



FIXING ≡ OUR HEROES' ≡ WELCOME

NO ONE SAID THAT COMING HOME WOULD BE EASY FOR VETERANS, BUT TOO OFTEN ORGANIZATIONS THAT TRY TO HELP END UP MAKING THE TRANSITION MORE COMPLICATED. A NEW PUBLIC-PRIVATE NETWORK IS PROVIDING VETERANS WITH STREAMLINED ACCESS TO NEEDED SERVICES AND BETTER SUPPORT OF THEIR READJUSTMENT TO CIVILIAN LIFE. BY JEFFERY FRASER

Lynn Strezeski's job in the U.S. Army was to analyze intelligence. She is proficient in multiple languages, including Russian. She spent most of her active duty in Texas, attached to a National Security Agency branch investigating transnational crime and narcotics.

It took her nine months to find a job when she returned to the Pittsburgh region as a civilian.

Even then, Ms. Strezeski settled for an entry-level position doing basic office work for wages less than what she would receive had she collected unemployment benefits. In the military, she knew where to turn for advice and support for any issue she confronted. Once home in Natrona Heights, northeast of Pittsburgh, she was on her own. And her search for a job was a struggle.

She found a maze of employment and veteran services websites, but little of the guidance and job leads she sought. She applied for more than 100 public- and private-sector positions, by her estimate, but managed to get only 10 interviews. The employment programs she approached arranged none of them.

"I was looking for anything, just to get a paycheck. I didn't want to take unemployment," said Ms. Strezeski. "I went from having people trust me enough to put life and death decisions in my hands to people not even trusting me to type up a document."

Returning military service members, other veterans and their families can use PAServes to connect to the resources of local nonprofits. So far, more than 25 organizations are part of the single-point-of-entry support network, including service providers, universities and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

PAServes can be accessed in person, by phone and online. Veterans enrolled in the network are paired with trained staff who guide them to resources and follow their progress.



She is not alone. Perhaps the steepest challenge faced by returning service members, veterans and their families nationwide is navigating the complex, fragmented systems of care and resources they find back home. In western Pennsylvania, it's an issue that a new public-private support network, PAServes, was created to address.

Launched in October, PAServes is a coordinated, single-point-of-entry support network for returning service members, other veterans and their families that connects them to the resources of more than 25 local nonprofits, including service providers, universities in the Pittsburgh region, and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. The Heinz Endowments awarded the Institute for Veterans and Military Families at Syracuse University a grant of \$300,000 to help establish the network, which is based on a model recently implemented in New York City and North Carolina. With support from other funders, PAServes has received a total of \$800,000 to cover its costs for two years.

In western Pennsylvania, Pittsburgh Mercy Health System administers the program, which has started an initial service area consisting of Allegheny, Westmoreland and Butler counties. Veterans are able to access PAServes in person, by phone and online. Once enrolled, they are paired with staff specifically trained in working with veterans who guide them to the resources they need and follow their progress.

The network is coordinated through a technology platform linking participating nonprofits that, collectively, offer services ranging from health care to housing, legal and employment assistance. Shared data includes background information on veterans seeking assistance, such as skills and military experience, as well as profiles of the network nonprofits. It's anticipated that access to such data will improve the process of matching resources to the needs of veterans, many of whom tend to ask for help with resolving multiple issues.

The system also documents actions taken to support the veterans and the outcomes. At the same time, the privacy of each individual participating in the program is protected, which includes compliance with the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA).

"We believe it will fundamentally change the way we serve veterans in the community," said Megan Andros, an Endowments Community & Economic

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Development program officer and Iraq War veteran whose focus is addressing issues faced by veterans in the region. “There has been a systemic problem, and the resources—although many—haven’t been reaching the people or haven’t been meeting their needs. This is a new way of doing business.”

The veteran population in the 10 western Pennsylvania counties is an estimated 235,000 men and women, according to a recent study by the Center for a New American Security. About 50,000 of them are veterans of the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. And each year, 5,800 more leave military service and return to western Pennsylvania to face the challenging transition to life as a civilian.

“You’re housed by the military, paid by the military, and all of your benefits are provided by the military. You’re surrounded with a support system to take care of you and your family. That’s the nature of the all-volunteer force today,” explained retired Army Col. James McDonough, Jr., managing director of community engagement and innovation for the Institute for Veterans and Military Families. “Losing that when you transition from military service is a very stark reality going forward—and you’re not an educated consumer in terms of what the next system looks like in your community. It’s a new world.”

The most common issues found among veterans who’ve sought help from the new networks in New York and North Carolina relate to the basic necessities of civilian life. The most common request is for help with getting a job, followed by housing and access to benefits.

In addition to smoothing their transition, the data gathered through the PAServes network are expected to shed light on veterans’ experiences and needs and

how they are being served—knowledge that remains incomplete and mostly anecdotal.

“I have housing providers coming to me and saying they are struggling with female veterans with children needing emergency housing,” Ms. Andros said. “Is that once a week? Once a month? What does that problem look like? With this system, we are going to start to see what is happening in our communities.”

Another characteristic of the PAServes model is an emphasis on building a continuum of quality care among providers who’ve developed the cultural competencies required to effectively serve returning service members and their families. This means, for example, that network providers complete an online training program to become certified in such skills and knowledge. It also means that the organizations are committed to collaborating with other service providers to ensure the best results for veterans in the Pittsburgh region.

Ms. Strezeski, who said she was desperate for guidance in finding a job, found little help with getting one that would be a good match, even among the employment programs she contacted. “It’s not that they weren’t trying,” she explained. “It just seemed they didn’t know how to help.”

It was her own persistence in improving her job status that eventually took her from an entry-level position at the VA to a property manager position at the General Services Administration in Pittsburgh that was a better fit for her abilities.

Sustaining the new support network designed to help other veterans returning from the military avoid such bumps in the road will depend on raising public-sector dollars after two years. In New York, for example, discussions with city officials over funding NYCserves in the future are already underway.

“Our philosophy is to raise the capital to seed innovation,” Mr. McDonough said. “We believe the private sector’s capital will demonstrate a sufficient value proposition for the public sector to pick up the responsibility of running these networks ad infinitum.” **h**