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TEXAS VETERANS COMMISSION

WITNESS TESTIMONY OF SHAWN DEABAY DIRECTOR, VETERANS EMPLOYMENT SERVICES, TEXAS VETERANS COMMISSION TO THE U.S. CONGRESS JOINT ECONOMIC COMMITTEE

July 10, 2013

INTRODUCTION

Good Morning, Chair Brady, Vice Chair Klobuchar and Members of the Committee. My name is Shawn Deabay and I have the privilege of serving as the Director of Veterans Employment Services at the Texas Veterans Commission. As such, I am responsible for the management and execution of the Jobs for Veterans State Grant (JVSG) from the U.S. Department of Labor Veteran Employment and Training Services (DOL-VETS) for the state of Texas. This is an equivalent position to a Veterans State Coordinator in other states.

Some have become disillusioned with the JVSG concept, contemplating a complete overhaul of the program or its consolidation with other employment initiatives. I voice caution with this view, primarily because, over my 13 years with the program, I have seen the program in Texas evolve from just another marginally performing state to, since 2006, successfully implementing the JVSG programs with unparalleled performance outcomes. As the result of my experiences at every level within the organization, I believe the JVSG concept is sound, and, properly implemented, can yield highly successful results. However, there are things that both DOL-VETS and other states can do to drastically improve the JVSG program.

My testimony provides some recommendations for improving JVSG, which include:

1. Improve communications
2. Seek input from successful states
3. Reward performance through funding formula adjustments
4. Promote innovative programs

My testimony also provides some factors to Texas’ successful implementation of the JVSG program, including:

1. Supportive structure
2. No competing priorities
3. Veterans serving Veterans
4. Focused outreach to employers
5. Building strong partnerships

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVING THE JOBS FOR VETERANS STATE GRANT (JVSG)

1. IMPROVE COMMUNICATIONS

There needs to be healthier communication between the leadership at DOL-VETS and the appropriate state agency that administers JVSG for the state. Currently, the communication does not flow with either efficiency or consistency. The main way in which DOL-VETS communicates with states is through rules in the form of Veteran Policy Letters (VPLs) to the states. The focus of these policy letters have included roles and responsibilities of the Local Veteran Employment Representatives and the Disabled Veterans Outreach Program specialists, state plan modifications, negotiated performance goals, and others.

There has not been a single Veteran Policy Letter distributed to states since June of 2012. July 1st was the start of the JVSG's second program year with no negotiated performance goals for any state. In August 2012, DOL-VETS announced an imminent Veteran Policy Letter completely overhauling the roles and responsibilities of the Local Veteran Employment Representatives and the Disabled Veterans Outreach Program specialists. Despite advising states to alter their state plans based on the contents, no further written guidance has been provided this year.

An example of this communication: REALifelines was an initiative funded by DOL-VETS to assist severely injured soldiers. The Texas Veterans Commission had three staff dedicated to this cause. Our REALifelines coordinator for El Paso, Texas was e-mailed directly by leadership within DOL-VETS at the beginning of December 2012 that the program would be discontinued. Two weeks passed before DOL-VETS officially notified the Texas Veterans Commission of their decision to end the program on December 31, 2012, leaving three Disabled Veteran Outreach Program specialists without employment following the Christmas holidays. Fortunately they were able to continue employment with the Texas Veterans Commission as the result of other vacancies. Otherwise, we would have had let them go.

2. SEEK INPUT FROM SUCCESSFUL STATES

States consistently performing at a high level should be called upon to provide input to DOL-VETS. Best practices should be shared and discussions held to continue to explore innovative ways improve employment services to veterans. There are states with incredible processes to ensure veterans have every resource available to locate and retain long-term employment.

A formalized group of successful small, medium, and large states should gather to provide DOL-VETS with input about what is working well, what is not working well, and what the future of the program should look like. Gathering information from successful states, those actually implementing the programs, can only improve how veterans are being served across the nation.

3. REWARD PERFORMANCE THROUGH FUNDING FORMULA ADJUSTMENTS

DOL-VETS provides funding to each state based on the number of unemployed veterans as compared to the number of unemployed veterans in other states. Attached you will find the latest funding estimates for fiscal year 2013. Essentially, one could argue that states are penalized for high performance. When a state performs well by assisting a high number of veterans locate and retain employment, the number of unemployed veterans in that state falls, lowering the ratio by which that state is funded, equating to less funding. When a state performs poorly with fewer veterans entering into employment, the number of unemployed veterans rises or continues to be high, thus increasing the ratio and equating to additional funding. Performance should be taken into consideration when allocating funds to incentivize states to elevate their performance.

Furthermore, one percent of the current funding must be used for performance. Some states provide boards with the money received for performance while other provide that money to JVSG funded staff or partners doing great things for veterans employment. All states receive this one percent regardless of the state's performance. If a state is performing well below the national average or well below their negotiated goals, the state will continue to receive one percent as outlined by the attachment. States not performing at a high level should not receive performance funding. This money should be given to states performing well to encourage innovation and enhance their ability to provide long-term meaningful employment to veterans.

4. PROMOTE INNOVATIVE PROGRAMS

DOL-VETS seems to be on the verge of many new helpful initiatives for veterans. One example is recent effort help female veterans with their unique employment struggles. Labor Department officials have launched a new website devoted to issues and challenges affecting women veterans. Since announcing this as a priority a new website was launched that addresses potential barriers to employment that can prevent women veterans from reaching their full economic potential. The site also contains links with information on employment opportunities, education and health care options and data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics and other government agencies. Also, Department of Labor announced a position created solely to focus on female Veteran employment issues. Since the Bureau of Labor Statistics 2012 Annual Report on the employment situation of veterans, noted that women veteran unemployment rate continues to be higher than both their female non-veteran counterparts and male veteran counterparts this increased focus by Department of Labor

FACTORS TO TEXAS' SUCCESSFUL IMPLEMENTATION OF JVSG

1. SUPPORTIVE STRUCTURE

Within the Texas Veterans Commission, the Veterans Employment Services program has a clear and efficient organizational structure. There is a direct reporting structure that gives the Texas Veterans Commission the ability to be very responsive to either concerns or policy changes. Changes or implementation of policies and procedures are addressed in a timely and effective manner. There are not multiple levels of supervision hindering the decision making process. Within the program, the entire supervising structure is comprised of veterans, basically veterans supervising veterans, which has proven to be extremely effective. Many states have too many levels of supervision to be able to be proactive or respond in enough time to make a difference. Many other states also have non-veterans supervising veterans, which we believe to be not as effective.

Such a supervising structure also allows for training to be implemented in a timely manner. Our training is organized state-wide ensuring identical training is provided to all Veterans Employment Representatives regardless of their location. Training is one of the most important aspects of performing at a high level. Consistent and unified training objectives are communicated with optimal results due to our supervising and reporting structure.

Response time is also improved with a streamlined supervisory structure. When Veterans Employment Representatives have questions/concerns or best practices, they can communicate to me as the Director of Veterans Employment Services within moments. Quickly responding to staff is extremely important and should not be understated. Staff wants to be heard and wants to make a difference in the lives of Veterans and their families.

Another item which falls into our structure is the ability to assign challenging, but attainable performance standards to all Veterans Employment Representatives. The current Veterans Employment Staff performance standards were actually designed by a working group comprised of Veteran Employment Representatives working to translate DOL-VETS performance measures into individual standards. Employment staff input is a vital part of any decision making process. Veterans Employment Representatives have a clear understanding as to their role within the Texas Veterans Commission and America's Job Centers. This ensures that what is best for the veteran always stays at the forefront of any decision.

2. NO COMPETING PRIORITIES

My singular purpose is ensuring veterans in Texas receive the employment services they have earned by defending our country. There is no more deserving of a group than veterans to receive our very best services. Many Veteran State Coordinators oversee multiple programs dividing the attention to Veterans Employment Services. Veteran employment should be the complete focus of the Veterans State Coordinator. Dividing focus with other programs is not providing veterans

with the attention and commitment they have earned and deserve. The majority of the State Coordinators I have met and worked with are extremely passionate about veterans employment issues. However, many are not allowed to commit 100% of their time to this effort.

The majority of the states have America's Job Center Managers in control over Veterans Employment Representatives staff. While some of these managers do a good job, many do not. This may not be the fault of the center manager, but due to competing priorities. Veterans are a small share of the population needing employment services. There are a number of programs within America's Job Center which require much attention. This takes away from 100% commitment and dedication to Veterans Employment Services. The structure and mission of the Texas Veterans Commission allows veterans needs to be the most important.

3. VETERANS SERVING VETERANS

Assessing veteran's needs is an important first step in a Veterans Employment Representative's job duties. This extremely important function includes a one-on-one, in-depth evaluation to identify significant barriers to employment. Veterans Employment Services staff is specifically trained to identify these barriers and a plan to address the needs. In Texas, all Veteran Employment Services staff members are veterans themselves and there is immense value in veterans being served and assisted by fellow Veterans. This makes every Veterans Employment Representative a walking success story!

Veterans have proved by their very service their willingness to work hard. In an economy with stiff competition for every job opening, and reluctance on the part of many employers to even consider the unemployed, the challenge is getting informed guidance from an honest broker about how to get a foot in the door of an employer at a time when the rules of looking for a job have changed dramatically.

Due to shrinking resources the trend in employment services to discontinue one on one job coaching in favor group workshops and internet tools. Sites like My Next Move (www.mynextmove.org) and the Veterans Job Bank (www.nrd.gov) encourage Veterans to research occupations, required skills, and open jobs using the Internet. However, many Veterans are at a disadvantage relying solely on these tools. Veterans find it difficult to have their valuable military experience recognized in the private sector. Also, frequent moves often leave Veterans without a network of professional contacts in the areas they locate to separating from the military. Simple guidance about how to get a foot in the door of an employer is usually what most veterans need to get employed. Veterans have earned the right for one-on-one job coaching and simply referring a veteran to internet sites is not enough.

4. FOCUSED OUTREACH TO EMPLOYERS

Not only is one-on-one service with veterans important, but one-on-one service with employers can be just as important. Employer outreach is another vital part of the Texas employment equation. Employers want to know how to locate and find qualified veterans to fill job vacancies. Many employers do not know each state has a Veterans Employment Services program. More needs to be done to market our services to the public with an emphasis on employers. Each state receives funding from DOL-VETS to operate the JVSG program, but monies cannot be used for marketing purposes. This leaves states to create other methods of getting the word to veterans and business hiring managers. Bottom line is that more employers and veterans need to know who we are and what we do. According to a study performed by the Society for Human Resource Management, 68% of Human Resource Professionals polled were not at all familiar with Veterans Employment Services. Only 4% were very familiar and utilize Veterans Employment Services.

The Texas Veterans Commission enhanced the role of four Veteran Employment Representatives designating them as Veterans Business Representatives. The Veterans Business Representatives are strategically located in Houston, Dallas/Fort Worth, San Antonio and Austin and are vested in building relationships with large companies and influential Texas employers in an effort to promote the hiring of highly qualified Veterans. This initiative's strategic approach has three phases. The first phase was to make initial contacts with Texas Workforce Commission business service units, and managers. Outreach to employers and employer organizations such as Society for Human Resource Management and local chambers of Commerce was essential in marketing Texas Veterans Commission employment services. Through media coverage and active marketing, the Texas Veterans Commission has been inundated with employer phone calls and email correspondence from across Texas and the nation, eager to hire skilled Veterans.

It is impossible to underestimate the value to a business of efficiently finding the right fit for job vacancies, therefore phase two includes increasing the hiring rate for Veteran job referrals. Helping employers fill job vacancies provides the greatest potential to positively affect employer relations and improve the well-being of all Veterans. In coordination with the Texas Workforce Commission, our staff will work to increase fill rates for Individualized Job Developments and WorkInTexas.com job postings. From start to placement, staff communicates that our goal is obtaining meaningful employment for our Veterans. The message to Veterans, qualified spouses, community and partners is "we are here to help you find, get, and keep a job." Two tools used to meet this objective are improved applicant tracking and increased employer follow up.

A critical component of the placement process is increasing rapport and confidence between the Veteran Employment Representative and the employer. In order to be successful, employers must understand that Veteran Employment Representative is invested in successful placements – placements where both the employer and Veteran employee are satisfied. Providing quality hires is key to developing that confidence with employers or potential employers throughout the state.

5. BUILDING STRONG PARTNERSHIPS

The Texas Veterans Commission does not accomplish such high success alone. Working relationships with DOL-VETS and the Texas Workforce Commission are an essential part of Texas' achievements. Partnership and collaboration are two of the most valuable tools any employment service organization has. The non-Veteran Employment Services workforce staff of our partners at the Texas Workforce Commission faces budget challenges of their own. Each year funding is stagnant, while costs to deliver services continue to rise. Each year boards must reduce the number of staff to keep up with costs. Maintaining a positive working relationship with Local Workforce Boards and working as an integral partner in the Workforce Centers is crucial to overcoming this challenge.

We also challenge our Veterans Employment Representatives to know all of the resources available for Veteran within their local community, including but not limited to the Veteran Service Organizations. Some cities have many services available for Veterans to help them overcome barriers to employment, while others do not. Our staff is responsible for not only knowing the resources available, but to have a point of contact. We do not simply refer a veteran to a partner. Instead, we may make that connection for the veteran to ensure they are taken care of properly.

CHALLENGES

There has been national concern with federal employment programs, including the Veterans Employment Services program. These concerns have led some in the Veterans community to support legislation which would consolidate multiple job training programs into one, essentially deemphasizing the Veteran Employment program and not giving Veterans Employment the attention it deserves and needs to succeed. Veterans services will always fall behind in a priority list towards providing basic services to the general population. The successes the Texas Veterans Commission has achieved in veterans locating and retaining employment through our decision making process and guiding principles should be considered as changes to veterans employment programs and considered by other states Congress.

CLOSING

We have been tremendously successful placing well over 38,000 Veterans into employment as reported by Department of Labor, Veterans Employment & Training. However, the real success is the impact the Jobs for Veterans State Grant has on Veterans and their families. I have a quick story I would like to share with you regarding a personal experience of mine when I was a Disabled Veterans Outreach Program Specialist in an America's Job Center.

There was a homeless Veteran living in his car in the parking lot of the center I was working at. I learned of this gentleman when I got to work one day and he was looking for assistance. I

learned of his barriers to employment, which included homelessness, lack of food, no place to clean-up, and a perceived lack of skills. We decided to work on an employment plan together with strategies to overcome these barriers. The key to this is that we worked on this plan together, a partnership between the two of us.

- We addressed housing by getting him a room at a faith-based organization. This was a challenge as he didn't like some of the restrictions that were in place by that organization.
- We were able to get him some food.
- Then we started an analysis of his skills and interests. After much deliberation, truck driving came to the forefront.
- We worked through available truck driving schools and training facilities.
- He was not used to being on a plan or having set goals to achieve, but I believe made obtaining employment realistic.

At the end of the process, this Veteran was employed at an over-the-road truck driving company and was able to live in his truck, which seemed to be his biggest joy of the job. He would send me e-mails from his truck whenever he was passing through East Texas thanking me and how happy he was. This is what it's all about and makes me appreciate my job even more. One-on-one service to Veterans...they have earned this right!