

RECENT DISCUSSIONS WITH PITTSBURGH VETERANS REVEAL THAT, WHILE THEIR MILITARY SERVICE SHOULD BE APPRECIATED, THEIR CIVILIAN POTENTIAL ALSO SHOULD NOT BE TAKEN FOR GRANTED.
BY JEFFERY FRASER

HOME FRONT

In February, some 125 southwestern Pennsylvania military veterans braved the bite of winter to meet at Community College of Allegheny County campuses and share their experiences, challenges and perspectives on adjusting to civilian life. Their concerns were revealing and somewhat surprising: Many of the issues they most often brought up have received little public exposure.

“You hear a lot about veteran suicide, mental health and homelessness. When we talked with veterans, we didn’t hear much about those issues,” said Megan Andros, Economic Development program officer for The Heinz Endowments.

Instead, finding help to resolve legal problems and being underemployed in jobs that offer less-than-rewarding careers were among the common themes during the forums funded by the Endowments and sponsored by Pittsburgh’s Community Engagement Board for local vets. The group is one of 60 sanctioned by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs to give veterans, service providers and other stakeholders a voice in identifying and addressing local issues.

The February sessions were part of a concerted local effort to examine how veterans are faring in southwestern Pennsylvania. Four months earlier, the most comprehensive study of the region’s veterans to date was released, adding greater depth to the profile of the local veteran population that has long lacked clarity and been complicated to understand and address.

Southwestern Pennsylvania is home to 235,000 veterans, about 37,400 of whom served after 9/11. That group is growing by an estimated 5,200 new veterans each year, according to an Endowments-supported study conducted by the Center for a New American Security, a Washington, D.C. think tank specializing in national security issues. Those numbers rank Allegheny and 11 neighboring counties among the nation’s most veteran-rich, with veterans representing 9 to 12 percent of their populations. By comparison, veterans account for 6.7 percent of the population of the average U.S. county.

Unemployment and underemployment, in particular, remain problems, according to the nearly 200 veterans who participated in a survey included in the center’s research. Some 32 percent of the veterans said they are “less economically secure” than when they left

active duty. And one-third of veterans said their civilian job requires “less skill and experience” than what they have to offer.

Younger veterans are the most likely to report economic insecurity. They also are more likely to believe that military benefits, such as those in the GI Bill, are “extremely important” to landing a job. Yet, only 6.5 percent of veterans in the Pittsburgh region use GI Bill benefits compared to 8.4 percent nationally.

Both the February forums and research by the Center for a New American Security revealed perceptions of a deep civilian–military divide. During the forums, a number of young veterans expressed detachment from civilian life in the region, and only 48 percent of those who participated in the center’s survey said they feel connected to their community, even though two-thirds of them belong to a veterans service organization.

Just 38 percent told researchers they’re satisfied with local veterans services. And overall they give local services only an average grade for providing the help they need when adjusting to civilian life. Researchers also found the desire for better coordination and collaboration among organizations serving veterans was a recurring theme in discussions with local stakeholders, community leaders and veterans.

The Center for a New American Security study, however, was completed before the October 2015 launch of PAserves–Greater Pittsburgh. The coordinated, single-point-of-entry support network for veterans has the potential to inspire wider collaboration and improve veterans’ experience with local services, said Phillip Carter, director of the center’s Military, Veterans, and Society Program.

Using an innovative model, PAserves has connected 858 veterans and their families, so far, with the resources of 42 local nonprofits as well as the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs. It links them to the appropriate resources in person, by phone and online. Veterans are offered service coordinators to help them overcome challenges ranging from resolving legal issues to finding a job suited to their abilities to obtaining care specific to their health conditions. The program also strengthens data gathering and analyzes capabilities in the region, which is important to developing best practices and improving the quality of services available to veterans.

The recent surge of once-scarce data has proven helpful to the veterans Community Engagement Board by identifying underemployment, providing legal services and bridging the military–civilian divide as some of the region’s most pressing issues. The information also offers objective evidence to rally dozens of service providers around finding solutions.

“Rather than each of us pulling from where our passions lie,” said Ms. Andros, “we now can now look at the data and work off of facts and figures.” **h**

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Only 48 percent of veterans who participated in the survey feel connected to their community, despite the fact that two-thirds of them belong to a veterans service organization.

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PROVIDING A PATHWAY TO SUCCESS

Veterans in the Pittsburgh region who participated in a series of recent forums or a Center for a New American Security survey indicated issues such as unemployment, underemployment and resolving legal matters were among their top concerns. Assisting them in navigating these challenges and adjusting to civilian life is PAserves — Greater Pittsburgh, a single-point-of-entry support network that provides veterans with a clear pathway to services and resources.