

# Younger vets still struggle as jobs scene improves

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WASHINGTON -- Two months after completing his five-plus years as an Army medic, Dan Huber is still looking for a job. And while he's had some promising interviews, he has no assurances the search will end soon.

That's given him some insight that he shares with some of his buddies back at Fort Polk in Louisiana: Don't wait until you've left the military to determine how you'll make ends meet as a civilian.

"I've told them: 'Hey, man, you guys have really got to start planning months and months in advance. It's not just planning for interviews. It's planning to make sure you'll be afloat in this time period, which you don't know how long will take,'" said Huber, 26, of Waukesha, Wis.

Although veterans as a whole have a lower unemployment rate than the nation at large, younger veterans who served in the years following the Sept. 11 attacks are having a much harder time finding work.

The unemployment rate for veterans between 18 and 24 exceeded 20 percent last year. It was also in double digits for those 25-34. The unemployment rate for both age groups was higher than for their nonveteran peers and much higher than the national average.

The job problems for younger vets have continued despite a wide range of private and public efforts. Congress approved tax credits for companies that hire veterans. Federal agencies stepped up their preferential hiring of vets. Many thousands are taking advantage of a generous package of educational benefits instead of entering the job market. Companies such as Wal-Mart, General Electric and many others announced programs designed to hire more veterans. And organizations like the U.S. Chamber of Commerce have helped put on hundreds of job fairs around the country.

Kevin Schmiegel, a retired lieutenant colonel who spent years trying to get young Marines to re-enlist, says the youngest vets are making a couple of critical mistakes when it comes to searching for a job.

With little job experience outside the military, many can't explain how the skills they learned in the military translate to the private sector, said Schmiegel, now executive director of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Hiring Our Heroes program. The program has helped more than 14,000 veterans land jobs and will be fine-tuning its focus over the coming year to help younger vets, as well as military spouses.

Trooper Deon Cockrell, military liaison for the Texas Department of Public Safety, had a similar take at a recent job fair in Oklahoma City. He said the discipline and skills acquired during

military service translate well to a career in law enforcement.

"A lot of them don't know that they're eligible," Cockrell said. "They can walk from uniform to uniform."

Congress tried to help with the transition to civilian life. Since November 2011, departing service members are required to attend various workshops designed to help them with such things as how to write effective resumes and cover letters and improve their interview skills. Previously, the training was voluntary, which greatly lessened participation rates.

Huber said he got help when he left Fort Polk, but he admits to waiting too long to seek it and says he was too busy on many days to worry about following through on the advice.

"I definitely wasn't focused on it, and I wasn't prepared for such a lengthy ordeal that is applying for a real, sustainable job," said Huber, who served in Baghdad in 2008.

At the Oklahoma City job fair, Jacob Clark, 25, had strong praise for the job counseling he got when he ended his Air Force career six months ago. He now works as a forklift operator and hopes to land a job maintaining airplanes. "I'm used to working with my hands," Clark said. "Planes are everywhere. They all need avionics maintenance." But he said civilian employers require a different kind of license that is difficult and time-consuming to get.

Michael Jackson, 27, of Oklahoma City and a former corporal in the Marine Corps, said the transitioning classes helped a little bit, but he's still without a job.

"It's been pretty tough," Jackson said. "I've had a lot of no responses."

He sounded encouraged though by the recent announcement from Wal-Mart that it planned to hire 100,000 people in the next five years. Jackson may not exactly fit the company's hiring criteria because he left the military more than a year ago.

"Wal-Mart would be the career I would be looking for," he said.

Schmiegel said the second problem he sees most frequently among young veterans is the desire to go home regardless of job prospects.

"They are making a decision of the heart. They are not going to where the jobs are. They are not going to the industries that are hiring," Schmiegel said.

His organization has developed a computer website with Google and various federal agencies designed to point veterans to the 100 fastest-growing cities and the five or six industries within those communities that are doing the most hiring. The aim is to push veterans to use their educational benefits to get training in a high-demand field and then relocate.

Curtis Coy, an undersecretary at the Veterans Affairs Department, said expanded educational benefits are playing an important role in lowering the unemployment rate as hundreds of thousands of veterans attend college through a program that covers tuition and fees, housing, books and relocation expenses. Participation in the Post 9/11 GI Bill program has jumped from about 366,000 in 2010 to 646,000 in the latest year. Some of those enrolled are spouses or children of a veteran. The program allows veterans to transfer their benefits to immediate family members if they have six years of service and commit to another four.

Coy said he's confident the employment trend is moving in the right direction. He says younger veterans often need a little time to figure out what they're going to do when they get out of the service. "I'm a 24-year veteran so I'm acutely aware of standing there at the steps going, 'So what do I do now?'"

Sgt. Jesus Sanchez, 33, who will be leaving the Army National Guard this year after 10 years of service, attended the Oklahoma City job fair to get a head start in his job hunt. He specializes in managing the flow of medical supplies and is looking to do the same in the civilian

world, but said he found many jobs appealing, including working at Wal-Mart.

"A job's a job," he said.

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Talley reported from Oklahoma City.

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