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Investing in Vets: Strategies to Help Returning Gulf War Vets Enter the Civilian Work Force Successfully

PUBLICATION: *Social Work in Mental Health* (2013); 11, 434-459.

PUBLICATION TYPE: Peer-Reviewed Journal Article

KEYWORDS: Veterans, employment, reintegration, civilian work force, Gulf War veterans, corporate

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS:

- Despite service members fighting in the Gulf Wars being more educated than service members from previous wars, veteran unemployment rates have risen significantly in recent years and are expected to increase, with over one million service members returning once the wars are over.
- Corporate leadership, veteran-specific training and a long-term commitment to veterans' employment were all significant factors in diminishing barriers to veteran employment and reintegration.
- In addition to military leadership, corporate or coalition-led policies and programs are an important part of supporting veteran employment and reintegration. Successful employment and reintegration is dependent on the labor market and behavioral health, among other factors.

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ABSTRACT:

“This article discusses the need for an integrated and active change management approach by social workers in American businesses to develop corporate policies that address the work and personal concerns of the Gulf War Era II (GWE II) veterans who will be returning home over the next three years. Many of these veterans were involved in intense combat and/or served multiple tours of duty in Iraq and Afghanistan. The challenge that veterans who served in Iraq and Afghanistan face in their efforts to find jobs and productive work, to establish relationships at work, to remain steadily employed and fulfilled, and to further their education are discussed.”

Implications

FOR PRACTICE

Social workers who understand business and organizational change can be leaders in supporting veterans in the workplace and advocating for positive social change for veterans and their families. Specifically, social workers should promote responsiveness and collaboration within work organizations, to the best of their ability. Because family members are often early barometers for troubled veterans, family and friends of veterans should take note of troubling behaviors as much as possible, and offer supportive environments for veterans' reintegration and reintroduction to employment in the civilian world. For employers, increased cultural competence concerning military populations would be helpful, as well as valuing and promoting veteran wellness on the job. Corporate-sponsored activities for veterans and their families, such as picnics and bring-your-children-to-work days, would be a part of creating a more welcoming culture that is supportive of military families. Creating a community atmosphere at the job might create a sense of purpose for veterans and increase productivity. Employers should view the experiences of veterans through the lens of the positive skills they offer, including increased resilience, technical and leadership training, and emotional growth. Service members preparing for the job market should research the skills needs within various industries, and be cognizant of the applications their respective military training has for civilian employment.

FOR POLICY

To provide sustainable employment for veterans, organizations should work on creating coalitions of corporate leaders who have the power to change policies, programs and practices, and who will monitor the success of these policy changes in terms of supporting veterans. Changes in disability policy in corporations, as well as at the state and federal levels, would be particularly useful for veterans with challenges stemming from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and/or traumatic brain injury (TBI) diagnoses. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) may consider working together with corporations on the implementation of appropriate policies to accommodate veterans with disabilities, especially those adjusting to post-service life with TBI and PTSD. For employers, policy changes increasing veteran-specific recruitment and training would be beneficial as well. Employers should also work with their human resource departments to develop veteran-specific training for new employees, and improve the quality of internal programs for employed veterans.

FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study was conducted using only a small convenience sample. Future research should include larger samples of participants and random sampling to improve generalizability of results. Future researchers should also expand on this study by asking veteran participants to both generate, and rank the importance of various factors impacting employment and successful reintegration, rather than limiting factors to those generated by the researchers. Researchers should also utilize in-person interviews to gather more reliable and detailed data beyond that captured in this study by online surveys. In this study, researchers indicated the importance of organizational coalitions, composed of corporate leaders, who can impact policy and program changes and monitor the success of those changes in supporting veterans. Future researchers should also evaluate the success of such coalitions longitudinally, in terms of increasing veteran employment in participating organizations.

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