

Captain Peter "Bull Frog" Wikul (Retired), America Works of New York, Inc.

Prepared Testimony of Retired Captain Peter "Bull Frog" Wikul  
on Behalf of America Works of New York, Inc.

To The United States Senate Committee On Veterans Affairs

Wednesday November 18, 2009

Chairman Akaka, Ranking Member Burr, and distinguished members of the United States Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs, good morning.

On behalf of America Works of New York, Inc. Chief Executive Officer Dr. Lee Bowes and Founder Mr. Peter Cove, I would like to express our gratitude for the opportunity to be here today to address the United States Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs about our Veterans Employment Programs.

My name is Captain Pete Wikul. I served thirty nine years in the United States Navy. I was known as the "Bullfrog" which is a title used to refer to the longest serving US Navy SEAL on active duty. I recently retired on October 1st. In 1988 I was honored to share the Nobel Peace Prize as one of the few US Naval Officers assigned as a United Nations Military Observer in Lebanon. I am here today as Director for America Works Veterans' Programs.

Who We Are

America Works is a private, for-profit performance-based workforce development firm that has places hard-to-serve populations in employment since 1984. We have helped low-income individuals and public assistance recipients across a broad demographic spectrum become self-sufficient by obtaining and retaining jobs, or improving their career positions. We work with Americans who are on public assistance, receiving food stamps, the formerly incarcerated, youths aging out of foster care, the homeless and sheltered, non-custodial parents, people living with HIV/AIDS and Veterans of the United States Armed Forces.

America Works was the pioneer company whose work led to the 1996 Personal Responsibility And Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, moving national welfare programs from subsistence to back-to-work programs.

To date, America Works has placed over 175,000 hard-to-serve individuals into jobs in cities across the United States. We currently have offices throughout New York State, New Jersey, Maryland, and California, and soon in North Carolina and Pennsylvania.

Why Veterans

Over the last few years America Works has seen a growing number of Veterans coming into our offices seeking employment. These Veterans came to us through our homeless programs, food stamps programs, welfare programs, and frequently through our ex-offender programs.

Concerned about our country's heroes rapidly sinking into the depths of poverty, we began researching what services were available for Veterans. We found that while the Department of Veterans Affairs states that "nearly 200,000 service members separate from the military each year" and that right now another 200,000 Veterans are incarcerated, there are few to no direct employment services provided to Veterans by either the Department of Veteran Affairs or by the

Department of Defense. In a time when our national unemployment rate tops 10.2% and the national poverty rate grows every day, we need to provide better, enhanced services to the men and women who risk their lives for our country. In order to do this, America Works has begun leveraging funds from other national scale programs to provide services to some of the Veterans in most need, but still, significantly more needs to be done.

### Types Of Veterans We Serve

Currently, we serve Veterans through several different programs. We actively serve Veterans receiving:

1. Public Assistance
2. Food Stamps
3. Veterans who have HIV / AIDS
4. Veterans receiving SSI and SSDI Benefits
5. Formerly Incarcerated Veterans
6. Veterans who are Non-custodial parents
7. Homeless and Sheltered Veterans who participate in our Homeless Veterans' Reintegration Program (HVRP)

While it seems we are serving many Veterans through our numerous programs, we lack the funding to provide preventive, direct employment services so that Veterans do not have to become homeless or receive welfare or steal for their food to be in our programs. It is too much of a tragedy to allow these Veterans to languish in poverty after they have given everything they could for their country to not provide them better services.

### Our Model

So what is the answer? How do we provide appropriate, effective, and timely services for Veterans from transition onwards. The answer is work-first programming; programs that provide direct, rapid attachment to the workforce. These are not programs that provide training for a job that doesn't exist and, these are not programs that refer Veterans to websites where they can virtually apply to jobs for which they will not receive a call back. These are programs that directly link the Veteran, the man or woman who served and protected us, to a real live job that exists in the job market right now. To ensure performance, the government only pays these programs after the Veteran is actively working on the job. There is no room for error in this model because if you can't get people jobs, you simply lose the program. These programs don't make money until the Veteran, him or herself, is making money. These concepts have been the bedrock upon which America Works has been built. This bedrock has led to over 175,000 individuals obtaining and retaining employment across the United States.

### What We Have Learned

Through our work with these amazing servicemen and women, we have learned many lessons that should be taken to heart. First, our nation's Veterans want to work. Our Veterans will certainly experience difficulties and hardships, but they want to work and continue to be the breadwinner for themselves and their families. In the first nine months of 2009, we have placed over 180 Veterans in employment in New York City with an average hourly salary of

approximately \$10.00. And we did the majority of this without even having a direct Veteran funded program.

Second, there is an exigent need for direct employment services for Veterans. While Veterans are motivated, many cannot find employers and they will struggle with barriers that will prevent them from successfully obtaining and retaining employment on their own. Performance-based contracted services are needed to effectively provide job placement services to Veterans today. Our Veterans are fighting with over 20 million other unemployed Americans for a limited amount of jobs and they deserve a leg up in the competition.

Third, companies are not only willing to hire Veterans but actively seek out Veterans to employ. The problem is one of time and resources. Companies need to fill positions quickly and they don't have the resources to advertise at length for Veteran-only employment opportunities. Through a service like ours, companies can call us up and ask us to fill jobs with Veterans that same day.

Finally, the VA alone should not be the only champion in this fight to implement employment programs of the breadth and scale necessary for today's Veteran population. We believe that through strategic partnerships, the Department of Defense, the Department of Veteran Affairs and private contractors can provide performance-based transition programs and assistance programs to current Veterans nationwide.

#### Our Recommendations

We recommend the following steps be taken immediately to help our Veterans from today onwards:

1. We need to design and provide specific, direct service employment programs to aide in transitioning today's military into successfully employed Veterans. This service should be offered from transition onwards, and would work in collaboration with current services, including the Transition Assistance Program and Vocational Rehabilitation. These programs will be pay-for-performance to ensure that our service men and women obtain and retain civilian employment.
2. In light of the number of wounded warriors returning from our 21st century conflicts, we also need to provide these direct employment services to spouses and dependents of Veterans. A wounded warrior needs his family to heal, but he or she also needs income to provide stability. We propose to offer these employment programs for the spouses and dependents of wounded warriors nationwide. This can begin by working with families who are staying at Fisher Houses as their wounded warriors begin the healing process. Jobs will be found to accommodate caring for the wounded warrior while also providing economic stability.
3. The United State Department of Labor has designed specialized employment programs for Veterans, and these need to be expanded. In particular, the Homeless Veterans' Reintegration Program has provided much needed help to homeless Veterans nationwide. This program should be expanded to help thousands of other homeless Veterans. Programs for incarcerated Veterans should also be provided nationwide to address the particular needs of incarcerated Veterans.

4. Finally, let us show you an America Works Veterans Employment Program. In DC today, there are over 30,000 Veterans, and an unemployment rate of 11.4%. Allow America Works to provide a direct employment program here in DC to some of the unemployed Veterans to show you that our model works. With \$1 million in funding, we can place and retain at least 200 Veterans in permanent employment. We can then bring you 200 success stories on this day next year.

As a Veteran and brother in arms with the men and women I've met at the America Works programs, I ask you today to make a real change for Veterans and their families nationwide. Our servicemen and women have served us, it is now our responsibility to serve them.

Chairman Akaka, Ranking Member Burr, and distinguished members of the United States Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs, thank you for your time.