

NATIONAL VETERANS EMPLOYMENT & EDUCATION COMMISSION

John W. Bowen, Colorado, Chairman

Joseph C. Sharpe Jr., District of Columbia, Director

This report covers the programs, activities and accomplishments of the National Veterans Employment & Education (VE&E) Commission, its two standing committees (Employment & Veterans Preference and Veterans Education, Other Benefits & Homelessness), and the division staff from July 1, 2022, through June 30, 2023. 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 VE&E Commission is chaired by John W. Bowen (CO). The division comprises director Joseph C. Sharpe Jr., policy associates Ricardo D. Gomez, Adam B. Treece and Kevin P. O'Neil, and administrative assistant Ifechukwude M. Abili.

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

2022-2023 Meetings

During the period of July 1, 2022, through June 30, 2023, the commission met for the following three regularly scheduled executive sessions:

- (1) The chairman of the commission addressed the National Executive Committee, held at The American Legion's National Headquarters in Indianapolis from Oct. 10-13, 2022. A complete report on that meeting appears in the Digest of Proceedings of the National Executive Committee of The American Legion, October 2022.
- (2) At the 63rd Washington Conference, held in Washington, D.C., from Feb. 26-March 1, 2023, commission members and guests met to hear the latest on subjects of concern.
- (3) The chairmen of the commission met May 8-9, 2023, at the headquarters office in Indianapolis. A complete report of that meeting appears in the Digest of Proceedings of the National Executive Committee of The American Legion, May 2023.

Legislative Appearances

A vital part of the work of the National VE&E Commission is the preparation and presentation of congressional testimony, preparing letters of support on issues impacting the economic well-being of America's veterans and meeting with congressional staff to discuss priority issues. During the period covered by this report, the commission staff testified before Congress and 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, 2022, to June 30, 2023, on matters concerning the National VE&E Commission:

- On July 20, 2022, Joseph C. Sharpe, director of VE&E, testified before the House Veterans Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity in a hearing titled "Modernizing Veteran Education in the Shadow of COVID-19."
- On Aug. 24, 2022, VE&E staff signed a joint letter of support with several veteran service organizations to applaud the Department of Education's proposed rules for implementing the closure of the 90/10 loophole.
- On Oct. 5, 2022, VE&E staff signed a letter of support for an NDAA amendment requiring the Voluntary Education Institutional Compliance Program of the U.S. Department of Defense to develop a risk-based survey to oversee covered educational institutions.
- On Dec. 14, 2022, Joseph C. Sharpe testified before the House Veterans Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity regarding "The VA Housing Loan Forever Act of 2022."
- On March 1, 2023, VE&E Chairman Bowen testified alongside National Commander Vincent J. "Jim" Troiola regarding matters concerning employment and education.
- On March 30, 2023, Matthew Brennan, policy associate, VE&E, testified before the House Veterans Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity regarding "Pending Legislation."
- On June 14, 2023, Ricardo D. Gomez, policy associate, VE&E, testified before the House Veterans Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity regarding "Pending Legislation."
- From July 1, 2022, to June 30, 2023, VE&E staff met with the following congressional offices to discuss issues related to veteran education, employment, housing and small business: Sen. Jon Tester (D-MT); Sen. Ben Cardin (D-MD); Sen. Joni Ernst (R-IA); Sen. Tammy Duckworth (D-IL); Sen. Angus King (I-ME); Sen. Rick Scott (R-FL); Rep. Mike Bost (R-IL); Rep. Roger Williams (R-TX); Rep. Mark Takano (D-CA); Rep. Nydia Velazquez (D-NY); Rep. Mike Levin (D-CA); Rep. Nick LaLota (R-NY); Rep. Morgan Luttrell (R-TX); Rep. Morgan McGarvey (D-KY); Rep. Maria Salazar (R-FL); Rep. Aaron Bean (R-FL); Rep. Jim Banks (R-IN); Rep. Austin Scott (R-GA); Rep. Carlos Gimenez (R-FL); and Rep. Mike Johnson (R-LA).

Administrative Activities

The National VE&E Commission is responsible for ensuring that America's veterans can 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 liaisons to assist the organization's members.

Staff answers a large volume of mail and electronic mail from veterans seeking information or assistance on issues under the commission's jurisdiction. While the staff can neither place individual veterans in jobs, educational programs or housing nor represent them in labor disputes, they provide information, guidance and, when appropriate, referral. In addition to responding to veteran correspondence, 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. Through this program, The American Legion pays tribute to employers nationwide who established outstanding records employing and retaining veterans, workers with disabilities and elderly workers. In addition, The American Legion recognizes exceptional members of the state employment security agencies.

Each year since 1969, the Legion's National VE&E Commission has sponsored the Employer of the Year Awards Program. This program seeks to honor employers nationwide who have established an outstanding record in employing and retaining veterans. Before this year's Washington Conference, Chairman Bowen appointed a five-person subcommittee to review all the Employer of Veterans Award Program nominations received in 2022.

The Awards Subcommittee met to select the following national winners:

- **Large Employer:** Akima, Fort Cavazos, Texas
- **Medium Size Employer:** Texas Veteran Security, San Antonio
- **Small Employer:** TangoAlpha³, Austin, Texas

Employment Service Awards

In 1993, three awards were first 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 nationwide to recognize outstanding veteran-dedicated staff members.

National winners are as follows:

- **LVER of the Year:** Eric Brown, Dallas
- **DVOP of the Year:** Kelly Norris, Garland, Texas
- **Employment Local Office:** Workforce Solutions Panhandle, Amarillo, Texas

Other Awards:

- **Employer of Older Workers:** Harris Health System, Bellaire, Texas
- **Michael Guty's Homeless Veterans Outreach Award:** Department of New Jersey – Housing Our Heroes, Trenton, N.J.
- **Enhance the Lives of Disabled Person Award:** PRIDE Industries Western Currency Facility, Fort Worth, Texas

EMPLOYMENT & VETERANS PREFERENCE COMMITTEE

James Fratolillo, Massachusetts, Chairman

Joseph C. Sharpe Jr., District of Columbia, Director

The committee's mission is to promote employment and training opportunities for veterans. To accomplish this, the committee works with Congress and various federal agencies. The committee does not place veterans in jobs; it relies on its network of employment chairpersons to assist individual veterans in finding employment. Posts and departments appoint these employment chairpersons. Occasionally, departments also appoint them at the county and district levels. Additionally, this committee promotes veterans' preference throughout the federal government and ensures that agencies continue to observe all veterans' preference laws.

VETERANS EDUCATION, OTHER BENEFITS & HOMELESSNESS COMMITTEE

Eric W. Measles, California, Chairman

Joseph C. Sharpe Jr., District of Columbia, Director

This committee ensures that veterans' educational benefits provided by the federal government are sufficient and that every generation of veterans has the same or better benefits than the previous generation. In addition, this committee ensures that all veterans receive the benefits they are entitled to for their military service on behalf of a grateful nation. Finally, this committee advocates for federal and local governments to allocate adequate resources to combat and 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 VE&E Commission addresses employment, education, homelessness and housing, and small business concerns regarding veterans and their families. A synopsis of the meetings and events follows.

Education, Licensing & Credentialing

The VE&E Commission is devoted to ensuring all veterans can utilize their education benefits to acquire the skills and experience necessary for gainful employment. This requires thoughtful consideration of veterans' needs and careful examination of how to improve student veterans' experience. To facilitate this, the National VE&E Commission routinely engages with subject-matter experts, policymakers, government agencies and other stakeholders to comprehensively examine and respond to veterans' needs.

The VE&E Commission can provide insight into the student veteran experience by engaging with myriad stakeholders. Often the various stakeholders are unaware of veterans' issues when pursuing their academic goals. One issue that has become increasingly common is school closures. School closures and scandals have led to the squandering of taxpayer dollars and the loss of time and benefits for veterans. To remedy this, the VE&E Commission works to advance the Risk-Based Survey (RBS) Model to ensure that only institutions of higher learning with reputable programs receive GI Bill funding. A recent focus that seeks to expand the RBS Model is the Gainful Employment Rule; this proposed rule uses a debt-to-earnings ratio and an earnings premium test to determine whether academic programs will provide students with a return on their investment and prepare them for gainful employment. If the respective program is not designed to do this, the institution will not receive GI Bill funding. It is a commonsense approach that will protect veterans from predatory institutions that aim to exploit them.

In addition to the RBS Model and the Gainful Employment Rule, there are additional proposed solutions to the issues student veterans face – including those that ensure student veterans can obtain their transcript in the case of school closures. The Transcripts for Heroes Bill is one solution the VE&E Commission worked with Congress to draft. This bill will allow the student veteran to access their transcript digitally, even during a school closure. This greatly reduces the likelihood that the veteran will have lapses in receiving their education benefits.

In addition to alleviating burdens for student veterans, the VE&E Commission works to expand opportunities for veterans in the licensing and credentialing space. To do this, the VE&E Commission regularly meets with legislators to find innovative ways for veterans to receive an education beyond the traditional four-year college path. Most recently, the commission supported a bill designed to promote interest in the aviation field. This bill aims to establish a grant program to assist veterans in obtaining private pilot certificates. As obtaining a private pilot certificate is a requisite to obtaining a commercial pilot's license, veterans must have one. The grant program will pay up to \$10,000 to veterans hoping to receive their private pilot certificate if the veteran intends to earn their commercial pilots' license. In the next decade, it is expected that 250,000 pilots will be needed to fill demand. With many veterans interested in aviation, having more avenues for them to enter the aviation field could help alleviate the impending shortage. The aviation industry, however, is not the only industry that will incur shortages. The trucking, cyber and health-care industries will require abundant skilled workers to fill the already exorbitant shortages in these critically manned career fields.

For this reason, the VE&E Commission works closely with Task Force Movement. Task Force Movement is a coalition of military lifecycle experts and industry specialists focusing on

improving the lives of transitioning servicemembers, veterans and their families. The American Legion regularly enlists the help of these industry specialists to find ways to reduce shortages in critically manned career fields and provide transitioning servicemembers and veterans with well-paying, family-sustaining careers. Put simply, the VE&E Commission seeks to advance legislation designed to create opportunities for veterans. This can be done in various capacities, through collaboration with various stakeholders in the education, licensing and credentialing space. The work the VE&E Commission does is critical to seeing that veterans have every available opportunity during and following their military career.

The National VE&E Commission hosted a “Higher Education and Credentialing” roundtable on Feb. 27, 2023, in conjunction with the Washington Conference. The roundtable featured 34 stakeholder participants and presentations from Task Force Movement, SOLID, LLC., the George W. Bush Presidential Center and John Patrick University of Applied Health Sciences.

The roundtable primarily focused on the changing landscape of higher education and filling critical skills gaps in the labor market with veterans. In addition, roundtable participants identified and examined innovations and new methods that institutions are embracing to educate veterans and explore servicemember barriers to gainful employment in the health-care, aviation and cybersecurity industries. Higher education and training changed dramatically in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and some changes will likely remain. As technological advancements cause colleges and training establishments to embrace new means of reaching out to and providing quality education to student veterans, those changes must be anchored to the commitment to ensuring veteran success in education and employment.

Finally, during The American Legion's 103rd National Convention in Milwaukee, the VE&E Commission hosted a multi-day licensing and credentialing event. American Legion members attended this meeting to develop a better understanding of some of the issues impacting servicemembers seeking gainful employment after becoming veterans.

EMPLOYMENT & TRANSITION

During The American Legion's 103rd National Convention in Milwaukee, the VE&E Commission hosted speakers to inform attendees on new developments and current issues on employment matters.

Mark Toal, director of the Office of Strategic Outreach for the Department of Labor (DoL) Veterans Employment and Training Services (VETS), briefed the commission on DoL’s mission, objectives and initiatives. This was done to prepare America’s veterans, transitioning servicemembers and their spouses for meaningful careers by providing them with resources, an understanding of protecting their employment rights, and employment opportunities.

DoL’s VETS office is the voice for the veteran employment space. Additional agencies within DoL that serve veterans and military spouses are the Employment & Training Administration, which works with the National Workforce System and American Job Centers, provides Unemployment Compensation (UCX) benefits, and houses the Office of Apprenticeship and Workforce Innovation and Opportunity (WIOA) Grants. The Solicitor's Office provides

employment law expertise and referral assistance regarding Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights (USERRA) cases. The Bureau of Labor Statistics continuously monitors and analyses U.S. veteran employment statistics. The Chief Evaluation Officer evaluates the effectiveness and efficiency of veteran employment programs. The Office of Disability Employment Policy focuses on disability-related policies that benefit veterans. The Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs ensures affirmative action provisions of the Vietnam Era Veterans Readjustment Assistance Act (VEVRAA). The Women's Bureau develops policy, advocates for equality and economic security, and promotes quality work environments for working women, including military spouses. The Wages and Hour Division oversees the Military Family Leave Act (FMLA). Finally, the Employee Benefits Security Administration provides financial literacy guidance and a military retirement structure.

Toal emphasized the soft skills and transferable skills veterans offer the private industry, including leadership, strong work ethic, technical skills, and strong performance under pressure. Toal emphasized that studies show veterans are more productive and have higher retention rates than non-veterans.

Additionally, Toal covered the Transition Assistance Module that DOL VETS provides, which consists of a one-day employment workshop and two one-day career-related tracks in employment or vocational training. He also discussed the supplemental programs to the Transition Assistance Program (TAP), including the Employer Navigator Partnership Pilot Program (ENPP), the Transition Employment Assistance for Military Spouses Program, the Wounded Warrior and Caregiver Employment Workshop, and the Off Base Transition Training Pilot.

Kimberly Holden, the deputy associate director for the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM) discussed OPM's initiatives and programs, including category ranking, pathway program reform, direct hiring authorities, and veteran and military spouse hiring among the federal executive branch agencies.

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 on. Mentorship is essential for veterans and transitioning servicemembers with 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 the Corporate Fellowship Program, Military Spouse Fellowship Program, Veteran Employment Transition (VET) Roadmap and Mil Spouse Roadmap.

The VE&E Commission 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. The task force examines all aspects of TAP and credentialing to optimize TAP to ensure that servicemembers receive a seamless translation from military service to the private sector.

Since the last convening of the Employer Innovation Taskforce Roundtable, private industry stakeholders highlighted a disconnect in base access between employers and transitioning servicemembers. Variability in TAP officer support for employers makes some installations more accessible than others. As a result, many servicemembers are not made aware of the different job opportunities out there for them. The private industry recommended a standard practice from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to ensure employers are equipped with best practices to maintain steady contact with transitioning servicemembers and in the interim, private-sector task force members suggested that The American Legion hold events at posts adjacent to military bases to allow employers to connect with transitioning servicemembers. Following the roundtable, the VE&E Commission has worked to convene a Crisis Action Team with private-sector taskforce members and TAP officials to develop a national platform for defining how the TAP program should work for transitioning servicemembers.

The VE&E Commission monitors the development and effectiveness of federal executive-branch agency programs that assist servicemembers, including National Guard and reserve members, veterans and their families, to ensure a smooth transition from the armed services into gainful employment. Division staff are working with stakeholders and the federal executive branch agencies involved in TAP to contribute innovative solutions to further optimize the program and ensure separating servicemembers face a smooth transition into the civilian sector.

On Sept. 7-8, 2022, VE&E staff attended the Military-Civilian Transition 5.0 Summit held by the TAP Interagency Partnership. The Department of Defense (DoD), DoL, VA and the United States Small Business Administration (SBA) briefed VE&E staff on the current implementation and intended updates of TAP beginning in 2023. Staff were also briefed by representatives from the five military service branches on how the program is applied.

During the summit, VE&E staff were briefed by DoL VETS during a breakout session covering the status of the ENPP and Off-Base Transition Training Pilot Programs. The ENPP, launched on April 1, 2021, as an extension outside of TAP, offers transitioning servicemembers and their spouses individualized career assistance through Employment Navigators at 13 designated military installations to ensure participants secure meaningful and gainful employment. Since the ENPP's launch, the program has expanded to nine additional facilities: Langley Air Force Base, Fort Drum, Fort Eustis, Fort Shafter, Schofield Barracks, Torii Station, Camp Schwab, Wounded Warrior Battalion East in Camp Lejeune and Joint Expeditionary Base – Little Creek. To date, ENPP is at 29 locations and has provided services to over 12,400 clients.

Through the ENPP, DoL VETS partnered with public- and private-sector employment and training entities that provide preparatory services for participants transitioning into the civilian workforce. DoL VETS has continued onboarding partners, initiating with nine original partners to a projected total of 48. These partners help identify and mitigate possible program gaps in service coverage. In total, 18,082 partner service connections have been made since the pilot's launch.

On Jan. 18, 2022, DoL launched the OBTT, a five-year pilot program based on the current TAP curriculum with revised changes to apply to the needs of veterans, National Guard, reserve members and their spouses. The OBTT consists of 10 two-hour workshops, offered virtually and

in-person, that provide an understanding of résumé essentials, interview skills and social media branding. The initial pilot locations were in Los Angeles and San Diego; Boston; Raleigh and Fayetteville, N.C.; Philadelphia and Pittsburgh; and Dallas-Fort Worth, Houston and San Antonio. The OBTT workshops will expand to more than 20 states and 50 locations by the end of the pilot.

As the OBTT pilot was previously attempted from 2013 to 2015, DoL is using lessons learned to improve marketing and strategic communication to increase participant attendance. They are doing this by making a more concerted effort at the grassroots and local level through American Job Centers, veteran service organizations, the Homeless Veteran Reintegration Program (HVRP) and the Veterans Readiness & Employment Program (VR&E). At the end of the third quarter for fiscal year (FY) 2023, OBTT conducted 3,119 workshops for 5,547 participants across the five pilot states.

The VE&E Commission noted from OPM's annual hiring data that there is a consistent decrease in federal government hiring of veterans. Despite the Obama administration's Veterans' Employment Initiative, issued under Executive Order 13518, federal hiring of veterans decreased from 33% in FY 2015 to 25% in FY 2020. Moreover, according to the Government Accountability Office (GAO) in its July 2020 report, veteran federal employees had lower retention rates and higher attrition rates within their first five years than their non-veteran counterparts. The GAO recommended that OPM and federal executive branch agencies address this disparity through a veteran retention strategy. Furthermore, the VE&E Commission learned that the OPM's Office of Veterans Affairs was dismantled. The Office of Veterans Affairs had four full-time employees who assisted veterans with their federal résumés and informed them of veteran preference benefits. Moreover, OPM's standard practice of quarterly meetings with veteran service organizations on veteran hiring and benefit updates has not been observed in over five years. The VE&E Commission met with OPM to discuss ways The American Legion can assist the agency in meeting the shared goal of having more veterans employed and retained throughout the federal executive branch agencies.

The VE&E Commission is working with two organizations to develop memorandums of understanding (MOUs). The first MOU is with the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), which seeks to bolster gainful employment opportunities for transitioning servicemembers and veterans within the department and produce actionable steps leading to increased veteran-owned business participation in USDA contracts. The second MOU proposal is with Military Hire, a veteran job and career services organization with over 650,000 members and over 35,000 collective companies and recruiters, whose primary purpose is to facilitate the transition process for veterans from military to civilian life by providing resources and job placement opportunities. The MOU will foster a working relationship to benefit transitioning servicemembers and recently separated veterans.

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 VE&E Commission collaborated with the Texas Veterans and Workforce Commissions to host a virtual hiring event through Premier Virtual on July 13, 2022. National Commander Paul Dillard provided a video welcoming remarks to employers and jobseekers as they entered the event. The event drew employers and jobseekers from across the nation. 184 employers from various industries and 230 registered jobseekers participated in the career fair. Jobseekers consisted of active-duty servicemembers, veterans, spouses and family members nationwide. Over 800 unique conversations between organizations and candidates were exchanged, with more than 5000 messages sent. There were eight on-the-spot interviews, and seven potential job offers at the event. Employers scheduled interviews with eight jobseekers after 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 to assess ways to improve future events.

On June 16, 2023, a career workshop provided jobseekers with skills and resources to conduct employer research and locate career opportunities across multiple employer websites. On June 22, and 29, 2023, workshops were held to aid jobseekers in tailoring their résumés to best serve the applicant tracking system. On June 21 and June 28, 2023, workshops to provide LinkedIn Basics were offered to ensure jobseekers can leverage the social media site to search for careers.

On Aug. 25, 2022, VE&E staff collaborated with the Department of Wisconsin and Hiring Our Heroes to conduct a career event during The American Legion's 103rd National Convention in Milwaukee. In conjunction with the career fair, the VE&E Commission supplemented the event by hosting résumé, financial literacy, social media branding, and VA medical-claim filing workshops in the morning. Following the workshop panels, attendees heard about a few selected employers' hiring programs and initiatives during the networking luncheon. The panel comprised representatives from Fiserv, Comcast, Amazon, OshKosh, SkillMil and VA. During the job fair, VE&E Commission Chairman James A. LaCoursiere provided opening remarks, followed by Adam Rocke, senior director of external Engagements for Hiring Our Heroes, and Mark Toal, Director for the Office of Strategic Outreach, DoL VETS. 44 employers from various market sectors were present, and more than 100 jobseekers.

While conducting outreach for the event, VE&E staff visited the Great Lakes Naval Base. Staff met with Gerald Metoyer, TAP program manager, and Krista Shalott, work and family life consultant for the Family Readiness Program of the Fleet and Family Support Center, to learn about the programs and initiatives offered to servicemembers transitioning from the Great Lakes installation. The VE&E staff also visited the Army and Marine Corps Reserve components at Fort Sheridan to disseminate information regarding the career fair.

On June 12, 2023, VE&E staff and the Department of Texas held employment and transition workshops at Fort Cavazos' Army Community Service Soldier and Family Assistance Center in Killeen, Texas. The workshops provided transitioning servicemembers, members of the Soldier Recovery Unit and military spouses with information on how to tailor their civilian and federal résumés, gain comprehensive financial planning knowledge, and achieve greater visibility to hiring managers through a well-formulated social media presence on LinkedIn. An American Legion department service officer also assisted transitioning servicemembers seeking more information about VA benefits and how to file VA claims. 33 of the 52 registrants who signed up for the event attended. There were over 661 page views on the registration site. The participants found the workshops helpful and were engaged with the workshop providers, who represented various organizations including the Texas Veterans Commission and Northwestern Mutual.

Finally, VE&E staff and Department of Texas Legionnaires attended Fort Cavazos' TAP Mega Job Fair on June 13, 2023, to educate servicemembers about their benefits. These Legionnaires discussed how The American Legion assists veterans in reintegrating into their local communities. They answered servicemembers' questions about benefits, described the Legion's programs and explained how to become a member. Approximately 2,000 servicemembers attended the event. Forty-nine transitioning servicemembers, active-duty personnel, veterans and military spouses signed into the American Legion booth.

VETERAN ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Veteran-owned small businesses (VOSBs) and entrepreneurial veterans seeking to start small businesses face challenges unique to the veteran community. According to the SBA, small businesses make up 99.9% of American businesses, of which approximately 6% are veteran-owned. However, recent data suggests that the number of VOSBs has steadily declined over the past few years. To combat this trend, the VE&E Commission counts on The American Legion's Small Business Task Force (SBTF) and its veteran small-business subject matter experts. The VE&E Commission facilitates the task force, composed of expert Legionnaires who help define and execute best practices in developing small businesses and government procurement policies. The task force fosters an entrepreneurial ecosystem that allows VOSBs to thrive.

On Feb. 23, 2023, the task force met virtually to discuss policy recommendations and priorities from its five subcommittees (Cybersecurity, Access to Capital, Veterans' Preference, Verification and Certification, and Taxes). Based on recommendations, VE&E staff and task force members worked on finalizing three tax-oriented resolutions. The first proposed resolution aims to grant The American Legion the ability to support measures that reduce tax liabilities for veterans, military members and their families and oppose measures that would increase tax liabilities for veterans, military members and their families.

The second proposed resolution aims to support the reauthorization of the Work Opportunity Tax Credit (WOTC) and efforts to enhance the WOTC for the benefit of veterans, military members and their families. The WOTC program incentivizes private-sector employers to hire and retain qualified veterans. Under this program, employers receive tax breaks in exchange for hiring qualified veterans.

The third proposed resolution seeks to support reauthorization, enhancement and permanent changes to 199A Qualified Business Income (QBI). The QBI deduction allows "pass-through" small businesses – such as sole proprietors, partnerships and LLCs – to deduct up to 20% of their QBI each year before normal taxation. This 20% deduction is essential in giving veteran-owned businesses the financial flexibility to succeed in the market.

The VE&E Commission continues to diligently advocate for veteran business owners to lawmakers and government agencies. Throughout July 2022 – June 2023, VE&E staff and SBTF members met with various congressional offices to discuss The American Legion's small business legislative priorities for the 118th Congress.

Commission staff discussed enhancing protection from increased cyber threats to VOSBs, providing access to capital for veterans seeking to start small businesses, codifying the proven Boots to Business program for servicemembers completing the Transition Assistance Program (TAP), and increasing contracting opportunities for service-disabled veteran-owned small businesses (SDVOSBs) by increasing federal agency-wide procurement goals from 3% to 5%. In addition, staff and the SBTF chairman discussed the inclusion of statutory language in the forthcoming 2024 National Defense Authorization Act that would expand the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA's) "Vets-First" contracting program to the Department of Defense (DoD). If implemented, "Vets-First" would provide significant opportunities for veteran-owned small businesses to work with DoD. This has been an American Legion priority for a few years because VOSBs and SDVOSBs continue losing government contracts to larger contractors. If not reversed, this trend will drive countless VOSBs and SDVOSBs out of business.

Strategic partnerships with public and private entities, including the SBA, are instrumental for the SBTF's success. To further strengthen this relationship, the VE&E Commission met with the SBA's Office of Veterans Business Development's Director to discuss drafting a Strategic Alliance Memorandum (SAM) between The American Legion and the SBA. This memorandum allows for the SBA to provide The American Legion with up-to-date information about SBA's programs and services and information regarding SBA's resource partners, including Small Business Development Centers (SBDCs), SCORE, Veterans Business Outreach Centers (VBOCs) and Women's Business Centers (WBCs). In addition, the memorandum supplements the SBA's ability to provide speakers to discuss SBA financing, government contracting and other business topics at American Legion workshops, conferences, seminars and other activities. Commission staff's efforts enabled The American Legion and SBA to complete and authorize this memorandum. This directly led to the confirmation of SBA's participation in The American Legion's Tango Alpha Lima podcast, which would aim for SBA to discuss all the small business programs available to veterans and their families.

During The American Legion's 103rd National Convention in Milwaukee, the Veterans Employment & Education Commission hosted speakers to inform attendees on new developments and current issues on veteran small-business matters. Members from the Legion's Small Business Taskforce attended this meeting.

Larry Stubblefield, associate administrator in the Office of Veterans Business Development at the SBA, opened the discussion. Stubblefield discussed the importance small businesses play to

the U.S. economy. He focused on the stability and impact small businesses created during the pandemic.

The chairman of The American Legion's Small Business Task Force, Charles Fowler, also briefed the attendees on 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, according to the 2020 DoD's Inspector General's Report, \$800 million was awarded incorrectly to non-eligible companies. 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 extend the certification from VA to DoD to ensure reliable veteran-owned companies get the procurement contracts.

VETERAN HOMELESSNESS

Preventing and ending veteran homelessness continues to be a priority for The American Legion and VE&E staff. The commission acknowledges that veteran homelessness is a national issue; however, it is equally important to acknowledge that each state faces unique issues. That is why the commission counts on support from each American Legion department through the Homeless Veteran Task Force (HVTF).

The task force is composed of chairpersons from each American Legion department. Commission staff is meticulously working toward ensuring each department has at least one chairperson. Commission staff periodically reaches out to departments to update the HVTF spreadsheet with up-to-date names and phone numbers for those Legionnaires eager to be part of the task force.

The goal is to maintain a task force with the resources necessary to prevent and end veteran homelessness nationwide. In addition, a comprehensive task force enhances The American Legion's ability to provide resources and services to homeless and at-risk veterans.

The VE&E Commission works closely with VA to meet the mutual goal of ending veteran homelessness. From July 1, 2022, to June 30, 2023, commission staff met with key VA personnel within the veteran homelessness sector to discuss mutual priorities and future collaboration. Commission staff met with the Veterans Health Administration's (VHA's) Homeless Program's executive director and principal adviser to discuss how VA housed 40,000 veterans for 2022, exceeding its goal of 38,000. Moreover, the commission learned of VA's calendar year 2023 goal of housing more than 38,000 veterans and ensuring that 95% of those housed do not return to homelessness.

Congress authorized the creation of the Advisory Committee on Homeless Veterans (ACHV) in response to the complex nature surrounding veteran homelessness. The committee advises the VA secretary on providing benefits and services to veterans experiencing homelessness. In April 2023, commission staff attended the committee's quarterly meeting in Baltimore. The meeting began with a message from the VA secretary, emphasizing the critical work that must be done to end veteran homelessness. Following the secretary's message, various federal employees spoke about their roles. The federal participants included personnel from the United States Interagency

Council on Homelessness (USICH), Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) and DoD. The meeting concluded with an announcement by the national Director for the Veterans Justice Program, who informed participants that the VA Legal Services for Veterans Grant Program's first grant was recently approved. This is significant because unmet legal needs are one of the leading causes of veteran homelessness.

In addition to these activities, from July 1, 2022, to June 30, 2023, commission staff personally assisted over 40 veterans experiencing homelessness. Staff connected these veterans with resources and personnel that could meet their needs. The HVTF greatly contributed by regularly collaborating with commission staff to help veterans in their respective states.

During The American Legion's 103rd National Convention in Milwaukee, the Veterans Employment & Education Commission toured Vets Place Central, a homeless veteran facility in Milwaukee. The 80-resident residence is managed by the Center for Veterans Issues (CVI), which provides housing and supportive services to help improve the quality of life for all veterans, their families, and the communities they live in and serve.

CVI works with government entities and corporate donors, including the Green Bay Packers, Harley-Davidson and Milwaukee Tool, while also fundraising independently.

At Vets Place Central, veterans can either use the facility as a short-term housing option for up to two years or choose to make it their permanent residence. For short-term stays, the facility also provides access to resources to help the veteran wanting to get out on their own by providing the first month's rent, security deposit, moving expenses and whatever it takes to get them on their feet. The Veterans Employment & Education Commission visits these sites to develop a better understanding of the programs and approaches that successfully combat veteran homelessness.