



HELPING OUR HEROES: CREATING PATHWAYS TO VETERAN EMPLOYMENT

Letter From The President

The war in Afghanistan is ending and our troops are coming home. But for many, another battle has just begun, this time on the home front.



As our service men and women begin their transition back into civilian life, many will have to overcome barriers of unemployment, poverty, housing instability, and mental and substance abuse issues. How successful they are depends largely on the systems we have in place to support them. With almost 330,000 veterans living here in Los Angeles County, and many more to come as the downsizing of the military begins, the need for a coordinated response is urgent.

As this report shows, the financial stability of our newly returned veterans is particularly uncertain. In 2010, the unemployment rate for post-9/11 vets was just over 18%, putting them at high risk of poverty and homelessness. This report, part of a larger veteran initiative within our Financial Stability efforts, is a call to action for our community - business and civic leaders, nonprofits, grantmakers and other partners - to work collaboratively to strengthen the service system so we can help our veterans succeed.

Working together, we can ensure that our nonprofits have the tools, skills and support they require to meet the needs of the veterans they are serving. Together, we can develop strong lines of communication and cohesion among service providers to promote a more effective service delivery system. Together, we can encourage and support public and private employers to hire and retain veterans in their workforce.

Our goal is to cut post-9/11 veteran unemployment in half by 2017, and ensure the long-term financial stability of our dedicated service men and women. This is a critical time for our veterans. And we are committed to supporting these men and women who have already committed so much to all of us.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Elise Buik". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of each name being capitalized and prominent.

Elise Buik
President & CEO,
United Way of Greater Los Angeles

Introduction

After the longest continuous military conflict in American history, and the impending downsizing of the armed forces, over 2.4 million men and women will soon have completed their military service and returned to American communities. It is possible that more will come home to the Southland than to any other urban region in our nation. But just how prepared are we in Los Angeles County to integrate our veterans, to bring them all the way home, with the jobs, services and resources they need to successfully resume their lives as civilians?

Much of this report focuses on veterans of the post-9/11 conflicts (the group whose service began in 2001 or thereafter), who will make up an increasing number of our veteran population in the coming years. This report includes an examination of their unique attributes and challenges plus an overview of the veteran services landscape to which they return. We will also recommend action steps by which we as a community can combine local resources and leadership to meet the economic, employment and potentially, other wellness needs of veterans in Los Angeles County.

Across America, communities, cities and counties are waking up to both the challenges and opportunities related to the homecoming of those who have served in the recent wars. But few have pulled together strategically, deploying local resources and leveraging federal ones, in a fashion that helps veterans to successfully reintegrate into civilian society. This is the issue that LA County itself must grapple with in the coming months if we are to bring our troops not just home, but all the way home.

“It was closed door after closed door, after closed door”

When Jorge Gonzalez got out of the military, he had his life all planned out, but a tough economy and difficulty translating his skills into the civilian workforce brought on challenges he was unprepared for. “It was closed door after closed door, after closed door,” he recalls. With help from a local workforce development service provider, Jorge was able to secure a job with a major oil refinery company and says his whole life has changed as a result.





I've saved people's lives. I'm
a pretty smart guy...I thought
that counted for something."

"Six months after my first tour in Iraq, they sent me back out again. It was supposed to be for 9 months, but it turned into a year. I was deployed 3 times in less than 5 years. I have applied for over 50 jobs. No one wants me, not even for an interview. I don't use drugs - never have. I can control air traffic, ground traffic, radio and all kinds of technology. I've saved people's lives. I'm a pretty smart guy...I thought that counted for something."

Jason, Age 24, East Los Angeles: US Army, 2005-09

What We Know... and What We Don't

Recent years have witnessed a flurry of new research activity about the circumstances facing America's veterans. But we still don't have access to detailed and timely data locally that would give our leaders — policymakers, advocates, service providers, grant makers, employers or civic officials — the reliable and comprehensive information they need to take informed and strategic action.

The Department of Defense (DoD) and Veterans Affairs (VA) collect useful data at a national level and sometimes by state, but rarely coordinate with local leaders to draw meaningful conclusions about the conditions for local veterans. For example, national data from September of this year shows that unemployment for female veterans who served in Iraq and Afghanistan is nearly 20%.ⁱ But we have no local data on female post-9/11 veterans; whether they have children and how many of those children live in poverty, which hinders our ability to develop a targeted and effective community response.

This report, as is true of other similar efforts, relies primarily on data from the US Census Bureau's American Community Survey, which is the most complete and current collection of relevant data that we have about veterans at the local level. Although this valuable employment data source is updated annually, there is a three-year lag time between collection and publication. With the eventual return of approximately 24,000 troops from post-9/11 military operations to Los Angeles County, the need for local government agencies and non-profit organizations to obtain and share relevant and timely data is urgent.

Who Are Our Veterans?

The majority of our nation's veterans are well over 50, spanning in age from the generation that served in Vietnam back to the period before World War II. While overall, our veteran population is shrinking, the fastest growing segment is of course the group who served in the first Gulf War era through post-9/11 conflicts.ⁱⁱ Womenⁱⁱⁱ and people of color^{iv} are increasingly represented in this group, as are members of the National Guard and Reserves, formerly known as “weekend warriors”, who live and work among the civilian population when not deployed. Since 9/11, Guard members and Reservists have served longer and more deployments than any generation before them.^v Indeed, nearly 45% of those who have been sent to fight since 2001 have been members of the reserve component.^{vi}

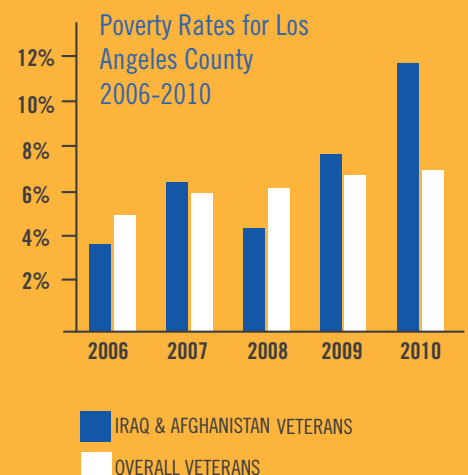
With over 1.9 million veterans in residence, California is home to nearly 10% of the country's veteran population.^{vii} Close to 330,000 veterans (17%) live in Los Angeles County alone.^{viii} While the majority are old enough to have served in Vietnam or before, an increasing number (36,000) are younger veterans. **In fact, in the coming years, Los Angeles can expect an influx of an additional 24,000 younger veterans as the war in Afghanistan ends and the size of our armed forces is likely reduced.**^{ix} This will bring our total population of post-9/11 veterans to almost 60,000 by 2017.^x

While overall veteran numbers will be down, demand will likely be up, given the unique and still unmet challenges facing many post-9/11 veterans. As most of L.A.'s veterans are young and have much of their working lives ahead of them, resources and assistance that promote their skills and open doors to employment opportunities should pay off both for them as individuals and for our community at large.

Poverty

From 2006-2010, the poverty rate for post-9/11 veterans almost tripled, from just under 4% to just under 12%.^{xi} This was significantly higher than the poverty rates experienced by veterans overall.

As our veterans transition home from service in Iraq and Afghanistan, they return to the care of their families and the communities of which they are a part. Not only do many fall through society's cracks, but the thousands of community-based organizations that serve them struggle to provide appropriate and effective services in the absence of consistent guidance or support. Just slightly more than half of those who have served since 9/11 have pursued the VA care for which they are eligible, some preferring to seek care elsewhere, others unaware of the resources available.^{xii} **Those that do wait months for their claims to be adjudicated; veterans in Los Angeles wait an average of 377 days – more than a year – to receive a response to their VA claims.**^{xiii}



Challenge:

The post-9/11 veteran population is projected to reach 60,000 by 2017. If unemployment and poverty rates remain high, thousands more of L.A. County's veterans could become unemployed, putting them at high risk of poverty and homelessness.

Goal:

Cut veteran unemployment in half by placing 5,400 veterans in jobs by 2017.

What's in a Number?

Our priority is to use the most reliable and timely local data available on our veterans. In terms of unemployment rates for post-9/11 veterans, our best data comes from the 2010 American Community Survey (ACS.) While we believe that unemployment for these veterans has declined in the past two years, there is no reliable data source to prove this. Therefore, in establishing our goal, we have used the 2010 unemployment rate of 18%.

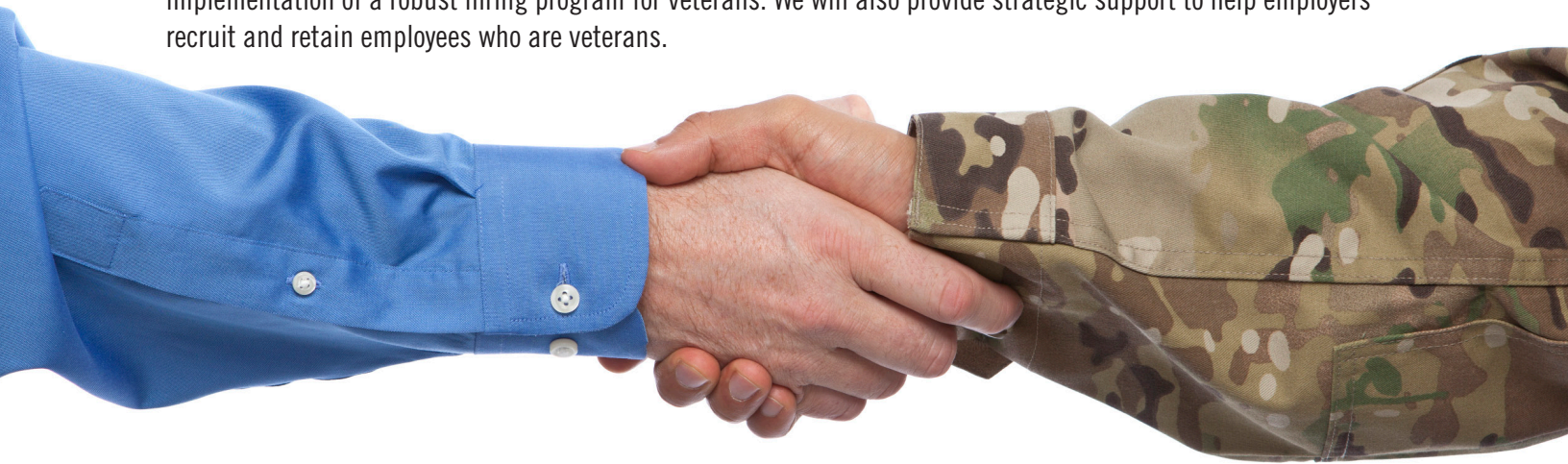
Given that our post-9/11 veteran population is expected to rise to 60,000 over the next five years, and with unemployment rates as high as 18%, our worst case scenario is that as many as 10,800 veterans could be out of work by 2017. Our goal is to cut that number in half by placing 5,400 veterans in jobs.

Strategies:

Engage the Business Community as a Key Partner

Financial stability is largely dependent on the ability to secure and sustain a steady-paying job. By working with employers to incorporate their insight and needs into veteran job readiness training, we can make sure veterans are prepared and competitive in the labor market. We must also provide employers with adequate support and education so that they can successfully hire and retain veterans.

United Way's Role: We will convene private sector leaders to identify and share best practices, and encourage implementation of a robust hiring program for veterans. We will also provide strategic support to help employers recruit and retain employees who are veterans.



Convene Stakeholders to Create and Implement a Comprehensive Service Model

Prosperity in the workforce does not occur in a vacuum. In addition to employment, many veterans need a range of services they can easily access to help them successfully reintegrate. Working together, service providers, policy makers, business leaders and other stakeholders can identify best practices to develop and implement a continuum of care model for workplaces.

United Way's Role: We will identify and unite stakeholders in the development of a successful reintegration plan for L.A. County's veterans and hold each other accountable for follow through. We will also facilitate LA County in defining a normative goal to guide our collective efforts.

Build the Capacity of Nonprofit Organizations Offering Employment Services to Veterans

Just as business leaders are integral to creating a robust veteran workforce, so are community-based organizations that work with our veterans every day. But they can't do it alone. We must provide these organizations with support and training so they can build their capacity and make sure veterans are receiving effective, high-quality services.

United Way's Role: We will support nonprofit partners with proven success records on veteran job placement and retention so they can refine and expand their services. We will also build the capacity of successful workforce partners that have not served veterans to direct and customize their services to meet veterans' needs. We will also engage L.A. County's grant-making community in efforts to identify opportunities for philanthropic intervention.

Advocate for Local Data Collection That Can Drive Our Efforts

In order to commit to key benchmarks and hold ourselves accountable to shared goals, we must ensure that reliable and timely data is collected and distributed on an ongoing basis.

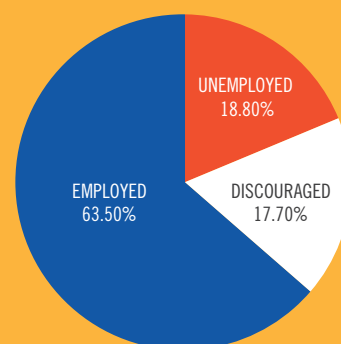
United Way's Role: We will play a leadership role in advocating for the collection and distribution of data so stakeholders can work together strategically and effectively in support of L.A.'s veterans.

Employment

Employment is critical to the alleviation of poverty. But veterans struggle to translate their military experience into jobs. Many have never had to write a resume or be interviewed for a job. And since material needs are almost entirely met while on deployment, the pressure of securing a paycheck to buy food or shelter is far removed from their experience. Employers are also unaware of the tremendous attributes that veterans possess and have sometimes overlooked this population in the past. For those in service, their military job has also imparted an enormous sense of purpose; the camaraderie, team-building and mission-driven nature of many military jobs are critical to service members' overall sense of wellness.^{xiv} Having returned to civilian life, the inability to secure and sustain a job weighs heavily upon some veterans, in ways for which many are underprepared.^{xv}

For many, the return to civilian life coincided with the economic downturn and poor job market. Post-9/11 veterans, in particular, have experienced high levels of unemployment. **The most recent data we have show that over 18% of post-9/11 veterans were unemployed in 2010.** Although recent national data points to an improvement in these trends since 2010, we have no local data to corroborate that. With the post-9/11 veteran population projected to reach 60,000 by 2017, if unemployment and poverty rates remain high, thousands more of LA County's veterans could become unemployed, putting them at high risk of poverty and homelessness.

Employment Status of Post-9/11 Veterans in LA County



Source for graph: Source: Economic Roundtable analysis; U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 5-Year PUMS (Public Use Microdata Sample), 2006-2010. Universe: Civilian veterans and non-veterans 18 years and over. Drawn from Employment Status Recode.

Discouraged Workers: Discouraged workers are a subset of persons marginally attached to the labor force. The marginally attached are those persons not in the labor force who want and are available for work, and who have looked for a job sometime in the prior 12 months, but were not counted as unemployed because they had not searched for work in the 4 weeks preceding the survey. Among the marginally attached, discouraged workers were not currently looking for work specifically because they believed no jobs were available for them or there were none for which they would qualify.

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

Housing and Homelessness

A quarter of L.A. County's post-9/11 veterans are rent-burdened, which means they spend 30 to 50% of their incomes on rent. Another 12% are severely rent-burdened (spending over half their income on housing.) Anecdotal evidence suggests that the housing situation may be even more volatile than the statistics indicate, with many younger veterans thought to be transient, still "couch surfing" before settling into a more stable lifestyle. This may also explain the much higher-than-normal percentage of post-9/11 veterans in overcrowded housing.

Figure VIII:

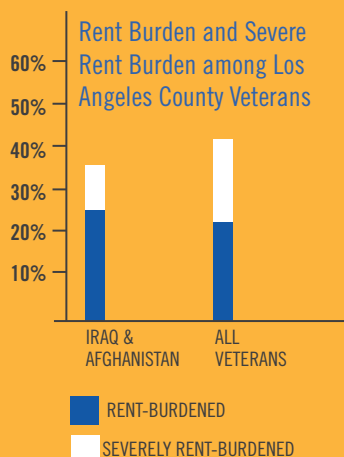
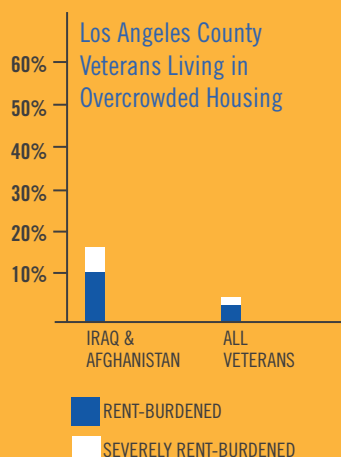


Figure IX:



With the economy still in recession and unemployment relatively high, veterans who are already struggling to pay their rent are at increasing risk of becoming homeless. **In fact, Los Angeles has the largest number of homeless veterans in the nation, with 9,000 known veterans sleeping on our streets each night.**^{xvi}

Challenges and Opportunities Facing Post- 9/11 Veterans

Like their predecessors, most veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan live successfully as members of civilian society. But they face unique challenges that - despite their enormous talents - may impact their ability to either secure or sustain gainful employment and reintegrate successfully into civilian life.

Physical and Emotional Trauma

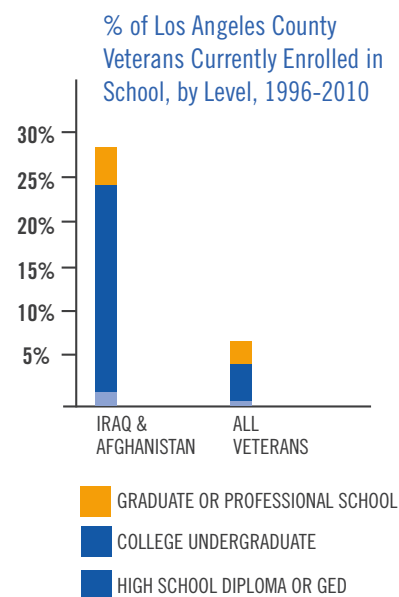
The nature of modern warfare means that most veterans have been excessively exposed to explosive blasts, and the long term prospects for health impact remain unknown. VA data collected nationally indicate that close to 240,000 individuals, an alarming 28% of post-9/11 veterans who have accessed VA care, have been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress.^{xvii} Given that only 55% of the eligible veterans have sought care within the VA system, it is fair to assume the actual counts are higher.^{xviii}

Extended Deployments

Unlike previous American conflicts, nearly half of those deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan have endured repeated and extended deployments. Among today's veterans are thousands who missed milestone events in their families' lives - births, first steps, prom nights - and thousands who were not there to help their spouses handle home foreclosure, the deaths of family members and other hard times. For many, these losses impact their ability to reintegrate fully with family, friends, work and community.

In spite of these challenges, post-9/11 veterans have much in their favor. **Ninety-eight percent of current service members hold at least a high school diploma, compared to the nonveteran County average of 75%.^{xix}** In fact, in Los Angeles, over a quarter of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans are currently pursuing some form of further education, mostly as college undergraduates (23%).

The unique demands upon post-9/11 service members have also required that they become adaptable and able to perform effectively in a dynamic workplace. In fact, a recent guide for employers of veterans from Syracuse University's Institute for Veterans and Military Families notes that these are individuals who are poised to offer exceptional value to America's employers. Highly-trained, disciplined and often uniquely-skilled workers, post-9/11 veterans are "creative, focused on the mission, can motivate a team, identify and solve problems, and deliver outcomes that will contribute positively to the bottom line".^{xx}



Overcoming the Challenges: What Los Angeles Can Do to Support its Veterans

A recent report from the nonpartisan Center for a New American Security documents that employers identify leadership, teamwork, character, discipline, expertise, effectiveness and loyalty as key attributes of the veterans they hire.^{xxi} Our nation's challenge is to heal the wounds of war so that these extraordinary skills can be put to service in a new way.

Creating Pathways to Employment

For four years running, veteran unemployment has exceeded that of nonveterans. L.A. County's veterans still struggle with higher than normal unemployment rates.

It is crucial that veterans have supported pathways into the labor force that result in opportunities for accessing and sustaining employment. This includes job readiness training programs that help them transition from military to civilian careers as well as support with job placement and retention. Likewise, employers need to be brought to the table as a partner in this work to help them understand the value of hiring veterans and give input on shaping programs to meet their needs. Connecting the local business community with service providers will also create a network of support that will help our veterans and therefore, our businesses, succeed.

Building a Coherent Infrastructure

Despite having one of the largest concentrations of military veterans anywhere in America, and in spite of its formidable resources, Los Angeles County lacks an efficient and coherent infrastructure to support the successful reintegration of veterans.

There is no “center of gravity” for the Los Angeles veteran community. Many nonprofits are doing outstanding work to meet the needs of veterans and would benefit enormously from a coordinated approach whereby a network of providers - including local VA leadership and engaged partners in the civic, business and philanthropic sectors - could ensure that no veteran slips through the cracks. Local VA leadership also has the potential to play a significant role by creating a community-based support network to address the concerns local offices cannot. And there are also opportunities for the grant-making community to share its intellectual capital about local assets and resources to fund these efforts and invest its financial capital in well-vetted community partners.

Advocating for Relevant and Timely Data

The lack of current data pertinent to Los Angeles County's veterans compromises our ability to serve them efficiently.

The most current information we have about veterans in LA County comes from the US Census' American Community Survey (ACS) of 2010, which is nearly 3 years old. Thousands more veterans have returned to Los Angeles since then, and their needs are unknown. Moreover, the ACS only accounts for certain veteran characteristics. For example, it provides little reliable information about the condition of LA's female veterans, who we know nationally are among the most vulnerable of all the veteran populations. Without timely and geographically-targeted data, our efforts around public policy, effective hiring programs, efficient services and strategic grants are put at an enormous disadvantage.

Conclusion

Public support for today's uniformed men and women may be stronger now than at any time since WWII. The popular "Sea of Goodwill" identified by now-retired Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Michael Mullen is stirring in communities across the nation.^{xxii} Local leaders are beginning to convene, plan and act in support of their veterans, working together to identify needs, understand gaps, inventory resources and create local solutions to the challenges of veteran reintegration.

The need for a coordinated response is as obvious as it is urgent. Los Angeles needs a response that engages employers in providing jobs; identifies best practices to create a continuum of care; provides education and support for service providers; and relies on the accurate and timely collection of data to drive our decisions. Our many older, more stable veterans will give way to a younger population that, although smaller in number, has both enormous assets and significant and complex needs. It would be an enormous misfortune for our local economy to forgo access to these talents because the infrastructure was not in place to help them succeed.

Helping to improve the economic condition of our veterans is a complex endeavor that requires the participation of many stakeholders. But we have the resources and the leadership within this community to develop the infrastructure we need. Our veterans are coming home. Let's make sure we bring them all the way home.

Don Le is a veteran of the U.S. Navy. After leaving service, a bad economy and tough job market made it difficult for him to find a job. "I probably sent out hundreds of resumes without a return call." With help from a local service provider, Don was able to rewrite his resume and find a job that spoke to his true passion, which is working with adolescents with substance abuse issues. He has now committed his life to giving back to others as others did for him. "There's always someone out there who needs help, and if I can, I would like to help them succeed in their dreams also."

"I probably sent out hundreds of resumes without a return call."



Acknowledgments

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End Notes

- i United States Department of Labor / Bureau of Labor Statistics, Table A-5. Employment status of the civilian population 18 years and over by veteran status, period of service, and sex, not seasonally adjusted. September 2012. See: <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/empst.t05.htm>
- ii US Department of Veterans Affairs' National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, see: <http://www.va.gov/vetdata/Report.asp> "Table 1L: VETERANS 2000-2036 by RACE/ETHNICITY, GENDER, PERIOD, AGE", 2012. As of September 2012, the actual number of known living American military veterans was 21,806,449.
- iii US Department of Veterans Affairs' National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, see: <http://www.va.gov/vetdata/docs/quickfacts/Population-slideshow.pdf>, page 4
- iv US Department of Defense, Contingency Tracking System, July 31, 2012.
- v The reserve components of the United States armed forces, also referred to as the Guard and Reserves, are military organizations whose members are drawn from the civilian population and who usually perform at least 39 days of military duty per year. Since 9/11 however, Reserve and Guard units have been called up to support and augment the active duty (or professional full-time) military on numerous occasions. US Code 10 USC § 10102 mandates that reserve components provide trained units and qualified personnel for active duty in the armed forces, in time of war, national emergency, or as otherwise required for missions related to the nation's security.
- vi US Department of Veterans Affairs, Office of Public Health Epidemiology Program, Analysis of VA Health Care Utilization among Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), and Operation New Dawn (OND) Veterans: Cumulative from 1st Qtr FY 2002 through 3rd Qtr FY 2012 (October 1, 2001 – June 30, 2012). Page 4.
- vii US Department of Veterans Affairs, National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, see http://www.va.gov/vetdata/Veteran_Population.asp. Note: "The Veteran Population Model (VetPop2007) (on which this information is based) is the latest official source of population information from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). VetPop2007 estimates the Veteran population and its characteristics from FY2000 through FY2006, and forecasts the population for FY2007 through FY2036. It uses data from VA, Department of Defense (DoD), and U.S. Census Bureau as inputs to forecast the Veteran population through the planning horizon."
- viii Burns, Patrick and Daniel Flaming. 2012. *Stepping Up for Veterans Standing Down*. Economic Roundtable. Underwritten by the United Way of Greater Los Angeles, 2012. Pages 4-5. All data gathered and analyzed by Burns and Flaming are drawn from: The US Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2010.
- ix Ibid. Page 5.
- x Ibid. Page 1.
- xi The U.S. Census Bureau uses a set of annual income levels, known as poverty thresholds, to estimate the portion of the population who are poor. Poverty rates refer to income levels in the year preceding the survey, for example data for 2006 to 2010 applies to the years 2005 to 2009. Poverty thresholds by Size of Family and Number of Children can be found on the U.S. Census web site: <https://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/data/threshld/index.html>
- xii Department of Veterans Affairs, Office of Public Health Epidemiology Program, Analysis of VA Health Care Utilization among Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), and Operation New Dawn (OND) Veterans, 5.
- xiii Glantz, Aaron and Shifflet, Shane, Disabled Veterans Stuck in Backlog Limbo, Center for Investigative Reporting. October, 2012. See: <http://cironline.org/veteransclaims>
- xiv Berglass, Nancy and Harrell, Dr. Margaret C. Well After Service: Veteran Reintegration and American Communities. Center for a New American Security, April 2011. Pages 14-17.
- xv Ibid.
- xvi Home For Good, The Action Plan to End Chronic and Veteran Homelessness by 2016. 2012 Update. Page 5.
- xvii US Department of Veterans Affairs, Office of Public Health Epidemiology Program, Analysis of VA Health Care Utilization among Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), and Operation New Dawn (OND) Veterans: Cumulative from 1st Qtr FY 2002 through 3rd Qtr FY 2012 (October 1, 2001 – June 30, 2012). Pages 9-10.
- xviii Ibid, 5.
- xix Burns, Patrick and Daniel Flaming. 2012. *Stepping Up for Veterans Standing Down*. Economic Roundtable. Underwritten by the United Way of Greater Los Angeles, 2012. Page 23. All data gathered and analyzed by Burns and Flaming are drawn from: The US Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2010.
- xx Haynie, Michael J., et al. Guide to Leading Policies, Practices, and Resources: Supporting the Employment of Veterans and Military Families. Syracuse University / Institute for Veterans and Military Families. September 2012.
- xxi Harrell, Dr. Margaret C and Berglass, Nancy. *Employing America's Veterans: Perspectives from Businesses*. Center for a New American Security, April 2011. Pages 5-6.

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