

Q&A



Deputy Assistant Secretary for Operations and Management, Veterans' Employment and Training Service, Labor Department

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Executive Viewpoint

A conversation with **Margarita Devlin**

What are the mission and priorities of the Veterans' Employment and Training Service?

After 26 years serving veterans, service members and their families at the Department of Veterans Affairs, I am honored to continue to serve in my role as deputy assistant secretary for operations and management at VETS. In fiscal 2020, our VETS team of over 2,800 Department of Labor and DOL VETS-funded employees served over 370,000 veterans and military spouses across all VETS programs.

Our mission at VETS is to prepare America's veterans, transitioning service members (TSMs) and military spouses for meaningful careers; provide them with employment resources and expertise; protect their employment rights; and promote their employment opportunities. Our vision is to enable all veterans, TSMs and military spouses to reach their full potential in the workplace.

In 2022, our priorities are:

1. Getting the military-to-civilian transition right. Given that about 200,000 service members transition to civilian life every year, this is a large and really important task. During the pandemic, VETS implemented virtual offerings using a web-based registration portal and delivered training using multiple platforms based on our customers' requirements. This required training on the platforms and proficiency in delivering effective and engaging training.

Last year, VETS managed the Veterans Employment Challenge to develop a new software tool that uses artificial intelligence to better connect TSMs with employers and match them with jobs based on self-identified interests and skills. We had more than 50 entries, and Eightfold.ai won the challenge. In partnership with DOL's Office of the CIO, we are now moving forward with a pilot to test the Artificial Intelligence Career Matching Tool with TSMs at nine installations and the 75th Ranger Regiment, which resides at three additional installations. We expect to begin this pilot in early spring 2022. If successful, we'll be able to deploy this tool to not just TSMs but to all veterans and military spouses.

2. Leveraging the right strategic partnerships to maximize employment outcomes. These include our federal partners at the Department of Defense, VA and Small Business Administration. Our state partners are also critical, and we have

a number of key nonprofit partners, including Veterans Service Organizations, labor unions and nonprofits focused on veteran employment. Industry associations allow us to help companies better understand why hiring veterans is a good business decision.

3. Advancing equity and inclusion in our underserved veteran communities. I am proud of VETS for taking an inward-looking approach to our activities and programs to determine if barriers exist that limit access for underrepresented veterans while prioritizing outreach efforts to these populations.

The pandemic exacerbated existing economic inequalities. As we move forward, VETS is intentionally placing focus on advancing equity and inclusion in communities that have not traditionally interacted with DOL and other segments of the federal government at the same rate as other veteran communities. We will identify gaps and barriers to equitable access to services and identify how our programs can better support all veterans, including women, minorities, LGBTQ+, rural, justice-involved and those with disabilities.

How did VETS pivot to continue providing services to veterans during the pandemic?

For the Transition Assistance Program (TAP), the department was able to quickly migrate into a virtual environment utilizing various online delivery platforms, such as Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Adobe Connect and Cisco Webex. From March 1, 2020, to Nov. 30, 2021, VETS provided 5,912 virtual instructor-led and 9,102 in-person workshops.

VETS' Apprenticeship Pilot — which launched on April 1, 2020, at eight installations — also shifted to virtual delivery. The pilot was designed to provide TSMs and military spouses with opportunities to be hired into apprenticeship positions prior to separation. We continue to maintain a virtual capacity to assist service members and their spouses still active in the program. To date, 155 TSMs and their spouses have been placed into apprenticeship programs.

Apprenticeship placement counselors continue to provide services as an extension of the Employment Navigator and Partnership Pilot (ENPP). Stemming from changes to TAP in the fiscal 2019 National Defense Authorization Act,

DOL proposed the ENPP to directly assist TSMs and their spouses with individualized employment and training needs outside the traditional TAP workshops. VETS launched the ENPP on April 1, 2021, at select military locations worldwide. Participants work one-on-one with employment navigators (ENs), both virtually and in-person, from the earliest stages of their transition until their final separation from military service.

ENs offer services that include self-assessments, skills testing, exploration of career options, and identification of high-demand occupations and necessary credentials. ENs can also connect participants with government and nongovernment partners for additional employment services. Currently, the ENPP has nine nongovernment partners, but new partners will continue to be approved and added to the ENPP.

VETS launched the Transition Employment Assistance for Military Spouses and Caregivers workshops to help military spouses and caregivers plan and prepare for their job search in pursuit of their employment goals. Four workshops were piloted in September 2020 and offered virtually beginning in February 2021; an additional five workshops were piloted in May 2021. From September 2020 through December 2021, we held 167 workshops with 1,091 worldwide participants.

The pandemic has had a system-wide impact on VETS' grantees under our Homeless Veterans' Reintegration Program (HVRP) and Jobs for Veterans State Grants program (JVSG). The closure of government and partner offices significantly limited access to services and resources, resulting in decreased referrals for over 150 HVRP grantees across the United States. However, many grantees developed new methods to continue providing services and simultaneously leveraged new or reinvigorated relationships in the fight against veteran homelessness. For example, a Florida human resources professional and U.S. Army veteran who lost his job during the pandemic due to downsizing was able to connect with an HVRP grantee through a referral from the VA's Supportive Services for Veteran Families program. This led to him being hired as a full-time senior recruiter at a nearby company.

The National Veterans' Training Institute (NVTI) quickly pivoted to providing all courses virtually. The institute successfully met the requirements to train JVSG employees as well as a variety of other veterans' employment and training professionals. In addition to constructing webinar trainings, podcasts and microlearnings, NVTI maintained, updated or revised 28 courses while training 2,490 JVSG staff and 11,074 non-JVSG staff.

How is VETS adjusting its programs to serve veterans from diverse racial and socioeconomic backgrounds?

VETS continues to seek new and innovative ways to address the needs of its diverse population of veterans. We are changing the way we utilize our research to identify how the intersection of race, gender identity and socioeconomic status impacts the veterans we serve and the services we provide. We have also expanded the language in HVRP's

grant funding opportunity announcement to include equity in program purpose and increase the pool of diverse applicants.

Additionally, we have increased our engagement and outreach to veterans from diverse racial and socioeconomic backgrounds with our Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) Engagement Initiative. VETS' target audience is veterans participating in the ROTC program and student veterans. The goal is to create opportunities to enhance the knowledge of VETS programs and increase awareness of careers in the federal civilian service. Ultimately, VETS would like to offer opportunities that would allow HBCU students to engage with the federal civilian service early and often through internships, job application preparation and proactive outreach.

How are you targeting programs to address the needs of women veterans?

VETS' Women Veteran Program has made statistical analyses and other research easily accessible in order to inform policy decisions and the national narrative on women veterans. VETS is increasing its capacity to conduct and coordinate research and engage with the community. This investment will allow the agency to effectively and efficiently address service gaps that enable more individuals to join and remain in the labor force.

How can VETS serve as a model for other agencies?

VETS is working on a data-driven, human-centric customer experience designed to better serve TSMs, veterans, military spouses and employers. By investing in research and data analytics to better understand customers' journeys, we hope VETS can serve as a model agency that meets the diverse needs of our evolving veteran community.

We are launching an effort to make sure that improvements are informed by the experiences of our customers. This is an area in which the IT community has been leading the way for years.

For VETS, it will mean asking ourselves some tough questions: What do our customers need to get into good jobs that become long-term successful careers? What do they need to prepare for such careers? How do they want our services provided? Sometimes in-person is really the best fit; at others, virtual delivery is the better choice. What do we know about veterans' employment needs, as well as those of employers? And how can we address both based on a clear understanding of reliable data and through a network of partnerships, recognizing that veterans' needs are as diverse as the rest of our nation's workforce? Ultimately, how do we know if the services we provide are resulting in improved long-term employment outcomes?

As a small federal agency with an important and quite diverse mission, VETS must leverage all the capabilities of IT and integrate them with the very human and personal aspects of serving America's veterans of all ages and eras. This interdependence is not only one of our challenges, it is arguably one of our greatest strengths. ■