

Ranking Member Larry E. Craig

Statement of Senator Larry E. Craig

Ranking Member, U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs

Hearing on:

DOL/DoD/VA Collaboration and Cooperation

to Meet the Employment Needs of Returning Servicemembers

June 13, 2007, 9:30 am

Dirksen Senate Office Building, Room 562

Good morning. Welcome to all of you, and thank you Chairman Akaka for calling this hearing to discuss the employment needs of returning servicemembers.

I think it goes without saying that, during a time of war, it is essential that we - as a nation -- help our warriors smoothly return to civilian life. For many, finding a job is a critical aspect of their transition. Not only is it important for their long-term financial stability, but meaningful work can have a beneficial impact on both physical and mental health. It is also important for our nation's economic vitality that the civilian labor market have the benefit of these highly trained, skilled, and motivated individuals.

Perhaps more importantly, we -- as a grateful nation -- owe it to those who have served and sacrificed to provide them with the resources and assistance they may need to thrive in civilian life. When the private and public sectors work together to fulfill that obligation, we can help ensure the continued viability of the "all volunteer force".

But meeting the diverse employment needs of all who wear the uniform involves many complex issues. There are recovering servicemembers who had their military careers cut short by devastating injuries and who are trying to find their niche in the civilian job market. We have members of the Guard and Reserve who are returning from war and want to be re-instated at their civilian jobs. And we have young veterans who have completed their terms of service and are looking to start civilian careers for the first time in their lives.

Today, we will hear about a wide array of programs and services - provided by both the private and public sector -- aimed at helping veterans succeed in the civilian job market.

Given the sheer number of entities and programs involved, it is clear that the nation -- as a whole - has made it a priority to ensure that returning servicemembers will have a successful transition to the civilian workforce.

In fact, veterans overall are continuing to experience lower unemployment rates than non-veterans. And even young veterans, who had struggled in recent years, have seen phenomenal improvements in their employment outcomes: The unemployment rate for 20 to 24 year old veterans dropped from over 10% last year to less than 6% during the first quarter of this year. I'm sure everyone here is as pleased as I am at these signs of progress.

Nevertheless, I think it is incumbent upon this Committee to continually monitor whether federal programs are effectively serving veterans' employment needs.

To that end, I called a hearing last year to examine two employment programs administered by the Department of Labor: The Disabled Veterans' Outreach Program and the Local Veterans' Employment Representative program.

Based on what we heard, Senator Akaka and I asked the Government Accountability Office to examine whether the current performance accountability system accurately reflects how well these programs are serving veterans.

Last month, GAO issued a report, finding that -- after many years of trying to improve data and performance measures - there is simply no way to determine whether these programs are effective in helping veterans find jobs or whether other factors are responsible for veterans' job outcomes.

Although I hope these programs contributed to the successes we've seen in recent months, I believe we must find a way to track how well these programs are serving veterans, so that we can quickly identify any gaps in existing services and can continually seek ways to further improve veterans' employment outcomes.

As we move forward, I hope this Committee and Congress will do our part to help returning servicemembers in their transition to civilian life, by taking steps to ensure that these and other programs are capable of providing them with the most effective employment services, not just today but for many years to come.

And I hope that employers across the nation will do their part, by making it a priority to recruit our nation's heroes and let them put their valuable skills and traits to work in contributing to the economic success of our nation.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.