

Rebecca Lee, Immediate Past President, National Association of County Veterans Service Officers

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Testimony of  
Rebecca Lee, Immediate Past President  
National Association of  
County Veterans Service Officers

Good morning Senator Brown, members of the committee, and staff, it is truly my honor to be here for this hearing. As a former President of the National Association of County Veterans Service Officers, I am here today, to comment on the:

- Veterans employment issues; and
- Recommendations for where we as a nation can do better to assist our returning heroes.

There are over 23 million honorably discharged veterans of the armed forces of the United States and a large percentage of those veterans are having difficulties returning to civilian life. In this day and age of our great nation it is unthinkable that a young man or woman enters the military service, serves honorably and upon discharge finds difficulties in sustaining gainful employment. It is our responsibility, the people of the United States, to live up to that promise of a better and brighter future. That promise that includes a myriad of veterans benefits should the service member become injured in defense of freedom; but also an underlying promise that says that if you serve your country with honor your country will be there to serve you, not with a hand out, but a hand up. Together we must develop a mechanism for solutions, so that veterans are able to return and find their part of the American Dream.

The National Association of County Veterans Service Officers is an organization made up of local government employees. Local government employees that believe we can help the Department of Veterans Affairs reduce the number of unemployed veterans and get veterans of all eras who are capable of working back into the workplace. We work in local government offices, in 37 States and currently are comprised of 2,400 full time employees in 700 communities. We are equipped to handle and ready to assist veterans one on one, with every Department of Veterans Affairs benefit, state and local benefits, and the reason we are here today, to assist them in obtaining gainful employment.

The National Association of County Veterans Service Officers has been in existence since 1990, primarily as a vehicle to provide continuing education and accreditation training in Department of Veterans Affairs' procedures and regulations governing veterans' benefits. The Association provides basic and advanced training for County Veterans Service Offices and also serves as a vehicle for them to obtain national accreditation with the Department of Veterans Affairs.

#### Unemployment Trends

We at the National Association of County Veterans Service Officers have observed various trends in unemployment among our returning veterans. The most obvious is the current economy, which seems to be affecting our nation's veterans even more so than their civilian counterparts. As of November 2011, unemployment rates hover at nearly 9% for the nation as a whole, returning

young veterans have a rate of 30.4% and young African American veterans returning from the service have an unemployment rate of 48%. Non-veterans of the same age group have an unemployment rate of 15.3%.

Why does the average veteran coming out of the service have a more difficult time locating a job? There are a lot of factors that affect the returning veteran. The fact that most veterans are men has an effect because unemployment is worse for men by a full percentage point. Men are unemployed at a rate of 9.5% while women are at 8.5%. Many returning veterans, particularly the younger veterans lack competitive education levels to compete on the open job market. Many left their high schools and went right into the military. After repeated deployments, these individuals are coming home to an unstable economy and what once was the land of opportunity has deteriorated to a land of survival. Unfortunately the job market seems to punish those with less education and few employers place importance on military service. Due to this, recently discharged veterans are resorting to their education benefits and obtaining degrees. This makes them years older than the competition graduating with them, and years behind those with a similar degree and workplace experience.

As most veterans from past war eras, the current veterans return to their homes. For a lot of the veterans, home is the rural south or the former manufacturing areas of our country where unemployment rates are very high. Because many employers place little value on military experience it is doubly hard for a returning veteran to compete head to head when the veteran is viewed as being essentially unemployed for the veterans entire active military service. If that is four or more years it places them at a steep disadvantage. Four years in the military can be viewed by some employers as four years without needed skills and experience for employment in their business.

In the blue collar sector, returning veterans often lack the proper licensing or certificates in skill training. For example, a mechanic with eight years in the military might be highly skilled in his craft. He may be more than qualified to enter the workforce and perform at a high level but he lacks the certifications of his civilian counterpart. In most cases the civilian would be hired over the veteran because the veteran lacks the certifications even though he possesses the skill and work ethic needed for the job.

There are a lot of factors that contribute to this problem.

A truck driver may have several years of experience driving a truck, much like his civilian counterpart, over some of the most difficult driving conditions anywhere up to and including combat situations. But when he applies for a truck driving job, he lacks the necessary licensing requirements for his respective state. He is not eligible to drive for the company unless he attends a school or goes through extensive testing to obtain a license with no guarantee of a job.

One industry still hires veterans at a high rate. The government hires more veterans than any other employer. Unfortunately with the way the economy is going and the political football that government employees have become in the partisan political climate, many jobs have been eliminated, or entities have been placed on a hiring freeze. Just over the past few months 57,000 government jobs at all three levels, Federal, State and Local, have been eliminated. Two industries still hire veterans at a higher rate. Police and fire hire a large amount of veterans for reasons such as discipline and rank structure are familiar and compatible to most veterans and

their employers. But with the economy being as poor as it is even these jobs are becoming harder to obtain for veterans and non veterans alike.

There was a time in this country when military service was viewed as something special and a unique qualification for employment. That does not appear to be the case any longer. More than 90% of all American citizens are not veterans of military service. They do not understand what it is to serve their country so they place very little value on it. It has become what other people do, not what is expected as an obligation of citizenship.

#### Other factors

PTSD - Post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) has become a substantial issue among returning veterans and their ability to obtain employment. Ten thousand combat veterans per month have sought out treatment in Veterans Administration facilities over the past year. This brings the number to more than two hundred thousand young veterans in the VA system just from the two most recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. This is approximately 16% of the troops who fought in these wars.

There are estimates that only half of the veterans affected by PTSD actually seek treatment because of the stigma around the military culture or how it may affect their employment opportunities. While PTSD is not a new problem, the public perception of it is. Civilians who have no combat exposure have a tendency to believe that recent returnees are “broken” or come with baggage, thus making hiring a veteran a sympathetic act, or a risk to the wellbeing of their company. We as County Veterans Service Officers, and all advocates know that this is not the case, and we all need to spend as much time and effort publicly praising their skills, and abilities as we do soliciting them to seek benefits.

Personal- I currently have four boys serving in the armed forces, one in the US Marine Corps, one in the US Army, and two in the US Air Force. Between the four of them they have served in nine combat tours. My son in the Marine Corps is a reservist, on his second combat deployment, will return this coming spring, finish his last semester of college in the summer and re-activate next fall to return back to Afghanistan. That will be his unit’s 10th deployment since combat operations began. These men and women are a prime example of the toll we are asking our Reserve and National Guard elements to pay. These individuals are students, parents, and someone’s employee. Every time they deploy at the need of the government, they leave behind their jobs, which the employer, by law needs to hold for them until their return home and is released from active duty. As you can imagine these employers are losing a great deal of productivity during these deployments, and ultimately start having a sour taste for employing our citizen warriors. To combat the bitterness of losing a great employee, Congress needs to implement a tax savings for employers who do save the jobs of deployed service members.

The National Association of County Veterans Service Officers is grateful for this opportunity to testify to the Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs. If we work together, I believe that we can reverse the growing trend of veteran unemployment and get our heroes into stable careers.

In Closing, the National Association of County Veterans Service Officers welcomes and is very enthusiastic for the aggressive implementation of the VOW to Hire Heroes act of 2011.

We also recommend that the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee author legislation that will allow for tax saving benefits for employers who employ deployed Reserve and National Guard members.

We furthermore suggest that the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee direct the Department of Veteran Affairs to include local County Veteran Service Officers in the TAP courses conducted within our nation's borders.

Finally we suggest that the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee direct the Department of Veterans Affairs to produce and distribute mass media campaigns which outline benefits of hiring veterans, and doing so on a national scale.