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Today's veterans face big, new challenges
Organizations offer variety of assistance for their transition to civilian workforce

by [Yvonne Gonzalez](#) - Nov. 11, 2011 12:00 AM
The Arizona Republic

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Former military men and women returning to the civilian workforce are facing similar or worse challenges today than those coming home from previous wars, veteran employment experts say.

New programs to benefit post-9/11 veterans, announced this week by the White House, are intended to ease the integration of those returning from Iraq and Afghanistan as operations wind down in the Middle East and North Africa.

While there are more programs and organizations in place today offering help, many veterans still find barriers to transferring their training and experience to other fields, said John Bloomquist, a local veterans employment representative for East Valley Employment Services, a Department of Economic Security office in Mesa.

"So many come out of the military that may be coming out as infantrymen, and what is their training?" Bloomquist said. "To follow orders and take direction. We have to figure out a way to train them so their skills are transferable."

Bloomquist, a Vietnam veteran whose first job after being discharged from the Navy was at a pizza parlor, works with unemployed veterans to help direct them to jobs and employers that match their skills.

Military training, however, does not always align with licensing in the civilian workforce, he said. Army medics, for example, do not qualify to be certified as emergency medical technicians, and tanker truck drivers must still earn their commercial drivers' license once they've been discharged.

Bloomquist's office offers workshops in resume writing, interviewing skills and dressing for success. But even then, he said, some do not find jobs because they're looking for a position that is too specific to their military training.

"It's a matter of trying to find that one thing that you're looking for and sometimes when you're looking at that one thing, you should be looking at 10 others," Bloomquist said.

Rick LeClair, veterans benefit counselor at the Arizona Department of Veterans Services and former veterans employment representative, said older veterans are seeing the biggest challenges in terms of computer literacy and resume writing.

But the 20-year Navy veteran said many are just looking for wages that aren't being offered by employers in this economy.

"Some of the veterans, I would have to tell them, you need to take what you can get," LeClair said.

Phoenix Workforce Connection, a city-run program, is helping train 45-year-old John Carlen, an Army veteran who was stationed in Germany during the mid-'80s, to be a welder.

After being discharged in 1987, finding work, then being laid off in 2001, Carlen sought training as a motorcycle mechanic. After racking up thousands in student loans, the economy took another turn and he was once again unemployed.

Now Carlen lives with other homeless and transitioning former military at Madison Street Veterans Association, whose slogan is "Veterans helping veterans," while he trains at the Maricopa Skill Center.

"I will have more employable skills to add to the ones I already have," Carlen said. "With veterans' organizations like the VFW (Veterans of Foreign Wars) and the American Legion, hopefully together we can make it better."

Employers like JP Morgan Chase and U-Haul are seeking out veterans to hire.

Robin Plumer, a mortgage processor for Chase and Air Force veteran, said re-entering the workforce in 1991 was scary because of a lack of guidance when she was discharged.

"You were pretty much on your own, trying to find what you're going to do next," Plumer said. "So I got a paper, circled jobs, and got a job as a debt collector."

After 2-and-a-half years with Chase, the culture shock has worn off and she works with Voices for Employees That Served, a networking and community service group within Chase.

"We started Voices for Employees That Served so that we could provide a forum so we could support each other and provide networking opportunities for each other," Plumer said. "I fit better in corporate America than all of my other positions with other companies."

She said veterans have leadership, training and educational skills, along with the ability to delegate and think quickly, that can apply to a variety of fields.

"Years ago I would have said no way, I won't work at a bank," Plumer said. "It's a lack of education for veterans who don't understand how to apply those skills in corporate America even if they don't have a degree to back them up."

Chase is holding a job fair for veterans to hire 310 people in positions like Plumer's as mortgage processors, who helps clients refinance mortgage loans. The fair is 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. today at Chase Tower in downtown Phoenix.

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When: 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. today.

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