

Garett Reppenhagen, Director of Veterans Development, Veterans Green Jobs

Statement of
Garett Reppenhagen
Director of Veterans Development
Veterans Green Jobs
Denver, CO

Before

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
OF THE U.S. SENATE

Concerning

“Veterans Employment:
Improving the transition
From the Battlefield to the Workforce”

April 13, 2011

Introduction

Chairman Murray, Ranking Member Burr and Distinguished Members of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs:

Thank you for inviting me on behalf of my organization, Veterans Green Jobs, to testify today on the important topic of employment needs of veterans and thank you for your tireless efforts in helping us who dedicated our lives to service to this country. My name is Garret Reppenhagen. I grew up as the son of a career Army father who was a Vietnam War combat veteran. Both my grandfathers served in WWII. Military service is a family tradition. I am an Army veteran who served on active duty from 2001-2005 with the 1st Infantry Division as a cavalry scout and sniper, to include tours in Kosovo and Iraq. As I transitioned from service member to civilian I have joined my fellow veterans in a demographic that is prone to unemployment, mental health injuries, substance abuse, homelessness, incarceration, and suicide. Due to these factors, since being Honorably Discharged in 2005, I have actively been involved with employment issues for our military veterans, particularly those of my generation who served in the post-9/11 combat era.

Veterans Green Jobs Organization

Veterans Green Jobs is a national 501 (c) 3 nonprofit corporation, headquartered in Denver, Colorado, that has existed since 2008. Our mission is to engage, transition, and connect military veterans with meaningful employment opportunities that serve our communities and environment. We work to inspire hope and confidence in our veterans for a positive future for

themselves, their families and their communities. Our vision is to empower veterans to utilize their military service to become leaders in a new mission that helps our nation achieve energy efficiency, energy independence and security, natural resources conservation and the resulting environmental, social and economic benefits. We direct our efforts to building programs that offer veterans concrete skill building and job placement. We view unemployment as a risk multiplier for all other obstacles a veteran faces. The lack of a stable career, which provides a veteran with a sense of purpose, compounds problems with healthcare, personal relationships, and other issues, and acts as a road block to successful reintegration into our communities.

We are dedicated to helping all veterans' transition into successful career paths by focusing on opportunities in stable economic sectors related to the green economy, to include energy efficiency and weatherization, clean and renewable energy, natural resources conservation, environmental restoration and other green sectors. In some cases veterans have received training in their military occupational specialties that translate to immediate openings in the green job sector. However, most need further training and education through community colleges, universities and apprenticeship or on-the-job programs. We encourage the veterans we work with to pursue these pathways towards employment. We strongly believe the job opportunities in these sectors will increase, and that veterans can be trained and positioned to assume these jobs. Private business has a significant role to play in assisting our veterans in transitioning from the battlefield to the workforce. Veterans Green Jobs directs a number of transition and employment programs to support these goals in partnership with government, business and higher education.

Veterans Green Jobs Programs

We currently directly employ 26 veterans full-time on our staff and in our weatherization programs. Our weatherization program, in partnership with the Colorado Governor's Energy Office, provides residential weatherization for low-income families. Veterans in this program receive a full wage and extensive training and certifications. Additionally, we are assisting over 100 veterans this year in our Veterans Green Corps and Veterans Fire Corps training and transition programs in six western states, in cooperation with the U.S. Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management, the National Park Service and the Conservation Corps in these regions. This program provides an 8-22 week paid, on the ground training program for veterans to perform wildland fire mitigation, trail clearing and wildland fire fighting on federal lands. Many of these programs are assisted by funding from the Corporation for National Community Service – AmeriCorps. The support from AmeriCorps leverages funding that the federal land management agencies contribute, creating a win-win whereby veterans receive training while accomplishing important hazardous fuels and conservation projects on public lands.

Also, we have 15 veterans who have participated in a Green Jobs Academy training program in cooperation with Bucks County Community College near Philadelphia. This program will expand this year to include technician training and direct job placement in the wind energy sector, in cooperation with Gamesa Wind USA, a large wind energy firm, with facilities on the East Coast. This program is an outstanding example of a program that provides technical training directly linked to a real job. With assistance from Veterans Green Jobs, veterans with technical Military Occupational Specialties are being recruited, interviewed and hired by

Gamesa, then directly placed in the Bucks County Community program for training, and then graduated into full-time jobs.

All of our programs represent “boots on the ground” for putting veterans back to work. As a non-profit, our successes have been accomplished by partnering with a wide array of government, private and nonprofit entities. We have developed an array of formal partnerships and teaming agreements with businesses, community colleges, 4-year educational institutions and other non-profits. Additionally, our efforts have been supported through charitable giving, to include the Walmart Foundation, the Sierra Club Foundation and the Call of Duty Endowment. However, as a non-profit we struggle to sustain these viable programs for veterans because of the down-turn in the economy which has directly impacted charitable giving, both corporate and individual, and other sources of funding.

Factors Affecting Employment Transition of Veterans

In executing our programs over the past three years we have learned a great deal about the employment issues facing veterans. There are numerous organizations and public offices in the space of veterans support and advocacy. What often sets Veterans Green Jobs apart is our ability to build partnerships that offer holistic employment assistance and linkages from training and education to direct job placement – by working with both veterans and the employers.

In our experiences, the programs with the greatest successes in serving veterans have incorporated the following elements:

- A sense of service that positively impacts veterans because they gain a sense of pride and accomplishment that transforms their military service into other forms of national and community service
- A living wage or stipend that allows veterans to support themselves and their families with some income while earning certifications and training to prepare them for civilian employment
- A direct connection with job placement as a result of training or education
- Well communicated resources that are easy to locate and access
- Personal guidance that helps individual veterans find training and careers based on their experience and interests

Our experiences have also taught us that some elements do not provide notable benefit, to include:

- So-called “one stop shops” or websites with numerous lists and web-based hot-links
- Resume banks that only offer standard competitive job searches
- Training with no prospective or direct employment at the other end that is linked to a specific employer
- Shallow employment opportunities and part-time work at a low wage that are not viewed as meaningful careers
- Disconnected services focusing on one aspect of veterans’ needs that do not communicate with other organizations or offices

Promoting Veteran Employment from the Battlefield to the Workforce

In making some suggestions to the Committee about how you can assist in enhancing the workforce opportunities for our veterans returning from military service over the past decade, we offer the following:

1. Convene immediately a national level workshop, engaging leaders in government, business and the non-profit sectors, to address solutions to current veteran employment issues. This workshop should be directed not towards defining and researching the problem, but rather to defining concrete solutions, successful models and funding sources.
2. Develop promotional materials targeted to both business-industry and returning veterans that identify skills by Military Occupational Specialty and their translation to civilian occupations.
3. Encourage all States to pass legislation that allows veterans to receive in-state tuition rates. As an example, Colorado has passed the GI Promise Bill which affords these rates to all veterans returning to public institutions in the State.
4. Develop federally funded grant opportunities to create veteran-based environmental restoration and remediation crews to assist in brown field restoration, mining reclamation, oil spill habitat restoration, and other environmental cleanup needs. This could include new legislation that establishes a revolving fund from a taxpayer return check-off for veterans to work in these areas.
5. Develop guidelines and policy measures that expand the Corporation for National Service-AmeriCorps Veterans Corps model to provide national service leadership opportunities to returning veterans at a livable wage.
6. Take into account the unique veteran demographic when creating national initiatives that target specific age groups (e.g., JobCorps and American Great Outdoors Initiative).
7. Provide government incentives to the residential and health care sectors to enhance the role of veterans in providing energy efficiency and weatherization of senior care communities, in concert with EPA Energy Star ratings and initiatives.
8. Develop clear communication and guidelines to education and training providers about the Post-9/11 GI Bill's ability to support veterans in non-credited certification and training programs.

Conclusion

Chairman Murray, Veterans Green Jobs is a national nonprofit corporation dedicated to green sector employment for veterans. We are fully aware of the urgency of the problems facing our veterans as they exit military service and return to our communities. Our Board of Directors, Chief Executive Officer and non-profit staff are composed of professionals, both veteran and non-veteran, who are dedicated to partnering with others in creative and proactive ways to place veterans into meaningful employment to the benefit of themselves, their families and their communities. This concludes my statement. I will be glad to answer your questions.