

A close-up, low-angle shot of a person's legs while running on a paved path. The person has a prosthetic left leg. The background shows a sunset over a landscape with hills and trees. The lighting is warm and golden.

NATIONAL ORGANIZATION ON  
**DISABILITY**

## **WOUNDED WARRIOR CAREERS DEMONSTRATION PROGRAM**

New hope for wounded warriors:  
An innovative approach to helping  
today's veteran succeed...

SPRING 2011

## **NOD: A Catalyst for for Disability Employment**

The National Organization on Disability is one of the oldest cross-disability organizations in the country. A key player in bringing about reforms in disability policy and practice, NOD now focuses on increasing opportunities for the seventy-nine percent of working-age Americans with disabilities who are not employed.

NOD develops and evaluates pioneering programs that can be scaled for higher impact, and conducts research aimed at understanding the employment gap for people with disabilities.

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SINCE 2001, more than 40,000 wounded military personnel have returned from Iraq or Afghanistan, approximately one-third of them with life-altering injuries. These disabilities often demand a long and difficult period of recovery and adjustment — but they need not be a barrier to civilian employment, income, and independence.

Too often, seriously wounded service members lack the training and resources to adapt their military experience and new disabilities to successful civilian careers. The waste of their talents and abilities, and its impact on thousands of military families, *is a completely preventable national tragedy.*

In 2007, the US Army asked the National Organization on Disability (NOD) to design a solution. The result of this collaboration is the Wounded Warrior Careers Demonstration, in which hundreds of the most severely injured veterans and their families have begun planning and preparing for careers, enrolling in school or training programs, taking jobs, and moving ahead.

In three years, the Army and NOD have built a scalable model and helped hundreds of veterans and their families successfully reintegrate.

“The National Organization on Disability’s Wounded Warrior Careers program has helped me to support myself and allowed me to open doors that, due to my injuries, once seemed closed.”

Scott Vycital, US Army Specialist (Ret.)



## PROVEN RESULTS

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**68% of Wounded Warrior Careers participants are employed or in education or job training – twice the rate of wounded warriors not enrolled in NOD’s program.**

NOD’s model is built on research involving hundreds of injured soldiers and their families. The demonstration program delivers a tightly integrated web of supports that is personal, prolonged, and proactive.

Research showed that severely wounded warriors need more specialized career transition assistance than is provided through existing programs. In response, NOD recruited and trained a team of Career Specialists — workforce development experts, many with military backgrounds — to work with wounded veterans and their families. NOD’s Career Specialists offer sustained career counseling, mentoring, and support and make effective connections among the often overwhelming array of services available to veterans. The

Career Specialists are deployed in Colorado, North Carolina, and Texas.

Two years into the demonstration, over two-thirds of the more than 250 participants are employed or actively engaged in education or training. This is twice the rate of those without NOD’s support.

The Department of Defense and the Army have asked NOD to expand the Careers Demonstration to more states. The program’s data-collection, which is producing longitudinal information on participants’ experience in the program, shows that the program has not only achieved what it set out to do, but that a great deal more can be accomplished.



*An NOD Career Specialist testifies before the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee.*

## NEW CHALLENGES, NEW SOLUTIONS



*Army Staff Sgt. (Ret.) James Williams with his wife, Jennifer.*

### REBOUND: James Williams' Story

*Following traumatic brain and associated injuries, James Williams was rated 100% disabled. He thought he'd never work again.*

*Working with NOD Career Specialist, Dwayne Beason, James revealed his passion for basketball. A 6'6" center, he had turned down a college basketball scholarship to join the Army. Dwayne got James a job coaching youth basketball at the local community center. Now enrolled in a Bachelor's program for school counselors, James plans to coach in public schools as well.*

*Along the way, Dwayne also helped James' wife, Jennifer, complete an accelerated degree program so she could help support the family while James finishes his degree.*

Even for veterans without severe disabilities, the challenges of transitioning home from a military career to the civilian workforce can be daunting. Today's veterans are older and far more likely to have spouses and children. These veterans are transitioning in the middle of their careers. Their abilities and expectations are far above the entry level positions sought by veterans of previous wars. Despite their considerable experience, they are less likely to have held a full-time civilian job, prepared a résumé, or experienced a non-military job interview. Most wounded warriors served repeated tours of duty doing work for which there are few obvious civilian equivalents. Today's wounded warriors must learn new skills while adapting to visible and invisible injuries, the impact of which we do not yet completely understand.

Seventy-five percent of Army Wounded Warriors experience Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and/or Traumatic Brain Injuries (TBI) — disabilities many employers and educators are unfamiliar with. Moreover, returning service members and their families often find themselves entangled in a perplexing web of benefits and services — which is all the more challenging for veterans coping with physical, cognitive, and emotional recovery.

**Today's wounded warriors must learn new skills while adapting to visible and invisible injuries. NOD Career Specialists, familiar with the effects of PTSD and TBI, help families, educators and employers understand them and know how to respond.**

## PERSONAL, PROLONGED, AND PROACTIVE: A MODEL THAT WORKS

Returning service members and their families often find themselves entangled in a perplexing web of benefits and services — which is all the more challenging for veterans coping with physical, cognitive, and emotional recovery.



Sergeant Leonard Mason, US Army (Ret.)

The Wounded Warrior Careers Demonstration program's success in overcoming these challenges makes it an important model, with replicable lessons for other workforce programs. This model is built on three pillars: Personal engagement, Prolonged involvement, and Proactive support.

### **PERSONAL: Support tailored to individual veterans and their families**

**Financial management skills** are often dangerously lacking as service members move from military to civilian careers — especially when that transition is unplanned. Delayed benefits, relocation costs, and significantly reduced income force many veterans' families into extreme financial need, which can in turn derail career progress. NOD Career Specialists work closely with veteran families to ensure adequate financial planning and budgeting.

**Career Action Plans** with clear steps are critical. Plans include not just steps toward a desired career path, but all supporting elements of the journey: physical and mental health, support for the family, independent living

skills, and coping techniques for the inevitable obstacles and setbacks.

**Spouses, children, parents, and siblings** are vital to a veteran's journey. Personal service means not only individual attention, but a focus on home and family. Indeed, 30 percent of participating veterans' spouses are benefitting from NOD's career assistance.

**Every veteran's circumstances are different.** Direct, face-to-face contact between the Career Specialist and the family is critical to supporting the veteran's career goals. In particular, the devastating effect of sudden and severe injury — often encompassing emotional and cognitive injuries — can lead to depression and a loss of self-confidence that undermine a veteran's ability to trust an adviser and envision opportunities. NOD's veteran-centered model keeps Career Specialists' caseloads low, enabling them to work intensively with each veteran over time.

### **PROLONGED: Support that lasts through the entire transition**

Sustained mentoring and intensive support are often needed for months, even years, to help veterans succeed

through the many stages and reversals of reintegration. NOD stays involved long after an initial job or education placement, developing alternatives if schools or employment are not initially successful.

### **PROACTIVE: Preparing for next steps, anticipating obstacles**

Even experienced counselors find it difficult to navigate the complex web of benefits and services for veterans. For veterans with long rehabilitation and training paths ahead, a missed opportunity or missing resource can make the difference between success and failure. To be sure that benefits and services are available when needed, NOD's Career Specialists work closely with other providers, rather than simply providing referrals.

**Emergency funds** can bridge the gaps through which too many veterans fall. Despite best efforts, some public benefits don't come through when needed. NOD maintains a reserve of flexible support funds that can be critical for avoiding the short-term crises that derail veterans and families.

**Schools and employers** often need help recognizing the potential of wounded warriors.



*Captain James Howard,  
US Army (Ret.)*

NOD Career Specialists often meet with educators or prospective employers ahead of time, to pave the way for success in school and work. NOD maintains these relationships over time, to help keep a path open for veterans' advancement. As a result, 93 percent of participants pursuing education have stuck with it and are completing their coursework. And 75 percent of employed participants have stayed on the job longer than 12 months.

**Addressing the unique demands of PTSD and TBI** is integral to NOD's approach. NOD Career Specialists, who are familiar with the effects of PTSD and TBI, help families, educators, employers, and service providers understand them and know how to respond.

**NOD's Career Specialists offer veterans and their families intensive and sustained career counseling, mentoring and support, and work closely with other service providers — rather than simply providing referrals.**



*Senator Dan Inouye with Specialist (Ret.) Scott Vycital and his wife, Jarah.*

# WOUNDED WARRIOR CAREERS: A PROGRAM BUILT ON EVIDENCE AND DRIVEN BY DATA

**68%** of participants are employed, in education or work training

**93%** of veterans pursuing education are attending or have completed coursework

**75%** of those employed have stayed in their job longer than 12 months

**80%** of participants who are employed are in jobs with benefits

**22%** are participating in volunteer programs

**30%** of spouses are benefiting from career assistance



*Specialist Danelea Kelly, US Army (Ret.)*

Recognizing that many organizations serve veterans with disabilities, the Army and NOD designed a scalable program that can be replicated by other service providers and generate valuable information for the field.

As part of the Wounded Warrior Careers program analysis, NOD collects data on each participant at every step. Metrics include type and severity of disability; previous education; job skills; marital status; services received; and progress in jobs, education, and training. These data inform both the wounded warrior's personalized reintegration plan and the course of the demonstration as a whole.

In addition to quantitative tracking, NOD surveys participants every 18 months to gauge satisfaction in education and employment and identify trends that inform our career efforts.

NOD's ongoing research clearly shows that programs designed for veterans of previous conflicts are not adequate for the wounds and demographics of today's military. It also demonstrates that even with the most serious injuries, disability is not a barrier to rewarding careers and successful re-integration into civilian society.

Most of all, the Wounded Warrior Careers Demonstration is showing that standing by service members who have made profound sacrifices for our country can be a cost-effective way to ensure that the country continues to benefit from the proven talents, abilities, and determination of its injured veterans.

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