

Mark Fischer, Program Manager, Washington State Department of Veterans Affairs

Statement of Mark Fischer
Washington State Department of Veterans Affairs
Before the
Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs

April 4, 2012

As a preface to my comments, most of what I have to say regarding the issue of transition, employment, and mental health comes from conversations that I have had over the last seven years with hundreds of returning veterans. Bringing those comments into a succinct statement was difficult, but here is the gist of it: "What would have been more helpful to me (as a Service member leaving the Service and a veteran) would be a peer mentor who had discovered the strategy to transition and has resources to provide me, and most importantly listens with interest and his or her heart. This listening and guidance needs to be done over a period of months, since they took months and sometimes years to train me. Now I need that same time to become a civilian adult."

The Washington Department of Veterans Affairs provides a variety of services that assist returning veterans as well as veterans who have served in past wars and eras. The programs that I have managed for the last seven years have primarily been involved with returning veterans, using peer to peer support. Using passionate veterans who are eager to help other veterans we have developed two programs, the Veterans Conservation Corps and Vet Corps (which is an AmeriCorps program, started three years ago in Washington State with the help of the Washington Commission for National Service). We were the first Vet Corps program in the country. At this time there are 31 Vet Corps members spread across the state in two and four year colleges with two members also at the Warrior Transition Unit at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, and we have contact with over 3000 veterans, family members and Active Duty members each year. These Vet Corps members, mostly returning veterans and some spouses of returning veterans, help other veterans and family members navigate the college system and find services at the VA and other providers, such as Tom Schumacher's PTSD state-wide counseling program.

The most important task that the Vet Corps members accomplish at colleges is the creation of a veteran community, so that veterans can find each other and have a "team" once again. The greatest losses that veterans feel upon exiting the military are lack of "mission" and "team". The "team" means that they have others who they can trust to assist them, a listening ear, mentoring, resource and referral information, and a veteran conversation that they understand. The civilian world can feel very foreign after being in the Service, given that the military culture is quite exacting and disciplined in its approach to enculturation. Some veterans have lived half-way around the world in austere conditions with traumatic events happening almost daily. Most unprepared civilians would crack in one day, and yet these Service members are trained to handle extremely difficult situations, and a huge percentage do it well. We expect veterans to adapt instantly to civilian life. As one veteran said recently, "people can talk about the water and how cold and wet it is, but until you jump into it for the first time you have no idea whatsoever".

We also work on helping veterans find a new “mission”. Sometimes it is as simple as providing for their families, but often there is an additional desire for something more. When you are used to working 16 hours days and feeling part of a well-organized unit, doing amazing jobs, it is hard to think about an existence that lacks that energy. And then, to have that training be marginalized by not crediting it towards college or apprenticeships is another blow upon re-entry. Many returning veterans want to continue to serve in their communities in some manner, so finding that “path” can take discussion, which is another task that Vet Corps members take on willingly given that they have found their own mission by helping others. In addition, I believe that there is a great deal of mutual healing of body and soul that occurs when these Vet Corps members serve other veterans. Relief and perspective on trauma and Service related mental health issues can occur in a counselor’s office, but another very effective healing process is being part of a community of peers that you know and trust.

In moving on to employment issues, the Vet Corps members feel that they are helping with the transitions issues at the colleges and try to direct them towards employment assistance. However, there are many gaps in the process because, as veterans say from having experienced it “transition does not happen in a day, a month, or even a year, it often takes years.” Our agency works as close as possible with the VA and the Bases in Washington State. We are very pleased with the new directions and opportunities for the TAP and ACAP programs, and have pledged to work closely with the Transition Program staff. My hope is that other contractors can be brought into this assistance, such as private non-profits, and the WDVA. Even with the best of intentions, the DOD and VA cannot reach all of those who are leaving or who have recently left the service, and even if the exiting Service member has a good experience in their last months of Service and has new information because of the DOD transition program there will be questions and issues to resolve once they step out of the Gate, when they really hit the cold, wet water.

My “ask” of AmeriCorps for next year is a larger group of Vet Corps members, to include transition assistance and employment assistant specialists as Members who can meet veterans in the community and provide on the spot guidance to employers, colleges, internships, the Work Source or other resources. Our programs are also developing good relationships with many employers who are now eager to hire veterans as they have discovered the wealth of talent within this group. This is a two way learning process as the Society of Human Resource Managers in this state has discovered as far as the veteran need for cultural awareness of the civilian world, but also the employers needing to be versed in veteran cultural competency. We are starting, but a matrix of support using all providers is paramount for success, and also need to create some unique roles that don’t fit into a typical federal or state bureaucracy. Through Vet Corps we can be a robust partner in this employment and transition initiative, and assist in bringing in other partners as well.

A few more thoughts from veterans: “Only a third of returning veterans in this state have even been to the VA, how will the other two-thirds get any health care assistance?” “Why don’t the Bases set the Service member up with the VA and enrollment in the VA health care system before we leave our Base?” “When I left the Service the last thing on my mind was listening to the ACAP person, the first thing was getting home to my family”. “I never realized how out of touch I was after 8 years in the Navy, until I heard the 18 and 19 year olds in class talk about stuff I had never heard of”. “I was out of the Army for several years before I knew there was a

women's clinic at the VA where I would have felt more comfortable getting help." "I did not know there was a difference between the federal VA and the state VA, no one explained that." "What happened to the Post Deployment Clinic, I went there one day and it was gone". "Where are all the yellow ribbons around the place I am trying to get a job."

The solution to transition is in all of us working together towards a healthy process without the silos that inflict so many initiatives, and the hoarding of assets that accompanies that need to control the silo.