboard available to the public that reports on progress in providing permanent housing for veterans experiencing homelessness in the Greater L.A. area. American Legion Resolution 141 of 2016 recommends placing more focus on restricting the Enhanced-Use Leasing capabilities to a priority list of services that will meet the needs of the veteran community. It further states that outside organizations should follow the same reporting procedures as the government to ensure proper oversight and accountability in assuring that the needs of homeless veterans are met. This advocacy continues as the meeting revealed that there is an ongoing concern in these areas as approval of the Master Plan 2022 Draft moves forward.

The second FAC meeting was with the Advisory Committee on Homeless Veterans. The purpose of the committee is to provide the VA secretary with an ongoing assessment of the effectiveness of the policies, organizational structure and services of VA in assisting veterans at risk of and experiencing homelessness. Secretary McDonough made a video appearance and spoke about his commitment to ensuring top-quality care for veterans, their families and their loved ones. He further explained how VA is committed to living up to the fundamental principle of advocacy by providing world-class resources to end homelessness and suicides. He adamantly stated that "VA will lead in advocating for veterans" by seeking new ways to ensure the most vulnerable veterans have access to care. He explained how the success of the programs will be determined by veterans because they are the judges of the quality of care they receive. After attending this FAC meeting the VE&E Division joined the American Legion Auxiliary (ALA) on a site visit to the Southeast Veteran's Center in Washington, D.C., to hear from veterans who receive services at that facility.

The site visit was arranged by ALA on a day when VA Chief of Staff Tanya Bradsher was visiting. This center is one of the facilities that has a Community Based Outpatient Clinic (CBOC) on site. The visit highlighted some concerns that veterans have about their convenience to care through CBOCs. If clinics were to close it would create a barrier for veterans to receive health care due to transportation issues. The chief of staff stated during the visit that VA's focus continues to be the care of all veterans. The VE&E Division will continue to monitor this concern to ensure that any changes made provide an increase to the care and support of veterans.

While some CBOCs may be closing, there is some good news surrounding funding for HUD-VASH. In December 2021, \$18 million was awarded to 33 states toward vouchers and housing assistance for veterans. In addition, there are increases for the program identified in the FY 2023 White House budget. The legislative movement in support of homeless prevention among veterans is gaining traction. The VE&E Division looks forward to advancing resolutions and advocating to Congress concerning homelessness among veterans in future conventions.

During this period, VE&E has reviewed the following legislation: Housing Our Veterans Act (H.R. 6810), Helping Unleash Benefits and Services (HUBS) Act (H.R. 6671), the extension of VA assistance for individuals residing temporarily in housing owned by a family member (2021a Ext), a food bill to establish a VA office for food insecurity, a pilot program for tiny homes for veterans (H6307), and an extension of certain VA programs for homeless veterans. The hearing is scheduled for May 18, 2022, on all but the first two bills mentioned in this paragraph. In addition to these legislative items, VE&E Division has answered the call of more than 40 veterans during this period and connected them with resources and assistance to help meet their needs. The Homeless Veteran Task Force has made this work possible and will only get better as the work continues going forward.