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## **INTERIM REPORT**

# Implementation Assessment of Executive Order 13518— The Veterans Employment Initiative



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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## SUGGESTED CITATION

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



**INTERIM REPORT**

Implementation Assessment of  
Executive Order 13518—  
The Veterans Employment Initiative



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## OVERVIEW

Under the auspices of the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM), the Institute for Veterans and Military Families (IVMF) at Syracuse University conducted an independent study to assess the implementation of the Veterans Employment Initiative (VEI). The VEI is a comprehensive program to improve government-wide recruiting, use of applicable hiring authorities, and retention of veteran employees across federal departments and agencies. It was established as part of Executive Order (EO) 13518, Employment of Veterans in the Federal Government, signed by President Barack Obama in November 2009.



### Intent of Study

The transition to the incoming administration of President-Elect Donald Trump, now underway, provides a valuable opportunity to review the implementation of the VEI over the past seven years, document progress and lessons learned, and offer policy recommendations. This interim report provides an overview of the project design and methods, presents preliminary findings, and provides future areas of focus that have emerged, to date. The findings and recommendations provided in this document will be followed by a full project report in mid-to-late winter 2017.

### Project Design and Methods

The study, which addressed problem areas previously identified by OPM, was carried out from May to December 2016. It employed a multi-method research design. First, the IVMF research team reviewed past research, policies, and other government documents and plans related to veteran employment. Next, we compiled and analyzed publicly available data on veteran employment in the federal sector. Based on this appraisal, a targeted data collection strategy (in-depth interviews and surveys) was used to capture diverse viewpoints from individuals closely involved in the VEI implementation and program management, as well as those involved in veteran hiring across the U.S. government.

## PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Preliminary results reveal largely positive outcomes for the federal government. Veteran employment in the federal sector has risen sharply since 2009. To some extent this can be attributed to the VEI and its strong leadership. Employment data and interviews, however, reveal mixed performance in hiring, retention, and program implementation across agencies. There remains clear room for improvement and increased interagency learning to sustain, if not improve upon, the gains made since 2009.

- 1 The VEI is governed by a Council on Veterans Employment, an interagency body comprised of the federal government's 24 largest departments and agencies. From the outset, the Council and its steering committee provided the initiative with strong, committed leadership. Maintaining senior leadership engagement will be critical as the VEI goes forward.
- 2 Adoption and implementation of the VEI proved strongest among large departments and agencies with more resources and a strong cultural affinity for hiring veterans. Departments and agencies of smaller size and more specialized missions experienced greater implementation difficulties.
- 3 The VEI facilitated or bolstered pre-existing cross-agency collaboration, particularly on veteran hiring and recruiting, and presents valuable opportunities to tap and institutionalize informal collaborative efforts identified during the initiative's implementation.

## FUTURE FOCUS AREAS FOR THE NEXT ADMINISTRATION

Three areas are highlighted as key areas of emphasis for the Trump administration—Council leadership and management, agency efforts to ensure VEI implementation, and cross-agency collaboration. The brief recommendations provided in this interim report will be discussed in further detail as our analysis continues.

### COUNCIL ON VETERANS EMPLOYMENT

- Establish clear, singular leadership at the highest level possible—preferably the Vice President;
- Ensure that agency representatives possess the necessary authority to remain engaged with the goals and objectives identified by the council.

### AGENCY IMPLEMENTATION EFFORTS

- Continue measuring performance against the entire employment picture—hiring, retention, and turnover—and continue to make appropriate adjustments for size, budget, mission, scope, and required skill sets;
- Take feasible steps to ensure veteran employment program offices are fully resourced. Continue to identify learning and resource sharing opportunities between Veteran Employment Program Offices, particularly between well- and under-resourced agencies;
- Develop tools and strategies to promote more proactive human capital planning (such as forecasting mission-critical hiring needs and considering how to hire veterans to meet these needs);
- Apply and make skillful use of veteran hiring authorities and the various flexibilities they afford to more effectively meet veteran hiring needs.

### CROSS-AGENCY COLLABORATION

- Extend the VEI agenda beyond exclusive focus on information sharing and operational tactics—integrate and reconcile programmatic efforts to increase unity of effort. Measure and monitor it too;
- Gather perspectives from individuals actively engaged in collaboration;
- Institutionalize a collaborative process to isolate, document, and formalize existing informal practices.

# I. INTRODUCTION

## A. BACKGROUND

In 2009, the jobless rate for post-9/11 veterans stood at 10.2 percent—more than a percentage point higher than nonveterans (BLS 2010). That November, over a year into the U.S. subprime mortgage crisis and resulting global recession, President Obama signed Executive Order (EO) 13518, Employment of Veterans in the Federal Government. The Order—signed in recognition of veterans' sacrifices on behalf of the nation, the importance of public and private sector employers in supporting veterans' transition to civilian life, and the challenges veterans have faced in finding employment post-service—established a government-wide Veterans Employment Initiative (VEI) to promote veteran employment in federal departments and agencies.

## B. THE VETERANS EMPLOYMENT INITIATIVE

The VEI is a comprehensive initiative to improve government-wide recruiting, use of applicable hiring authorities, and retention of veteran employees across federal departments and agencies. The program is governed by a Council on Veterans Employment, an interagency body comprised of the federal government's 24 largest departments and agencies, with the Secretaries of Labor and Veterans Affairs serving as Council Co-Chairs and the Director of the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM) as Vice-Chair. A steering committee, comprised of a sub-set of Council representatives—OPM and the Departments of Veterans Affairs (VA), Labor (DoL), Defense (DoD), and Homeland Security (DHS)—oversees administration of the VEI, monitoring implementation of key agency-level activities, maintaining mechanisms to hold agencies accountable for performance, and informing the Council regarding the VEI's structure, execution, and strategic direction.

The VEI addresses five problem areas that OPM identified prior to the release of the Order:

- Absence of clear leadership concerning the worth and importance of hiring veterans;
- An interagency organizational structure that does not support advocacy for veterans' employment;
- Inadequate understanding by human resources professionals regarding an advantage in the federal hiring process known as Veterans' Preference;
- Insufficient understanding of Veterans' Preference and the overall hiring process by veterans and transitioning service members;
- Lack of systems to match veterans' skills and education to available positions.

The U.S. Presidential transition, now underway, presents a ripe opportunity to review the implementation of VEI over the past seven years, document achievements and lessons learned, and offer policy recommendations to the incoming Trump Administration on how best to support veteran employment in the federal government. This interim report, a product of a study conducted independently from May 2016 to December 2016 by the Institute for Veterans and Military Families (IVMF) at Syracuse University, addresses these issues.

Readers should caution that this is an interim report and it should be understood as such. Herein, we present preliminary findings from the study through December 2016. We present a brief description of the project design, methods, and our progress to date. We also review key findings and future areas of focus that are emerging from our first wave of data collection and analysis. A full project report that includes a complete analysis of the various data collected for this effort (interviews and surveys) will follow this document with an estimated release of mid-to-late winter 2017.

## II. PROJECT DESIGN AND METHODS

### A. PROJECT DESIGN

Under the auspices of OPM, the Institute for Veterans and Military Families (IVMF) at Syracuse University is leading a study to assess the implementation of the VEI. The study is guided by the following research questions:

- How have the Council on Veterans Employment and its participating federal agencies implemented EO13518 since its inception?
- What are the key lessons learned from the Veterans Employment Initiative (VEI)?
- What can the next administration do to improve, sustain, or further institutionalize the intent of the VEI across the federal government?

Our investigation of the VEI and related veteran employment issues occurred from May 2016 to December 2016, and incorporated a multi-method research design. First, our team reviewed past research, policies, and other government documents (e.g., strategic plans) related to veteran employment. Next, we compiled and analyzed publicly available data on veteran employment in the federal sector. Based on this appraisal, the research team employed a targeted data collection strategy (i.e., triangulation) to capture diverse viewpoints from individuals closely involved in the VEI implementation and program management, as well as those involved in veteran hiring across the U.S. government.

### B. PRIMARY DATA AND METHODS

Data collection occurred in three overlapping stages between May and December 2016. In the first stage, the IVMF team worked closely with OPM to collect and analyze agency-level data on veteran employment since 2009 and employee perception data from the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey. Next, the research team conducted in-depth confidential interviews with 14 select senior government leaders—political appointees and civil servants—closely involved with the VEI from inception to present day. Finally, we expanded our data collection to include two additional targeted surveys, distributed through the OPM: one survey aimed at agency-level chief human capital officers (or their representatives) and a second, broader survey aimed at federal hiring managers and veteran employees. The purpose of these two surveys is to capture a greater diversity of viewpoints on the VEI from human resource leaders and front-line federal employees.

### C. PROJECT STATUS

As of December 2016, the IVMF research team has collected and analyzed key agency data on veteran employment. We also conducted and transcribed 14 senior leader interviews (61 min. on avg.) and content analyzed the resulting transcript data to capture emerging themes and validate points of accord and discord among those most closely tied to the VEI. Of note, we anticipate conducting a small number of additional interviews prior to release of the full report. Finally, the chief human capital officer survey, distributed to the 24 participating departments and agencies, resulted in responses from 17 chief human capital officers. The broader hiring manager and veteran employee survey, distributed by OPM via email to approximately 2,800 federal employees, netted 1,171 responses (41% response rate). At present, these two surveys are still being analyzed. Findings from both surveys will be reflected in the final report.



### III. INTERIM FINDINGS

This section presents interim findings on the VEI’s implementation, focusing solely on federal employment data and initial themes that have emerged from our in-depth interviews conducted through December 2016. Readers should treat these findings as preliminary. This analysis does not include findings from our targeted surveys, which are still being analyzed.

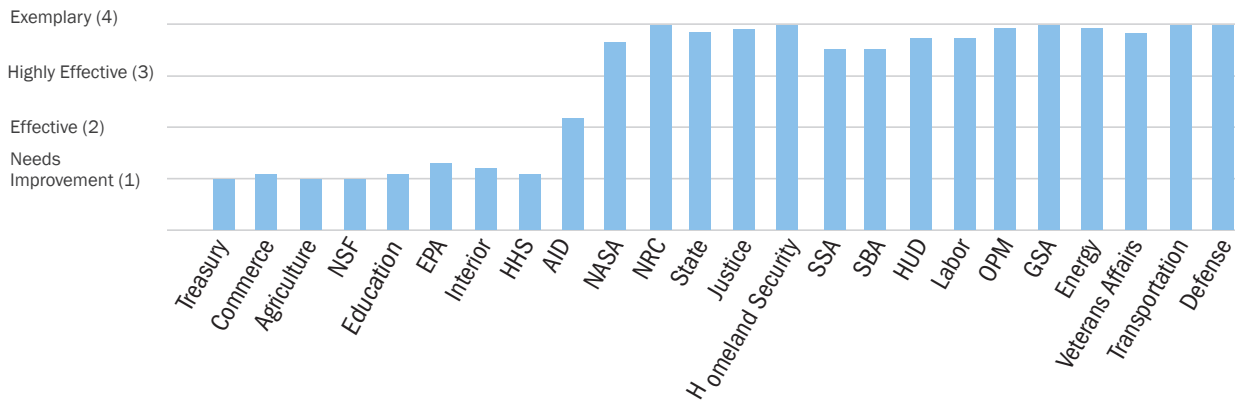
#### A. VETERAN EMPLOYMENT IN THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

##### THE VEI PERFORMANCE MEASUREMENT SYSTEM

The VEI has instituted a government-wide performance measurement system to track and hold agencies accountable for veteran employment outcomes. From the initial system—focused on total veteran new hires and disabled veteran new hires as percentages of agencies’ overall annual new hiring (veteran and non-veteran)—the Council recently introduced a new Veterans Employment Performance System, which rates agencies based on a combination of four employment metrics: Veteran New Hires, Disabled Veteran New Hires, Veterans On-Board, and Veteran Retention Rates.

The new system improves upon its predecessor by providing Council leadership with a mechanism to carry out clear performance reviews. The system groups agencies by size and adopts a rating scheme based on interagency comparison. After completion of a performance review, each agency’s performance is rated from lowest to highest on a 1-4 scale as Exemplary (EX), Highly Effective (HE), Effective (E), or Needs Improvement (NI). Results from the performance reviews point to significant progress with meeting the performance objectives. For FY 2015 (latest available data), approximately 67 percent of council agencies were rated Effective or higher (i.e., received a score of 2 or higher) (See Figure 1).

**FIGURE 1. FY2015 AGENCY RATINGS FOR VETERAN EMPLOYMENT PERFORMANCE**



Source: IVMF Analysis of Office of Personnel Management (OPM) data.

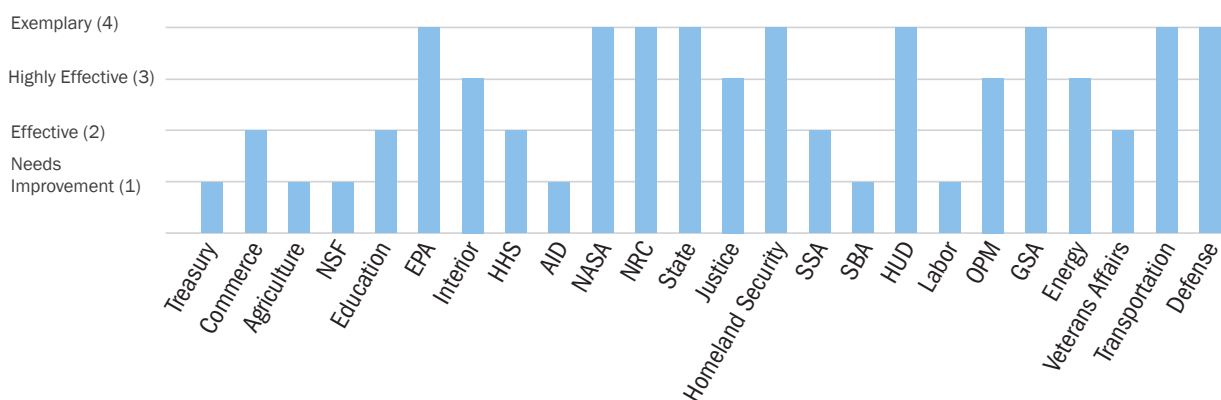
##### SUMMARY ANALYSIS OF HIRING AND RETENTION DATA

Since the inception of the VEI, there have been consistent annual increases in the percentage of veterans hired into the federal civilian service. The most recent information available indicates a move from a low of approximately 24 percent veteran hires (as a proportion of total hiring) in FY 2009 to a high of roughly 33 percent in FY 2015. Veterans now represent nearly one-third (30.9 percent) of the more than two million employees in the federal workforce, as compared to one-quarter (25.8 percent) in FY 2009 prior to the implementation of the VEI (OPM 2016a).

Upon closer examination, there has been significant variation in veteran hiring across the 24 agencies since 2009. The agencies reflecting the most success in hiring veterans appear to be those with ample resources and a strong cultural affinity toward hiring veterans. For example, nearly 80 percent of veterans in the federal service are employed by the Departments of Defense (DOD), Veterans Affairs (VA), and Homeland Security (DHS). Unsurprisingly, DOD alone employs roughly half of all veterans in the Executive branch. Conversely, hiring performance appears relatively less successful among smaller agencies with fewer resources. Some observers attribute a lack of fit (perceived or otherwise) between veterans' skill sets and agency positions requiring specialized training or knowledge of specific public policy areas as factors contributing to the relative lack of veterans hired.

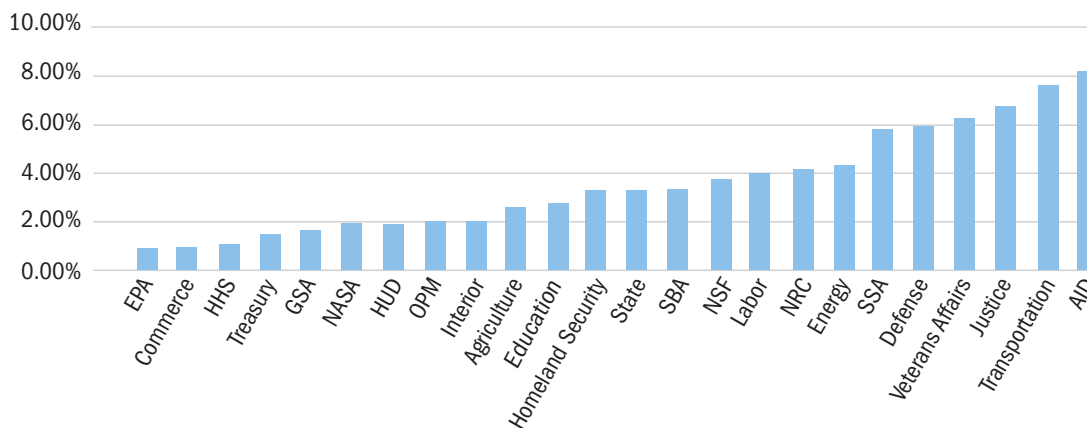
Information on the retention rate of veterans is more limited, although available data from OPM suggests progress, with 79 percent of Council agencies rated Effective or above in veteran retention for FY 2015. As with recent hiring trends, though, there is significant disparity in department- and agency-level retention performance (See Figure 2). In FY 2015, 16 agencies had higher non-veteran employee retention rates compared to veterans by more than five percentage points; seven agencies (Commerce, SBA, DOL, NSF, USAID, Treasury, and USDA) reported retention rates 10 percentage points higher for non-veteran employees (OPM 2016b).

**FIGURE 2. FY2015 AGENCY RATINGS FOR VETERAN RETENTION**



Source: IVMF Analysis of Office of Personnel Management (OPM) data.

**FIGURE 3. AGENCY PERCENTAGE POINT INCREASE IN VETERAN ON-BOARDING, FY 2009 TO FY 2015**



Source: IVMF Analysis of Office of Personnel Management (OPM) data.

## B. VETERAN EMPLOYMENT INITIATIVE IMPLEMENTATION

### COUNCIL ON VETERANS EMPLOYMENT AND STEERING COMMITTEE

#### FINDING #1

**From its outset, the Council on Veterans Employment and the Council steering committee provided the VEI with strong, committed leadership required for implementing a program of such large scale and scope. Maintaining senior leadership engagement will be critical to sustaining the VEI's successes going forward.**

The Council's first co-chairs, VA Secretary Eric Shinseki, Labor Secretary Hilda Solis, and OPM Director John Berry were instrumental in setting the VEI's direction and providing momentum for the initiative. Over time, however, senior leader turnover and changing priorities reduced this momentum to some extent, but efforts by OPM to regularly convene the Council steering committee and keep key committee stakeholders involved helped in part to manage these challenges. A former VA official interviewed had this to say about the efforts:

“ I give a lot of credit to the folks at OPM, because they brought us together as a steering committee fairly frequently. Even though the Council may not have been meeting for several months, the steering committee was meeting every few weeks. ”

The power of the steering committee rested in attendance by political appointees—for example, Assistant Secretaries focused on human capital issues—with the requisite authority to commit their departments and agencies to courses of action arrived at during committee deliberations. As the VEI unfolded, steering committee attendance, in some cases, shifted from political appointees to career civil servants without sufficient authority or access to effectuate policy and management changes in their organizations. Nonetheless, the steering committee remained integral to sustaining and advancing the VEI.

To ensure continuity of leadership and most effectively promote consistent engagement in overseeing agency-level performance and implementation activities, a number of individuals interviewed for the study stressed the need for the steering committee to remain a forum for leaders exclusively at the Assistant Secretary-level or higher. In the view of one former VA official,

“ I would set a strict rule: nobody on the steering committee—and you do need a steering committee to do the work in-between the council meetings—nobody under Assistant Secretary-level will [should] be permitted to come to these meetings. If a department cannot have their Assistant Secretary, then they're going to be left out of any decisions that are going to be made that they're going to have to comply with. That will motivate them to come to the table. ”

At the Council level, study participants praised the overall governance structure, but stressed the need to elevate VEI leadership to the White House level. Study participants argued that investing leadership in a single senior official at the top levels of the government, such as the Vice President, would bring about a number of benefits, including strong legitimacy and accountability, ready opportunity for the new administration to tailor the initiative to its priorities, and diminished risk for confusion in lines of authority, communications, or reporting that might arise under the existing shared leadership model of the Secretaries of VA and Labor.

## AGENCY IMPLEMENTATION EFFORTS

### FINDING #2

**Adoption and implementation of the VEI proved strongest among large departments and agencies with more resources and a strong cultural affinity for hiring veterans—such as the Departments of Defense, Veterans Affairs, Homeland Security, and Labor. Departments and agencies of smaller size and more specialized missions experienced greater implementation difficulties, although in interviews, leaders of these organizations described positive steps they have taken because of the VEI. Moreover, efforts to implement the VEI helped departments and agencies, across the board, further identify and isolate their challenges—as well as best practices, in some instances—in utilizing Veterans’ Preference and the full suite of veteran hiring authorities to meet human capital needs.**

Naturally, larger departments and agencies with more resources and a strong cultural affinity toward hiring veterans—DOD, VA, and DHS, among others—most readily adopted and worked to implement the VEI. Smaller departments and agencies encountered greater implementation challenges, with some claiming they simply lacked the resources necessary to put the “nuts and bolts” of the VEI fully into place. Veteran Employment Program Offices (VEPOs)—department- and agency-level offices created under the VEI to promote veteran recruiting, hiring, and retention—were a prime example of this issue. Smaller agencies argued they could not afford to commit full-time staff to manage these offices, and in some cases responsibilities for veterans’ employment were borne by personnel tasked with other types of diversity hiring (despite the Order’s express directive to create a dedicated veterans’ employment office with full-time staff). According to a former DHS official,

“There were agencies where the veterans’ program manager was really dual or triple or quadruple hatted with various other responsibilities, and that was a function of the size. If you are a very small agency, it’s harder to devote the resources to it.”

Despite these types of challenges, leaders at smaller departments and agencies pointed to positive steps for which the VEI served as an impetus. For example, while some stakeholders at organizations like the Departments of Education, Transportation, and Housing and Urban Development perceived the skill sets and policy knowledge required to perform their missions as too specialized and esoteric to readily match-up with the skills and knowledge veterans garner in-service, efforts to bolster veteran employment activities in these types of organizations have yielded little results. As an official at the Department of Education noted,

“I would say some of our wins from this process have been helping us look more closely at our data and then thinking about how we, one, do our outreach. Then, how [do] we connect to the communities that have the skills that we need at this agency, and then, also, how [do] we educate our folks internally on how these processes work, and a lot of the benefits of going with [veteran] hiring flexibilities.”

References to bolstering knowledge of veterans’ employment options among hiring managers and human resources personnel validate the importance of the training component of the VEI. Indeed, difficulty understanding and implementing veteran hiring authorities, along with a need for improvement in this area, was perhaps the most widespread theme that arose during the interviews—every individual the research team engaged with spoke to the problem. However, some also spoke to best practices uncovered during their participation in VEI implementation activities. For example, one official described a practice wherein HUD program managers would proactively forecast human capital needs and provide this information to their human resources colleagues. In turn, human resources staff would then work with the hiring managers to craft employment listings and empower them to attend veterans’ job fairs with knowledge of the hiring flexibilities they could use (including flexibilities to make on-the-spot offers).

“That’s a great model...it was really a team effort [in that] one person in the team could spec out everything needed [in terms of human capital], and the other person on the team was a subject matter expert on how to hire people and interview and recruit, and they [worked together].”

## CROSS-AGENCY COLLABORATION

### FINDING #3

**The VEI facilitated or bolstered pre-existing cross-agency collaboration, particularly on veteran hiring and recruiting, and presents valuable opportunities to tap and institutionalize informal collaborative efforts identified during the initiative's implementation.**

The research team uncovered a number of instances of cross-agency collaboration brought about or bolstered by the VEI. The Veteran Employment Program Offices (VEPOs) proved to be especially useful in promoting collaborative efforts. For example, through the VEPOs, individuals in different departments and agencies could appraise each other of open positions that had proven difficult to fill, and share resumes of candidates who appear to possess the prerequisite knowledge, skills, and abilities for those positions. As an official at the Department of Education described it,

“There are specific options...where there's a significant skill to match and again, our program manager has a very good relationship with [another agency's] program manager, so what she found to be successful is that they do a lot of resume sharing amongst each other, searching our jobs that we have and vice versa, and they will actually share their candidate pool with us and we will share ours with theirs [when we think we have candidates that may meet one another's needs].”

It should be noted that while this collaboration often occurred through (and because of) the employment offices set up under the VEI, information sharing was to a large extent a function of inter-personal relationships. Capitalizing on and furthering successful collaboration brought about by the VEI will require efforts to institutionalize information sharing and other types of interactions across department and agency boundaries.

## IV. INITIAL FOCUS AREAS FOR THE NEXT ADMINISTRATION

The following short-term recommendations are provided for the incoming administration of President-Elect Donald J. Trump.

### COUNCIL ON VETERANS EMPLOYMENT

- Establish clear, singular leadership at the highest level possible—preferably the Vice President;
- Ensure that agency representatives possess the necessary authority to remain engaged with the goals and objectives identified by the council.

### AGENCY IMPLEMENTATION EFFORTS

- Continue measuring performance against the entire employment picture—hiring, retention, and turnover—and continue to make appropriate adjustments for size, budget, mission, scope, and required skill sets;
- Take feasible steps to ensure veteran employment program offices are fully resourced. Continue to identify learning and resource sharing opportunities between VEPOs, particularly between well-resourced and under-resourced agencies;
- Develop tools and strategies to promote more proactive human capital planning (such as forecasting mission-critical hiring needs and considering how to hire veterans to meet these needs);
- Apply and make skillful use of veteran hiring authorities and the various flexibilities they afford to more effectively meet veteran hiring needs.

### CROSS-AGENCY COLLABORATION

- Extend the VEI agenda beyond exclusive focus on information sharing and operational tactics—integrate and reconcile programmatic efforts to increase unity of effort. Measure and monitor it too;
- Gather perspectives from individuals actively engaged in collaboration;
- Institutionalize a collaborative process to isolate, document, and formalize existing informal practices.



## V. SUMMARY

Preliminary results from this ongoing investigation, which presently rest upon federal employment data and in-depth interviews with individuals intimately involved in the VEI, reveal positive outcomes for the federal government as a whole. Veteran employment in the federal sector has risen sharply since 2009. Certainly, to some extent, this can be attributed to the VEI and its strong leadership, particularly in the early years of the initiative.

Still, while the raw numbers tell a good story, both the employment data and the interviews show some degree of mixed performance in hiring, retention, and program implementation across agencies. There remains clear room for improvement and increased interagency learning to sustain, if not improve upon, the gains made since 2009. Of course, this will largely rest upon the incoming Trump Administration to carry forward with renewed leadership and focus.

As a final note, in the coming month, we will complete the remaining analysis of our two surveys. From these, we anticipate our final comprehensive report to provide a richer discussion on the interim findings highlighted above and give greater attention to such relevant topics as federal hiring authorities and normative questions around Veterans Preference and defining success in veteran hiring across the federal government.

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### ABOUT THE INSTITUTE FOR VETERANS AND MILITARY FAMILIES (IVMF)

The IVMF is the first interdisciplinary national institute in higher education focused on the social, economic, education, and policy issues impacting veterans and their families post-service. Through the focus on veterans programming, research and policy, employment and employer support, and community engagement, the Institute provides in-depth analysis of the challenges facing the veteran community, captures best practices, and serves as a forum to facilitate new partnerships and strong relationships between the individuals and organizations committed to making a difference for veterans and military families.



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