Return to Careers
November 2011

A National Qualitative Inquiry into the Career Experiences, Interests, and Support Needs of Veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan with Traumatic Brain Injuries and/or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

Work sponsored by the Institute for Economic Empowerment at AbilityOne and executed in partnership with the Aperio Consulting Group, the Economic Mobility Corporation, and the Institute for Community Inclusion.
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I. **Foreword: Gov. Tom Ridge**

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have earned their place in history as the longest running engagements fought with all volunteer forces. With repeated deployments and the stress of unconventional warfare, several hundred thousand veterans will return with these wars’ signature injuries: Post Traumatic Stress and Traumatic Brain Injury. Communities across America will be hard pressed to respond, despite their determination to ensure a better career for these veterans, than their predecessors returning from previous wars.

At NOD we have long believed that even Americans with the most severe disabilities have skills and talents to offer to employers, and in so doing, they can become productive, contributing members of their communities. And we’re firmly convinced that the added qualities of commitment to service, discipline, resilience and extraordinary problem solving skills that veterans with disabilities learn in their service, are unique talents that can be trained towards high productivity in the workforce.

So when the Army came to NOD in 2006 to develop an employment service demonstration for severely injured veterans, we gladly rose to the challenge, mounting a first-of-its-kind program. “Wounded Warriors Careers” helps both veterans and their spouses pursue civilian careers when transitioning from military duty.

We are truly grateful to contract with the Institute for Economic Empowerment at NISH to develop “Return to Careers,” an innovative and timely national qualitative analysis of the support needs and career interests of Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom Veterans returning with Traumatic Brain Injury and/or Post Traumatic Stress. Both projects will, we strongly believe, make important contributions to the lives of soldiers returning to civilian life after injury—and inform what communities, the military, the Veterans Administration, and policymakers can do to help.

Ultimately, the findings evidence a myriad of things essential to ensuring the success of our nation’s heroes. We’ve learned that a civilian career after injury is something a veteran can successfully pursue through an approach that:

- Ensures careful, methodical career exploration to inform the education or job development path
- Customizes a process suited to the unique needs and interests of each veteran
- Acknowledges the importance of family members in the transition
- Seeks out the veteran, often in his/her home, in a
proactive manner

- Is sustained over a prolonged period, often lasting years; and
- Works closely not only with veterans, but also with their employers or schools.

We look forward to continuing our support of new and promising approaches to ensure Americans with disabilities have access to meaningful career opportunities, and we expect this research to initiate important conversations and innovations in support of veterans returning to the civilian world with newly acquired disabilities.

Sincerely,

Gov. Tom Ridge

Chairman, National Organization on Disability

Former Governor of Pennsylvania and First Secretary of Homeland Security
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:
The Return to Careers Project - Understanding the Career Interests and Support Needs of Veterans with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and Traumatic Brain Injury

I. Background

Through the AbilityOne® Program, NISH creates employment opportunities for people with significant disabilities. The Institute for Economic Empowerment (the Institute) was established by NISH to carry out research and development activities that advance full and fair employment for individuals with significant disabilities, particularly those facing the most challenging barriers to employment.

The AbilityOne Program currently provides employment for more than 47,000 people with significant disabilities through a network of nearly 600 Community Rehabilitation Programs (CRPs). This is accomplished through the purchase of services and products by the federal government. NISH has a long-term interest in the employment of Operation Iraqi Freedom/Operation Enduring Freedom (OIF/OEF) veterans with significant disabilities as approximately 6% of AbilityOne employees are veterans with significant disabilities.

The Institute was established by NISH, a central nonprofit agency of the AbilityOne Program. Through research and development activities, the Institute seeks to make significant progress towards its strategic goal of full and fair employment for individuals with significant disabilities, particularly those facing the most significant disability-related barriers to employment. To attain this strategic goal, the Institute has established three key strategic objectives:

1. Increase employer demand for workers with significant disabilities;
2. Increase the productivity and availability of persons with significant disabilities who are willing and able to work; and
3. Expand and improve employment support infrastructures needed for ongoing employment and career advancement.

The Institute determined that the employment of veterans with significant disabilities could be better served through the
AbilityOne Program. To that end, it undertook a review of its programs and discovered that few CRPs actually served Operation Iraqi Freedom/Operation Enduring Freedom (OIF/OEF) veterans with significant disabilities. Those with an interest in serving these veterans had difficulty locating them and addressing their needs; in turn, OIF/OEF veterans were not finding their way to CRPs who could serve them.

The Institute recognized the access to civilian careers that CRPs could bring to this population of veterans and launched a research project to secure primary information from the veterans, their family members, service providers, educators and employers. In 2009, the Institute released a Request for Proposal (RFP) seeking assistance in conducting research on identifying and developing and testing job interests and support strategies to meet the short and long-term employment needs of veterans with significant disabilities. The RFP specified that the research should focus on veterans who had been diagnosed with the signature injuries for this population: Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI).

The National Organization on Disability (NOD) was selected to conduct this research based upon direct experience with these veterans through NOD's Wounded Warrior Careers Demonstration project and our ongoing relationship with the Army Wounded Warrior Program (AW2). The Institute awarded the two-year contract in January 2010 and work began in February of the same year.

II. Research Summary

In support of its mission to expand the participation and contribution of Americans with disabilities, NOD contracted with NISH and partnered with entities with significant expertise to contribute to the work. The Economic Mobility Corporation, the Institute for Community Inclusion and the Aperio Consulting Group provided significant knowledge and support to the Return to Careers Project for the Institute. This project sought to understand the career interests and employment support needs of OIF/OEF veterans who have been diagnosed with PTSD and/or TBI and are now transitioning back to civilian life.

The approach to this research was twofold. First, NOD and its contractors undertook a literature review on the employment challenges and support needs of veterans with PTSD and/or TBI and the approaches that have been effective in meeting those needs. To augment the findings of the literature review, NOD conducted primary research via focus groups and a written survey of demographic indicators administered in concert with more than 200 face-to-face and telephone interviews with veterans, their families, support networks, employers and educators.
Interviews were transcribed and coded, and the results were analyzed. Additionally, meetings of involved partners were convened in the form of an advisory panel, which served to support field researchers and facilitate analysis of the findings that ultimately comprised the report.

In conducting the research, NOD sought to identify:

- Common challenges encountered by veterans with PTSD and/or TBI;
- Factors influencing the short-term employment and educational interests, as well as long-term career goals of veterans with PTSD and/or TBI;
- Support strategies that are shown to be effective in obtaining employment in preferred careers;
- Effective delivery strategies and costs of short and long-term career supports;
- Occupations of most interest to veterans with PTSD and/or TBI, and characteristics of ideal work environments;
- How veterans’ goals and required supports change over time;
- The role of the veterans’ family members in pursuing their career goals, and what family supports have been most effective; and
- The supports employers report as having been the most effective in recruiting, retaining and promoting candidates with PTSD and/or TBI.

There are 2.4 million OIF/OEF veterans, 114,000 of whom have received disability ratings from the Department of Veteran Affairs (VA). Of these veterans, 18.5% have been diagnosed with PTSD or Depression. Another 19.5% have been identified to have TBI. Because of their prevalence, PTSD and TBI have become known as the signature injuries of the Global War on Terror.

All veterans interviewed by NOD reported a diagnosis of PTSD and/or TBI. Demographically, they were mostly white males aged between 20 and 40. The majority were married with children. Most lived with a partner, family member or roommate; while just under 20% lived alone. Forty-one percent had PTSD only; 53% had both PTSD and TBI; and just 6% had TBI only. Importantly, more than 50% of the veterans in the sample had a physical disability in addition to their cognitive or psychological injuries.
a. Literature Review Findings

From the literature review, NOD found that the most common challenges to employment and education for these veterans include difficulty maintaining attention and concentration, difficulty responding to instruction due to memory issues, challenges related to endurance in the workplace (such as lack of focus and premature fatigue,) and an increased likelihood of anger and anxiety-related social challenges (such as relating to and working with others).

While clinical and other therapeutic interventions designed to help veterans with overall functioning are effective, those targeted to employment and education are not. It was found universally that customized interventions for the veterans and training on the specifics of PTSD and/or TBI for the staff that support those veterans, would result in more consistently positive outcomes in employment and education.

Other key findings from the literature revealed that a “whole life” approach (inclusive of counseling, physical therapy and employment supports) to supporting a veteran was of greater value than concentrating on education or employment alone. Also, support provided directly to employers can have great impact.

In sum, the literature showed that the most effective approaches to success in employment and education are those that are flexible, customized to the abilities of the veteran and his/her family, and readily available through a variety of community-based workforce development service providers. In other words, interventions based on a distinct understanding of the individual and his/her family are far more likely than others to lead to competitive employment outcomes.

b. Interview Findings

Nearly 75% of the veterans were not working at the time of the interview, while close to 50% were attending college or other training. The interviews also revealed that a large majority of the veterans believe they need further education or training in order to achieve their goals.
Career Interests by Occupational Cluster

Interviews and analysis revealed that while occupational interests showed wide variation across veterans, some industry sectors were mentioned more frequently than others. These included, in descending order of frequency:

- Management and Business or Financial Operations;
- Protective Service;
- Healthcare;
- Social Services;
- Teaching;
- Computer Occupations;
- Engineering and Surveying;
- Installation, Maintenance, and Repair; and
- Other Social or Physical Sciences.

In keeping with the criticality of individualized supports, it is important to note that while the above occupational interests and careers were identified as trends, the individual veteran’s goals and preferences remain of paramount importance in identifying career interests.

Ideal Work Environments

The desire to work in an organization with a clear structure for advancement was voiced frequently, particularly by those veterans whose interests were in the fields of business and financial operations or computer networking. In other words, a structure of guidance and advancement similar to what was experienced in the military was preferred. A trend that was not occupation-specific was the desire to work in an environment that includes other veterans; this was simply a trend and not a universal desire.

Effect of Rank in the Military

The most recent or current rank (in cases where the interviewee had yet to be fully separated from the service) in the military and level of education brought their own trends. Veterans who retired as non-commissioned officers were more often interested in management or business and financial operations positions. These veterans believed that their military service gave them the transferable leadership skills and experience to supervise and train people in civilian positions. Veterans who retired at lower ranks were more likely to be interested in jobs in the healthcare field.
Effect of Mental Health or Cognitive Impairments on Ability to Work

A vast majority of the veterans interviewed felt that symptoms related to their mental health or cognitive abilities had affected or would affect their ability to work or to perform certain types of work—even if the effect was relatively small. These veterans noted periods of depression, loss of sleep due to nightmares, debilitating anxiety, mood swings, short tempers, short-term memory loss, inability to concentrate, stupor from medication, and migraine headaches.

Support Needs

The specific types of supports needed for veterans with PTSD and/or TBI to obtain and retain meaningful employment were found to be unique to each individual. In general terms, this study found that supports must be provided as early as possible in the pre-employment process. Some supports that proved effective include:

- In-depth career consultation and exploration;
- Career counseling that focuses on a veteran’s abilities rather than cognitive impairments;
- A deeper understanding of their own disability (specifically its manifestation in the workplace);
- An understanding of benefits and legal rights;
- Mechanisms with which to carry-over military skills into the civilian workforce (transferable skill identification);
- Military-earned certification and credentials recognized by colleges and employers;
- Help discovering well-matched job opportunities;
- Peer-to-peer mentoring; and
- Social interaction practice.

In keeping with the “whole life” approach, the study found that a veteran’s family is often instrumental to ensuring his/her well-being, self-confidence, job satisfaction, and ongoing career success. PTSD and TBI can cause significant stress to the family, which, without support, can break the family unit. Consequently, when the family unit understands the veteran’s disability and takes a role in providing support, the veteran is more likely to succeed in the workforce. As a result, support for the whole family is critical for success.
The family supports that were reported as most effective are:

- In-home medical care for the veteran;
- Consistent VA appointments; and
- Counseling and education to the realities of PTSD and TBI.

For businesses to succeed in hiring veterans with PTSD and/or TBI, NOD found the following to be key:

- A company-wide commitment, starting from the top, to hiring these veterans;
- Education and training to managers and co-workers about PTSD and TBI, how they manifest themselves in the workplace, and how managers and co-workers can help;
- Education and training about military culture;
- Accommodations such as memory aids, customizable work stations, and environment;
- Encouraging disclosure so that employers may provide the most effective accommodations for productivity;
- Assignment of an easily accessible job coach or mentor (can be a specially trained manager or co-worker);
- Employer access to qualified veterans for recruitment;
- Flexibility in structuring job descriptions and work hours (to allow time for therapy and medical appointments);
- Clear structure and process for management and advancement; and
- The presence of other veterans in management and leadership.

We found these final three trends to be the most prominent: flexibility, a clear management and advancement structure and the presence of other veterans in a company’s leadership.

Given the intense interest among employers to hire wounded warriors, we strongly believe that if committed business leaders put these methods into practice, many other employers would follow.

III. Conclusion

This research project was undertaken by NOD and the Institute to better understand the process of recovery and re-entry to civilian life faced by veterans with PTSD and/or TBI who are
returning home from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars; and to help ensure that these veterans find success in the career marketplace. Chronically unemployed and underemployed, these veterans often require specific supports to remove barriers and ensure success in the workforce. It is our goal that, by identifying these supports and suggesting methods of delivery, these injured men and women who have served our country will indeed return to civilian life and embark on careers of personal and professional satisfaction.
I. INTRODUCTION

a. National Organization on Disability Overview

The National Organization on Disability (NOD) was founded in 1982 with the mission of expanding the participation and contribution of America’s 54 million men, women, and children with disabilities in all aspects of life.

In recognition of what NOD believes to be the most urgent need for Americans with disabilities, NOD’s Board of Directors recently adopted a Strategic Plan focused on improving employment prospects for the 33 million working-aged Americans with disabilities.

And the need is pressing. The most recent Kessler/NOD Survey of Americans with Disabilities conducted by Harris Interactive reveals that only two in ten working age Americans with disabilities are employed, versus six in ten of those without. These numbers have remained virtually unchanged for more than 20 years, regardless of the strength or weakness of the overall economy.

To realize this mission, NOD has positioned itself as an engine for new ideas and proven practices in the field of disability employment. Through privately funded demonstration projects built as a response to the needs of individuals and businesses, NOD’s use of private funding allows for a degree of flexibility and risk-taking that is not often possible with publicly-funded initiatives.

To ensure that these projects accomplish their goals, each of them includes a built-in evaluation process, which allows NOD to continuously improve its programs and respond to new findings.

With the knowledge gleaned from work in the field, and the evidence gathered through project evaluations, NOD ‘scales up’ these small demonstrations through direct pursuit of sustainable public dollars, ‘spreading the word’ about successful NOD
projects, and influencing policy and practice in an attempt to see the best work replicated in larger-scale agencies and service providers.

b. Partner Overview

The partners who participated in this project include:

i. The Economic Mobility Corporation

The Economic Mobility Corporation identifies, develops and evaluates programs and policies that enable disadvantaged individuals to acquire the education, skills and networks needed to succeed in the labor market so that they can support themselves and their families.

ii. The Institute for Community Inclusion

The Institute for Community Inclusion at the University of Massachusetts Boston supports the rights of children and adults with disabilities to participate in all aspects of the community. As practitioners, researchers, and teachers, they form partnerships with individuals, families, and communities. Together, they advocate for personal choice, self-determination, and social and economic justice.

iii. The Aperio Consulting Group

The Aperio Consulting Group was founded on the conviction that public service is the highest calling to which an American can aspire. Its work is designed to honor and enrich excellence in the fields of education, workforce, and economic development. Aperio’s consultation to practitioners, policy makers, and funders is driven by a knowledge of the pressures under which they operate, and the needs of the students, career-seekers, and businesses who are their customers.

c. Return to Careers Project (RTC) Overview

In February of 2010, the AbilityOne Institute for Economic Empowerment, a research and development program that promotes employment for people with severe disabilities, partnered with NOD regarding our collaboration with the US Army Wounded Warrior (AW2) Program. NOD’s Return to Careers Project (RTC) is an effort to better understand the process of recovery and re-entry to civilian life faced by veterans with
disabilities returning home from wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and to help ensure that these veterans find success in the workforce.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW SUMMARY

a. Introduction

The National Organization on Disability contracted with the Institute of Community Inclusion at the University of Massachusetts Boston and the Aperio Consulting Group worked together to develop a literature review on employment as it relates to veterans of the United States Armed Forces who have been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and/or traumatic brain injury (TBI). Below is a summary of the findings. The complete report is also included as Appendix 9.

Topics covered in the literature review include:

- Characteristics of the Current Population of Veterans of the United States Armed Forces;
- What Is PTSD and How Can It Impact Employment Outcomes?
- What Is TBI and How Can It Impact Employment Outcomes?
- Department of Veterans Affairs Vocational Rehabilitation Programs;
- Improving Employment Outcomes for Veterans with PTSD;
- Improving Employment Outcomes for Veterans with TBI;
- Additional Employment Resources for Veterans with Disabilities; and
- Closing Summary.

In addition to the narrative literature review, an annotated bibliography in table form is included as an appendix in this product.

Information for this review comes from the following sources: peer reviewed literature obtained by searching EBSCO Host Academic Search Premier, ERIC, and PsychINFO, internal Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA) documents and reports; two key informational interviews with DVA employees who are knowledgeable about DVA employment programs, and internet sites describing various employment programs and supports that are available to veterans of the United States Armed Forces. The following key words were used to create Boolean strings when searching for documents and resources: veterans, employment,
employment programs, post-secondary education, post-traumatic stress disorder, PTSD, TBI, and vocational rehabilitation.

Observations in this summary, unless otherwise noted, are drawn from the reading and interpretation of the literature, which is detailed at length throughout the Review.

b. Overview

The literature reviewed clearly demonstrates that PTSD and TBI are significant barriers for veterans seeking education and employment. The RAND Corporation’s Invisible Wounds of War project shows that 18.5% of Operation Iraqi Freedom/Operation Enduring Freedom (OIF/OEF) Veterans experience PTSD or depression, and that 19.5% experience a TBI (Tanielian and Jaycox, 2008); thus the common terminology identifies these as the ‘signature injuries’ of the recent conflicts. Furthermore, Rand’s more recent report estimates that 20-30% of OIF/OEF deployed Service Members may be affected by PTSD/TBI. This underscores the likely growth in this population and importance of applying new approaches.

While a number of findings point toward interventions that have great potential in serving these veterans, it is clear that the systems designed to support veterans in education and employment require capacity building to improve their quality. In every case, specific training on the nature of PTSD and TBI for staff supporting these veterans would improve the value of these services. Furthermore, the literature suggests that flexible and individualized interventions customized to the needs of each veteran are more likely to produce meaningful employment and educational outcomes.

c. Common Challenges for Veterans with TBI and/or PTSD in Education and Employment

Specific challenges in attaining education and employment shared by both veterans with PTSD and those with TBI include difficulty maintaining attention and concentration, difficulty responding to

Having a single point of contact within the office of veteran services on campus, well-trained in veteran-specific programs and how to assess when and how to make appropriate referrals for the veterans to appropriate services, is crucial.
instruction due to memory-related issues, challenges related to endurance in the workplace, and an increased likelihood of anger and anxiety-related social challenges in and outside of school and the workplace. While both of these conditions occur at various levels of severity, the literature could not delineate exact differences between veterans experiencing different levels of severity in their conditions, except to say, in some cases, that the challenges identified for any veteran with PTSD or TBI would be more prominent in those with more severe forms of these conditions.

d. Challenges Specific to Veterans with PTSD

PTSD is typified by distractibility, fear of criticism and confrontation, increased anger, and numerous other challenges related to stress and the possibility of re-living trauma. Therefore, veterans with PTSD may struggle with acclimating to the necessary social norms of the workplace and educational settings, accepting criticism or even instruction, working with others, handling work related stress, and adapting effectively to new and changing environments. This, in turn, suggests challenges for the employer and educator, and a level of support that might require accommodations to successfully include veterans with PTSD in the workplace and educational settings.

Furthermore, a study of Vietnam-era veterans by Sovoca and Rosenheck (2000) demonstrated that those who developed PTSD had a 50% lower likelihood of employment than those who did not. It is notable that unemployment specifically seems to exacerbate many of the corollary symptoms of PTSD, including anger and anger-management issues.

e. Challenges Specific to Veterans with TBI

TBI has a significant impact on veterans including their self-perception, physical and mental health, and adaptability to dynamic work and educational environments. Research suggests not only a drop in the likelihood of employment for veterans with TBI, but also a likely drop in the quality, position, and earnings of the employment they attain. Though it is not specified in the literature, the authors assume that this has to do, in part, with challenges faced by employers in conveying job requirements and duties, and the preference of veterans with TBI for highly structured jobs. Furthermore, veterans with TBI report a sense of significant change in their identity. The authors believe this
perceived identity change is exacerbated by the overall sense of change experienced as a result of the transition from military to civilian life.

As referenced above, the literature suggests that employers lack information and understanding in how to accommodate TBI in their workplace. This is a complex issue, given the range of needs for someone with TBI, and given the fact that these needs can range from more structured task assignments and management styles, to general difficulties with the social aspects of work and being managed.

f. Workforce Development Resources and Strategies

For veterans with both PTSD and TBI, the literature suggests that flexible, individualized and community-based workforce development methods are more likely to lead to competitive and positive employment outcomes. Intervention based on a distinct understanding of the individual, with a means for understanding their specific goals, interests, and employment capacity is essential. In order to ensure this level of understanding, it is crucial that workforce development staff have relevant training and knowledge on issues related to PTSD and TBI. In the case of TBI, some authors even suggest that having the advice and support of medical professionals can be of great value. In part, the authors of this literature review speculate that the efficacy of these methods is based on the variability of disability, severity, and circumstance among veterans with TBI and PTSD. With such diversity of need and circumstance, it makes sense that the most effective models would be those designed to the individual and their needs.

Support to employers is also recognized as an important aspect of successful employment outcomes. Providing information regarding accommodations (in the application process as much as on the job itself), flexible work arrangements (such as telework, flexible scheduling to provide longer breaks or individualized work hours, and task instruction that is suited to the veteran's

The literature review illustrates the need to focus much more research and demonstration efforts on innovative employment models that meet the needs of a new generation of combat veterans.
communication and learning needs), and general information on the nature of TBI and PTSD are all important aspects of the information that workforce development professionals should provide to the employer.

Furthermore, there is evidence to support the finding that a comprehensive approach to serving the veteran, including attention to social, medical, and life concerns (rather than providing only employment services), is of particular value. While it is important to maintain a focus on employment and self-sufficiency, veterans with PTSD and TBI show better employment outcomes when they are also receiving support for their related medical and mental health concerns (including anger management, building memory and executive function, and general support around physical, mental and brain health). Studies also show the importance of engaging the entire family unit as professional support to the veterans in their employment search. Spouses and children can act as powerful motivators and supports to the veteran, but will often also require support themselves.

The literature review consistently showed that successful veteran services include an employment focus. Services that assume the employability of the veterans, are based on real experiences in the community, and promote the value of work as an important and attainable outcome, all were more likely to produce competitive employment outcomes. The authors of this literature review give this finding special emphasis, based on observations that many of the services available to veterans, particularly early in their process of return, are built around a ‘medical model’ emphasizing medical care over self-sufficiency. Of course, medical care plays an extremely important role in the life and success of a returning veteran with a significant injury; however, balancing this care with the tools to assist the veteran toward self-sufficiency and transition to civilian competitive employment would seemingly be of great value.

g. Use, Coordination and Efficacy of Currently Available Employment Resources

While many services exist inside the Department of Defense (DOD), Vocational Rehabilitation (VR), the Department of Veteran Affairs (DVA) and in the community, there remains a dearth of direct employment assistance, including employment advocacy,
supported employment, and transitional or internship work experiences. The two primary VA services related to employment—Compensated Work Therapy, a Supported Employment inclusive strategy in which the veteran works a transitional job and compensation is a DVA benefit, and Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E)—have very little interaction and coordination. Compensated Work Therapy is often branded as the temporary jobs at the VA itself; while it has Supported Employment pilot projects, these are often focused on those with what the DVA has long considered serious mental illness—which to date does not, by their policy, necessarily include PTSD or TBI. Additionally, many veterans view VR&E as payment for school and generally do not see it as a vehicle for job placement.

There is nothing in the literature that suggests the development of specific employment training strands that build on military service job experiences or vocational themes. There are already a wide variety of services for veterans in VA, DOD, VR, and some public and private community agencies, but these are not well coordinated nor advertised to veterans. The literature review illustrates the need to focus much more research and demonstration efforts on innovative employment models that meet the needs of a new generation of combat veterans. This group clearly benefits from the increased public attention, medical research, and financial resources. Nevertheless, there has not been a robust research focus concerned with ameliorating the debilitating effects of the negative medical and daily functioning consequences due to TBI and PTSD on the veterans’ employment and educational functioning. The literature review highlights the knowledge base that has been gained and also helps pinpoint some of the existing gaps to be filled.

h. The Consequences of Services that Fail to Support Employment

Studies on veterans with both TBI and PTSD emphasized that, while these barriers made the acquisition of employment a more difficult goal, it also made it a more important goal. In both cases, veterans who were unemployed found the primary and secondary symptoms related to their disability to be exacerbated. Veterans with PTSD have a harder time managing their anger and stress, and veterans with TBI were more likely to be depressed, and to self-medicate while unemployed.
i. Education Supports and Programs

What separates a campus that professes to be veteran-friendly from a campus that actually has successfully implemented veteran-friendly programs and systems is difficult to define or quantify. There is not yet a current database in place to track veterans in post-secondary institutions or the success of those institutions who serve veterans. Survey data as well as anecdotal data from post-secondary institutions and veteran groups are the best indicator for the efficacy of available educational supports at this time.

Veterans making the transition from military service to higher education have reported many frustrations and made suggestions for improvements through a focus group assembled by the American Council on Education (ACE). It was widely stated that, while on active service, soldiers became accustomed to the command hierarchy that leaves little doubt for what their roles are and to whom they need to directly report. Cohen & Zinger (2010) surveyed students at Queensborough Community College (QCC) regarding their deployment and subsequent transition into post-secondary education after leaving active service. The veterans in this study reported that in civilian life and in post-secondary education specifically, the chain of command and structure is much less apparent. Finding information about financial assistance, veteran services, class registration, disability services, or even knowing what questions to ask in any of those categories can become major hurdles to success in higher education. Having a single point of contact within the office of veteran services on campus, well-trained in veteran-specific programs and in assessing when and how to make appropriate referrals for the veterans to appropriate services, is crucial.

Housing, financial aid, peer mentoring, tutoring services, navigating the bureaucracy of federal aid programs, and health care services are just a few of the amenities that veterans may need to discover and access in order to succeed in college. Surveyed veterans have widely stated that they often have a limited understanding of any of these services when they leave the military. Having peer mentoring groups start as soon as a veteran enters college is a highly recommended avenue for success. Pairing a veteran who is new to the post-secondary atmosphere with a veteran who not only knows the ins and outs of college, but has also lived the struggle of transitioning to civilian
life, has been endorsed by veterans as immensely helpful. This peer support network also serves as a catalyst for veterans to advocate for more effective policies and practices within an institution, which subsequently benefits both the student body and faculty. When institutions provide effective and meaningful support to veterans, those supportive institutions are more likely to attract more veterans.

**j. Use, Coordination and Efficacy of Currently Available Education Resources**

On August 1, 2009, the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008, or the “new GI Bill”, was put into effect. This GI Bill contains many changes from the previous Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 1984, more commonly known as the Montgomery GI Bill. The biggest change is in increased financial benefits to students, which could increase veteran interest in accessing higher education. The new GI Bill opens the doors for veterans to postsecondary institutions that are private, or typically more expensive, which translates into these institutions accessing a student population they have not typically served. How well these institutions serve this veteran population, as well as how all postsecondary schools are serving them with statistically higher percentages of PTSD and TBI, are two crucial questions that will impact the success of veterans who are transitioning into higher education, and ultimately, the civilian labor market.

The Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act of 2008 (ADAAA) is another piece of legislation that has been modified and will likely impact the number of veterans with disabilities who access services and opportunities like post-secondary education. The ADAAA took the basic language and eligibility criteria of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 and expanded the definition of persons who are perceived as disabled. Because the ADAAA took away the idea that the use of mitigating measures such as medication, prosthetics, assistive technology, hearing devices or mobility devices could be considered when determining if a disability affected major life functions, it is much more likely that TBI and PTSD can and will qualify as disabilities that merit accommodation under ADAAA and Section 504, despite the fact that they are sometimes episodic and/or may be effectively treated with medication (Grossman, 2009). It is important for disability service providers to be aware that a veteran who might not be determined to have a disability by the military could be
eligible for protection under Section 504 and/or ADAAA (Madaus, Miller, & Vance, 2009).

Grossman (2009) also notes that a post-secondary institution doesn’t need to “fundamentally alter its programs, curriculum, or lower its academic standards to accommodate individuals with disabilities” (p.5). However, what is fundamental to a curriculum or academic standard might come into question when serving students with TBI or PTSD. For example, a student with TBI might not be able to perform math calculations in his head but understands the process and can execute problems if allowed a calculator. The standard that a college might have stating that all math functions must be performed without a calculator might need to be revisited, particularly if the math class is standing between the student and a degree as well as subsequent employment. Post-secondary institutions need to make decisions about redefining the fundamental standards of a program and consequently, how these standards can be modified to accommodate students with TBI or PTSD.

III. RESEARCH METHODS

Over the course of 20 months, the Return to Careers Project conducted 200 interviews with veterans with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI); their families; their support networks; and their employers and educators. The Return to Careers Project inquired about:

- Trends in the employment or educational interests, as well as longer-term career goals of returning veterans, especially those who have TBI and/or PTSD;
- Support strategies that are typically most useful in helping people with TBI and/or PTSD to obtain employment in their chosen careers;
- Characteristics of ideal work environments for people with TBI and/or PTSD;
- Costs and best practice delivery strategies for the identified short- and long-term career supports required by veterans with TBI and/or PTSD;
• The role of the veteran’s family in their career search, and what supports the family requires to help the veteran’s career aspirations;

• How veterans’ goals and required supports change over time; and

• What support businesses and other employers require to recruit, retain and promote candidates with TBI and/or PTSD.

Because the sample used in this research was a convenience sample—one in which we recruited based on availability of subjects—it is not representative. This means that although the findings derived from rigorous analysis are generalizable, demographic delineations represent this sample only and are not presumed generalizable to the overall population of veterans with injuries.

   a. Compensation

Veterans, as well as their spouses and family members, were each paid a $125 stipend for their time.

   b. Data Collection

Interviews lasted approximately one hour for each person interviewed. Interviews were voice recorded for accuracy, with the interviewee’s permission. Recordings were kept completely confidential and then professionally transcribed for analysis. Interview protocols can be found in Appendix 1 and consent forms can be found in Appendix 2.

   c. Analysis

To gain meaningful insights from the rich and detailed data collected in this project, NOD has utilized both quantitative and qualitative data analysis. For quantitative analysis, NOD utilized an anonymous demographic questionnaire which captured gender, race, total household income, income from SSDI/VA/DOD, disability ratings from DOD and VA, evaluation of overall health and ability to participate in recreation, and ease of transportation. For qualitative analysis, a coding guide was developed with the Economic Mobility Corporation. Researchers coded all relevant portions of interviews and analyzed them using
Atlas.ti. This methodology allowed for the characterization of the study population and the dissemination of robust findings.

IV. INTERVIEW RESULTS

a. Introduction

The following section summarizes the research results based on the lines of inquiry NOD pursued in the interviews of veterans with PTSD and/or TBI, their families, support networks, employers and educators, as detailed in the preceding section.

Also included is additional information on the demographics and characteristics of the veterans interviewed and a course of research conducted on the employer side of the veteran employment equation, as represented by the community of businesses who serve as contractors to the Department of Defense.

iv. Characteristics of the Veterans in the Final Sample

Table 1 presents the demographic and household characteristics of the 81 veterans in the final analysis sample. Most of the veterans interviewed are male, in their 20’s or 30’s and more than half are white. Just over half (54%) are married and a slightly higher percentage (63%) are living with either their spouse or partner. More than two-thirds have children. Most live with someone else, whether that was a spouse/partner, parent, or non-relative, although nearly a fifth (19%) live alone.

Veterans who retired as non-commissioned officers were more likely to be interested in management or business and financial operations positions; and wanted to apply the leadership and management skills they obtained in the military to civilian positions.
Table 1.

Characteristics of the Veterans in the Analysis Sample (N=81)

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>91%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Racial Identifier Chosen</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian or Alaskan Native</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 to 29</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 to 39</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40 to 49</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Marital Status</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Currently married</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Separated, divorced or widowed</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never married</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has children</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Current Living Arrangements</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lives with spouse or partner</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As shown in Table 2, 57% of the veterans retired from the military at non-commissioned officer ranks, while 41% retired at other enlisted ranks. Most (76%) of the veterans in the sample had been retired from the military for more than a year; about a third (32%) had been retired for more than three years. Most had only a high school diploma or GED at the time of the interview; 22% had earned a college degree. However, most of the veterans (77%) had attended college at some time, and a third had some type of vocational training outside of their military training.

### Table 2.

**Military Rank, Time Since Retirement, and Education of Veterans in the Analysis Sample (N=81)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank When Retired from the Military or Current Rank</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Enlisted: E1 to E4</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enlisted: E5 to E9 (Noncommissioned Officer/NCO)</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Officer</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time Since Retirement from the Military</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not retired</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than one year</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One to three years</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than three years</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Lives with parents (not spouse or partner) 10%
- Lives with non-relatives only 9%
- Lives alone 19%
Table 3 presents information about the veterans’ disabilities and disability rating. Nearly all (94%) of the veterans in the analysis sample said they have post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and 59% have traumatic brain injury (TBI). Just over half (52%) have additional physical disabilities, including injuries to the back, leg, arm, hip or shoulder, burns, and loss of hearing or vision. Fifty-five veterans provided their VA disability rating and an additional seven who did not know their VA rating provided their DOD disability rating. Of these 62 veterans, about a third (34%) have a disability rating of 100% and another 37% have a rating between 70 and 90.

**Table 3.**

**Veterans’ Disability Type and Rating**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PTSD and TBI Status</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Has PTSD only</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has PTSD and TBI</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has TBI only</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has additional physical disabilities</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Highest Degree Earned**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Highest Degree Earned</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High school diploma or GED</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate’s degree</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate degree</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ever attended any college</td>
<td>77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ever attended any vocational training (not including military training)</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In addition to asking veterans about their injuries and disabilities, we asked them to rate their health and how their health affects various activities, including activities related to work or education. The health rating is only available for 51 of the 81 veterans and the health effects on activities related to job or education rating is only available for 60 of the 81 veterans (either because the veterans did not complete the supplemental survey or because they completed an earlier version of the survey that did not contain the questions). Of those who provided a health rating, just over half (51%) rated their health as fair or poor while the rest said it was good or very good (Table 4). Of those who provided a rating of how their health affects activities related to work or education, just over a quarter (27%) said their health makes work and education-related activities very difficult, while seven percent said their health prevented them from performing these activities at all.

Table 4.
Veterans’ Assessment of Their Health

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Veterans’ Rating of Their Own Health (N=51)</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very good</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fair</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How Health Affects Activities Related to Job or Education</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Makes activity only a little difficult or not at all | 30%

Makes activity somewhat difficult | 37%

Makes activity very difficult | 27%

Cannot do activity at all | 7%

In sum, the veterans in the analysis sample were dealing with significant and often multiple injuries; many felt that their health had at least some negative effect on their ability to perform work and educational activities. Few held post-secondary degrees. Many had a family to support while they pursued their educational and career goals.

b. Career Goals

i. Introduction

This section includes the findings from RTC’s analysis of the career goals and interests of the 81 veterans in the final analysis sample, which included transcribed and coded interviews. We examined whether there were trends in the veterans’ immediate employment interests and/or longer-term career goals, whether and how their goals have changed over time, and how their current interests compared to their previous experience and training. We also examined whether there were notable differences in the career goals and interests of veterans by key demographic characteristics, including their education, age, military rank, measures of their health and the type and severity of their disabilities, and the amount of time that had passed since they retired from the military.

A primary goal of the research was to learn whether there were identifiable trends in either the immediate employment or educational interests of the veterans or longer-term career goals of returning veterans who have TBI or PTSD.

One of the most common areas of interest was working in some management capacity or the business/financial operations of a private company or government agency.
Most of the 81 veterans in the analysis sample were not working at the time of their interview and just over a quarter of the veterans (27%) were currently employed. Nearly half of the veterans (48%) were attending college or training, and an additional 20% expressed an interest in earning a college degree or certificate in order to achieve their career goals. Only seven percent of the veterans were both working and attending college or training; most of those who were in school did not express an immediate interest in obtaining employment. About a third of the veterans were neither working nor in school at the time of their interview, but nearly all of them shared plans or their ideas about what they would like to do in the future.

ii. Identifiable Trends of Occupational Interests and Careers

As one might expect, the veterans’ immediate occupational interests and/or longer-term career goals were diverse. However, there were some clear trends in the broad fields or types of work that interested the veterans but with notable differences across key subgroups of veterans. In addition, the research showed whether the veterans’ career goals or interests have changed over time and how their current goals or interests compared to their existing experience and training. Table 5 presents the breakdown of veterans’ employment interests across several broad occupational categories. Within each of these broad categories, the veterans were interested in a range of specific jobs or occupations, as discussed below.
One of the most common areas of interest was working in some management capacity or the business/financial operations of a private company or government agency. Those generally interested in management felt that their military service gave them the transferable leadership skills and experience to supervise and train people in civilian positions. Some veterans were interested in specific business or financial operations positions, including human resource specialist, accountant, auditor, trainer, project manager, and logistician. Many of these veterans expressed that they enjoy working with people as a team to accomplish a common goal and enjoy some other aspect of the work such as working with numbers and finances or the technology involved.
Another cluster of veterans were pursuing degrees in computer networking or in business administration with an information technology focus. Some wanted to work in network administration while others planned to apply the technological skills they gained to other fields, including computer forensics and logistics. Many of the veterans pursuing the technology field expressed that they enjoyed hands-on work with computers and other electronics, particularly taking them apart, building them, solving problems, and deriving satisfaction from seeing the end product.

One theme that emerged from the interviews with the veterans interested in business or financial operations and computer networking positions is the desire to work in an organization with a clear structure for advancement. Some spoke in terms of General Schedule levels in the federal government while others discussed established job titles and career ladders available in private firms. Some, though not all, liked the structure that the military provided and sought this structure and guidance around their responsibilities and how they could advance as they navigated and transitioned into the civilian workplace.

A small group of veterans were pursuing engineering degrees with different specialties, including aerospace, civil, mechanical, and electrical engineering, with one veteran interested in topographical surveying. These veterans expressed similar interests as those attracted to information technology because of their shared curiosity in building and creating things, working with computers and other electronics, and learning new technologies. The difference was that they were seeking higher level positions in management or research and development. As one veteran noted, he no longer wanted to turn the wrenches but to supervise the people who do.

In contrast to the veterans seeking operations or information technology careers, another group of veterans expressed their preference to work outdoors or to split their time between indoor and outdoor work. They did not want to go to an office every day and sit in front of a computer. They wanted physical or hands-on work where their experiences would differ every day. Some stated that even if they were doing the same tasks each day, they would
like having the opportunity to do them in different environments while meeting and talking with different people each day. Many had the opportunity to learn and perform a variety of tasks in the military and they were looking for that diversity in a civilian job. The veterans looking for this type of environment were primarily interested in two broad fields: protective service, or installation and maintenance and repair.

Protective service was the most common area of interest among the veterans after management and operations. Within the protective service field, veterans’ specific occupational interests included a variety of jobs, such as police officer, probation officer, security consultant, and fish/game warden. Some veterans expressed interest in working on the investigative side of police work rather than the patrol side. Some were interested in eventually moving into a career with the FBI, in law enforcement, or as a U.S. Marshall.

Veterans interested in installation, maintenance, and repair occupations were all working in this capacity at the time of the interview and included an air conditioning technician, aircraft mechanic, cable maintenance technician, and weapons and military vehicle technician.

In discussing their career interests, another group of veterans stated that they primarily wanted a job that helps people, particularly assisting returning veterans. After their own experiences of being wounded, making the transition into civilian life, and experiencing the importance of the people who had helped them, they wanted to make a difference in the lives of others. Veterans expressing an interest in helping others were primarily interested in two broad fields: healthcare and counseling or social work.

Within the healthcare field, veterans were interested in a variety of career paths, including nurse, emergency medical technician, radiology technician, anesthesiologist, medical assistant, physician’s assistant, physical therapist, and doing research on TBI and PTSD. Many of these veterans said they were grateful to the people who had helped them with their injuries and recovery and wanted to do the same for others. For some, their personal experience resulted in an interest in learning more about how the human body or the brain works.
Another group of veterans wanted to pursue careers in counseling, social work, or advocating for social services. Similar to those who were interested in the medical field, these veterans have been impacted by counselors and social service providers as they transitioned out of the military into civilian life, and they want to do the same for others. Those specifically interested in working with veterans felt they have something unique to offer in their ability to empathize with the veterans and share what they have learned from their own experiences.

Several veterans expressed an interest in teaching, either in early childhood education or at the elementary or high school level. A few mentioned areas of focus, including art, history, science, and special education. Most of these veterans said they enjoyed being around children and passing knowledge along to others, as well as wanting to make a difference in the lives of others.

One theme that emerged across occupational categories was their preference for working in an environment where their co-workers or supervisors include other former military personnel. They enjoy working with other veterans and feel that colleagues or supervisors who are veterans would be more understanding of the challenges they are facing with their health and other issues related to the transition into the civilian workplace. Others expressed that they need to work in a military friendly environment where people are respectful of military personnel even if they do not share that experience. It is important to note that not all of the veterans felt this way. Some specifically said that they do not want to work around soldiers or that they want to move to a non-military town.

Veterans who had higher disability ratings (70 to 100 percent) were more likely to be interested in careers in computers, engineering, and counseling or social work than were those whose disability rating was between 10 and 60 percent.
sample sizes for subgroups were small, a few trends did stand out.

The first set of factors examined were related to the veterans’ experience, including their most recent or current rank in the military and their level of education. Veterans who retired as non-commissioned officers (NCOs) were more likely to be interested in management or business and financial operations positions. As noted earlier, these veterans wanted to apply the leadership and management skills they obtained in the military to civilian positions either in the government or private business. On the other hand, veterans who retired at lower ranks (E1 to E4) were more likely to be interested in jobs in the healthcare field. Veterans who already held a Bachelor’s degree were more likely than those who had less education to be interested in management or business and financial operations positions or in counseling and social work positions.

Furthermore, an examination was done to determine whether there were relationships between veterans’ age and their career interests. However, age is highly correlated with rank and, therefore, this examination revealed similar trends as those noted above. Namely, veterans who were still in their 20s were much more likely to retire at the ranks of E1 to E4, and these veterans were more likely to express interest in healthcare careers. Veterans who were in their 30s were more likely to be interested in management and operations positions than either those who were in their 20s or those who were 40 or older. Veterans who were age 40 or older were somewhat more likely to express interest in counseling or social work careers or in teaching. All but one of the veterans age 40 or older retired as an NCO or Officer. Some of these veterans expressed an interest in translating the teaching and counseling aspects of their military roles into a civilian career.

Finally, the research was examined to find out whether there was a relationship between a variety of health indicators and veterans’ career goals or interests. The goal of this analysis was not to suggest that veterans with certain types of disabilities or severity of disability should be counseled into certain types of jobs. Rather, the information can be useful for understanding the veterans’ own perceptions of what they can

Career counseling that focuses on their abilities could help veterans with PTSD and/or TBI build self-esteem and recognize what they are capable of doing with appropriate supports.
do and may shed some light on the supports that are needed to help veterans develop and achieve their goals.

Veterans who had TBI were more likely to favor careers in computers, engineering, and counseling or social work than were veterans who have PTSD but not TBI. Veterans who have PTSD but not TBI were more likely to be interested in teaching. Veterans who have additional physical disabilities were less likely to express interest in protective service careers than those who do not have other physical disabilities.

To the extent that the veterans’ disability ratings reflect the severity of their disabilities, it appears that the severity of their injuries or disabilities affects their career interests or goals. Veterans who have lower disability ratings (10 to 60 percent) were more likely to express interest in management, business or financial operations, teaching, and installation, maintenance or repair positions than those whose disability rating was 70% or greater. Veterans who had higher disability ratings (70 to 100 percent) were more likely to be interested in careers in computers, engineering, and counseling or social work than were those whose disability rating was between 10 and 60 percent. This may indicate either something about the circumstance of the veteran’s recovery or could be an artifact of a different level of support. There were no notable patterns of career interests in relation to the veterans’ own rating of their health or by their rating of how their health affects their work or educational activities.

### iii. Conclusion

The interviews reveal that veterans who have PTSD and/or TBI have a wide range of career interests. Some have a strong interest in a particular type of work, while others have strong preferences regarding the environment in which they want to work, leading them to pursue certain types of occupations. Any effort to employ these veterans will need to target a wide variety of positions at levels appropriate for matching the veterans’ experience and education. The data also reveals that a large majority of the veterans need further education or training in order to achieve their goals. Those whose past experience was gained in the military may need assistance translating their experience to the civilian workplace, particularly those interested in management and business operations positions. This argues for integrating small numbers of veterans into employment groups (with or without disabilities).
c. Needed Support

i. Introduction

This section summarizes the findings about the supports that veterans who have PTSD and/or TBI need to obtain and retain employment and to advance in their careers. These findings are based on the interviews with the 81 veterans described above.

ii. Veterans’ Perceptions of How Their Health Affects Their Employment

To better understand the supports that veterans who have PTSD or TBI need in order to obtain and retain employment, an examination of the research was done to determine what veterans said about how their health or injuries affected their employment or pursuit of education. A large majority of the veterans interviewed felt that their health had or would affect their ability to work or to perform certain types of work. Many expressed that they had days when they could not function due to migraines, depression, or nightmares that kept them from sleeping the night before. Many talked about how PTSD causes them to feel overwhelmed and experience anxiety attacks. These attacks are often triggered by something that reminds them of their combat experiences, including loud noises, crowds, smells such as burning fuel, settings such as construction areas, or the presence of soldiers or people who are injured. Many are not comfortable being around other people at all and always feel that they have to be on guard. They report needing to be able to see everything and everyone around them and not liking when people are behind them.

The veterans said they have mood swings and feel they are more short-tempered than they were before. For this reason, they worry about their ability to interact with coworkers or customers on the job. Some said they get frustrated easily, particularly when they feel they are not performing as well as they should. Some expressed concerns about being able to handle the stress that comes with working in a fast-paced environment or in a position where they are responsible for managing others or working on multiple projects, even though this is the type of position they would like to obtain. NOD believes this suggests a

Experience in the disability field suggests that any shortcut to fully understanding an individual will compromise the quality of the services and supports.
need for substantial structure to the job and/or organization, at least until the fuller potential becomes more evident or the condition improves.

Most veterans who have TBI said they have difficulty with short-term memory. They also felt that it takes them longer than others to process information and to perform tasks at work or school. Some mentioned difficulty with multi-tasking and said they either need to focus on one thing or a couple things at a time whereas in the past they could do more. They need to slow down and pace themselves so that they do not become ill or panic. Some said they have difficulty comprehending things, learning new concepts, reasoning, doing mathematical computations, or getting organized. Veterans interviewed also said they have difficulty concentrating, partly due to an inability to filter out background noise. This affects their ability to take a test, complete a task, or hear and comprehend what other people are saying.

Many of the veterans interviewed have physical injuries in addition to PTSD and/or TBI that cause pain in their legs, arms, hands, back, shoulders, hips and joints. Many said that they cannot do the physical work they have done in the past, such as construction or mechanic work, or pursue jobs in security or law enforcement because they cannot lift, climb, move quickly, make repetitive motions, walk a long way, or keep their balance. Some have been advised by the military or nonprofit organizations to pursue physical jobs that matched their previous experience but they found that they could not do them. Many mentioned that they cannot sit down for too long, which affects their ability to work in an office setting. Some have visual or hearing impairments that require special equipment on the job. Hence, just because a veteran is qualified for a job does not mean that he or she is suited for it given new circumstances.

Some veterans mentioned that the medication they take for their pain, depression, or anxiety makes them drowsy or “zombie-like,” affecting their ability to work. Many veterans also said their need to take time off for appointments with doctors and counselors affected their ability to obtain and keep a job.

The information shared by the veterans about how their health affects their pursuit of employment and education is useful for thinking about the types of supports they will need in the workplace. It is important to keep in mind that, while there are some common themes, the veterans’ needs vary as do their career
interests and preferred work environments. While some veterans are looking for work environments that fit their current health situation, others want to learn how to work through their physical or mental health issues in order to pursue the careers of their choosing, even if this means working in an environment that has the potential to cause anxiety or to test their physical and cognitive abilities.

**iii. Supports People with TBI and/or PTSD Need to Obtain Employment**

According to the Brain Injury Association, individuals with TBI and/or PTSD will need supports to obtain employment with the level of need dependent upon the individuals’ strengths and weaknesses. However, generally speaking, individuals with Brain Injury may need such supports as:

- Vocational testing to determine job skills
- Development of compensatory strategies (i.e. note taking, electronic devices)
- Training in transferability skills
- Assistance in finding employment from trained workforce development professionals
- Understanding of needed job accommodations by both the employer and the employee.

Similarly, it is important for individuals with PTSD to both consider necessary areas of support during the pre-employment process and to work with trained workforce development professionals who can guide individuals through the process. The Job Accommodation Network recommends that individuals consider these questions prior to obtaining employment:

- What limitations is the employee with PTSD experiencing?
- How do these limitations affect the employee and the employee’s job performance?
- What specific job tasks are problematic as a result of these limitations?
- What accommodations are available to reduce or eliminate these problems? Are all possible resources being used to determine possible accommodations?
- Has the employee with PTSD been consulted regarding possible accommodations?
- Once accommodations are in place, would it be useful to meet with the employee with PTSD to evaluate the
effectiveness of the accommodations and to determine whether additional accommodations are needed?

• Do supervisory personnel and employees need training regarding PTSD?

But, for both individuals with TBI and PTSD, it is recommended that these supports should be offered and utilized early in the pre-employment process in order to assist individuals with becoming job ready. Furthermore, these supports should be included in an individualized employment plan that can act as a guide for veterans with TBI and PTSD.

iv. Veterans Acknowledgement of Disability in Relation to Supports, Career Perceptions, and Goals

NOD’s interviews with the veterans revealed numerous supports that can help veterans who have PTSD and/or TBI to retain employment and be successful in the workplace. Some veterans recognize that they would benefit from these supports. Others are not comfortable with the idea that they need support or that an employer should be expected to provide accommodations for them. Many expressed concerns about revealing the details of their injuries or the fact that they had injuries at all to their employers. They believed they would be fired due to the perception that they could not do the work or that they would carry the stigma of being a veteran with PTSD. These veterans will need assistance to help them feel comfortable seeking the supports they need to succeed on the job.

v. Short and Long-Term Supports Veterans Need to Obtain Employment

The following sections summarize the findings about the supports veterans who have PTSD and/or TBI need in order to make a successful transition from the military to a civilian career. The sections are divided into three parts, including supports needed to obtain a job, supports needed to succeed on the job, and additional supports needed throughout the transition process that indirectly affect veterans’ ability to pursue employment and careers.
Many of the veterans interviewed felt that they needed more help transitioning into civilian life than what they had received from the military and other public, private, and non-profit organizations. The veterans were predominantly interested in receiving help with employment, education, health related issues, and financial difficulties. The first focus will be on the supports the veterans need that are directly related to obtaining a job. Many of the supports the veterans mentioned having or needing were ones that had been provided as they were transitioning out of the military, either by the military itself or by another public or nonprofit organization. However, they were dissatisfied with the services provided to them, and the assistance they received did not help them succeed in obtaining employment. These services were often provided in a rushed and brief group session in which the veterans were uncomfortable, and unable to retain the information they heard. The services were also offered in a generic form and not personalized to meet the veterans’ interests and abilities. The types of supports that could help veterans in their pursuit of employment include the following:

- **Intensive career exploration and job search**
  The veterans want more help with career exploration and the job search process. They feel that the transitional assistance they received did not adequately help them understand the civilian job market, the types of jobs that are available, and the requirements of those jobs. The veterans would like to receive more information about how to match their mental or physical abilities to the types of jobs that are available in the civilian sector before they enter the workforce. Some veterans spoke of trying out a job to test their physical and mental abilities only to have it end badly, creating unnecessary stress.

- **Ability-focused career counseling**
  Some veterans expressed that they lack confidence about their ability to work due to their PTSD or TBI. They are concerned about being unreliable, not being able to work regularly, or perform well on the job due to forgetfulness, headaches or discomfort interacting with other people. They also worry about the time they would need to take off due to illness, their medications, or their doctor appointments.
Career counseling that focuses on their abilities could help these veterans build their self-esteem and recognize what they are capable of doing, particularly with appropriate supports.

- **Understanding their own disability**
  Some veterans feel that they would form better relationships and be more successful with their daily routines if they better understood their own psychological problems. They would like the opportunity to meet with a psychologist or other professional at the time of retirement from the military who can educate them about PTSD and/or TBI and how they can control their behavior in different situations. Some believe that understanding their injuries and trauma through therapy would help them transition more effectively. Others feel that asking for help or receiving help is a sign of weakness. Their military training emphasized succeeding through self-reliance. Both psychological and career counselors need to help veterans overcome feeling ashamed about the problems they face and their reluctance to ask for help so that they can be successful.

- **Education about legal rights and entitled benefits**
  Many veterans believe that employers will not hire them if they disclose information about their disabilities and the supports that may benefit them on the job. Some believe they cannot be hired for the specific type of work they would prefer to do, while others recounted instances of being denied employment due to medication they are taking or their type of injury or disability. Some said they are concerned about the stigma of PTSD if an employer knows they are a wounded veteran and they show no signs of having a physical disability, or if an employer asks during an interview about their disability. They are concerned about being seen as unstable or “trigger-happy.” Thus, it is crucial to educate veterans and employers about veterans’ rights and the benefits to which they are legally entitled to in the civilian workforce.

- **Assistance in translating military experience into civilian workforce**
  The majority of veterans interviewed expressed interest in receiving support with the job search process, including translating the skills they gained in the military to the civilian workforce. Some veterans said the assistance they had received with translating their military experience was
not useful because it did not take their career interests into account and typically focused on hard skills such as mechanical work or operating heavy equipment. Veterans who advanced into leadership positions in the military did not want to be told that they could only gain entry-level jobs requiring physical labor. This type of assistance is provided in a generic, one-size-fits-all manner based on occupational specialties in the military. Veterans report a desire for career assistance that is customized to their particular experience and interests.

- **Education and occupational certifications and credentials for military experience**
  Many veterans find that they cannot obtain a job at the level of responsibility or skill that they had in the military because they do not have a college degree. Further, employers do not understand or recognize how their military experience translates into the civilian job they are seeking. As noted in the section on career interests, many veterans pursue a college degree in order to achieve their career goals. But, in the meantime, they want to work in a position that matches their experience and skills. This is often the case when a veteran has managed soldiers in the military but cannot obtain a similar manager-level position in the civilian sector. The veterans could benefit from the development of a system in which the military bestows them with certificates or credentials that are meaningful to employers in the civilian sector. Similarly, the military is in the process of beginning to work with institutions of higher education to develop a system by which veterans can earn credits for military experience equivalent to what they would learn in the classroom; this work has yet to come fully to fruition.

- **Assistance with identifying appropriate job opportunities**
  Veterans also reported wanting more support with identifying job opportunities and preparing for job interviews. They want the opportunity to attend job fairs for transitioning soldiers before they officially retire from the military, so that they might secure a job prior to their military retirement.

- **Customized job interview training and practice**
  The veterans expressed a need for job interview training and practice that is customized for people with PTSD or TBI. Such interviewing assistance would recognize the difficulties many of these veterans face dealing with stressful situations and interacting with people who appear to be challenging
them. Some veterans feel they cannot obtain a job because they cannot be successful in an interview due to anxiety and memory issues. In some cases, the need for an advocate or facilitator at various stages so that the conditions are set properly for the veteran to be hired was evident.

- **Opportunities for social interaction practice**
  Some veterans spoke about the need for opportunities for social interaction in order to prepare themselves for dealing with people in the workplace, including coworkers and customers. These veterans feel anxious about daily interactions with people outside of the military environment. Due to their traumatic experiences in the military and subsequent PTSD and TBI, they find it difficult to trust and socialize with people whom they do not know. Some veterans mentioned that the counseling they were receiving was helping them with this issue. Others were appreciative of opportunities they and their families had to take part in social or recreational activities with other veterans and their families. These events provide a non-threatening atmosphere in which the veterans can begin the process of socializing with unfamiliar people.

- **Peer-to-peer mentoring program**
  Veterans were largely supportive of the idea of a mentoring program designed to help them learn how to deal with issues related to their mental and physical health, including issues regarding transitioning into the civilian workforce. Retiring veterans could be paired with peers who are further along in the transition process and understand their issues. These mentors and mentees could serve as a support system for each other and fill a gap for veterans who do not seek professional counseling services. Many veterans were also interested in joining online support and networking forums where they could connect with fellow veterans and post questions related to healthcare or other issues. This would facilitate forming friendships with veterans around the country and provide access to advice from those who had been through similar experiences.

vi. **Trends Regarding Ideal Work Environments for Veterans with TBI or PTSD**

Based on this analysis, there are no ideal positions or occupations for veterans based either on their veteran or disability status. Experience in the field suggests that disability requires greater
flexibility and individualization of planning and support provision, and anything that suggests a likely shortcut to fully understanding an individual will compromise the quality of the services and supports offered to them. Therefore, the trends in employment conditions identified below should be accompanied by the recognition that any services and supports, along with any large-scale employment initiatives, must be conducted in a fashion that respects and considers the nature of each veteran’s individual goals.

The following trends regarding ideal work environments were drawn from veterans’ responses to the types of occupations they have previously pursued and would wish to pursue in the future. Their responses regarding what they wanted from their careers, and data gathered on the types of services and supports they would require to be successful include:

- **A clear structure of leadership and advancement**

  Veterans repeatedly expressed the desire to be involved in occupations that offered clear paths to advancement, along with a clear structure of management and leadership. Many veterans expressed the desire to take on leadership roles in their post-military careers, and expressed frustration that their leadership in the military did not translate into the prerequisites to take on leadership roles in civilian careers. Beyond the simple ambition for advancement, research also suggests a desire for the clarity of the military career, in contrast to the often more nebulous nature of management and leadership in civilian careers. For example, it is not at all uncommon in the civilian workplace that an employee might take direction from multiple managers within an organization; but this research suggests that veterans typically seek working environments where their mandate will be more clearly defined, with less potential of contradiction and uncertainty from management and leadership. While not all returning veterans want a military culture, a paternalistic employer and transparent career process is a common theme. In addition, developing a culture that veterans will appreciate is often found in defense companies where there is an affinity for and recognition of veterans attributes.

- **Presence of other veterans on staff and in leadership**
Veterans frequently expressed the desire to work with and for other veterans. This likely reflects a desire to work with others who understand and can promote the culture and nuance of the military life. Also, many veterans noted the desire for mentor relationships with other veterans who had more experience in transitioning, and could offer them guidance and support in their own process. Having more veterans on staff and in leadership would allow companies to offer this internally, as a ‘natural support’. Further, having more veterans on staff and in leadership would promote environment features that would make veterans more at ease in the company, such as the clarity of management and advancement cited above.

• The need for flexible work arrangements
Many of the supports that veterans told us they believed would contribute to their success would be most easily accomplished in companies that promote flexible work arrangements, or management policies that allow for individualized support to staff, without compromising the company’s goals, values, or economic needs. For example, veterans’ desire for training that accommodated PTSD and TBI could best be accomplished in a company that offered a range of options to staff in training. Furthermore, veterans’ concerns about their need to schedule doctor’s appointments, sick leave, or other time off are easier to accommodate in a company with a flexible leave policy, or where telecommuting and flexible schedules are commonly accepted policies. Access to medical and mental health care, perhaps through Employee Assistance Programs that understand veterans benefits such as TRICARE and the DVA and are generally responsive because of being on or near-site also seem crucial employer supports.

As an aside, this trend may seem at odds with the earlier observation that veterans are more comfortable with clear management structures. However, these trends are not in conflict, and may be mutually supportive. The presence of flexible work policies in a company simply allows for better responsiveness to each individual employee’s needs; it does not suggest an uncertain management structure. Additionally, the military is close-knit, and operates together sometimes 24hrs/day. As a result, they are accustomed to being known to their leaders, having their leaders know their marital status, and having concern
for housing, health and welfare in ways not customary in the
civilian world. So, they actually can be made comfortable with
leaders they trust knowing them well, and they expect the
organization to care about their personal and familial welfare as
well as their careers.

d. Change Over Time

During this analysis, veterans’ current employment or educational
interests were compared to their past experience and goals and
the types of jobs for which the veterans were prepared. Overall,
about a third of the veterans did not identify a goal from an earlier
point in their lives, either pre-service or pre-injury. Many of them
had worked in retail, food service, or construction jobs and joined
the military because they felt it offered better opportunities than
the jobs they were able to obtain, but they had no clearly defined
career goals at the time of enlisting. About two-thirds of the
veterans had identified their employment or career goals prior to
their injury. As a group, there are some similarities in the types
of career goals the veterans held in the past compared to those
currently held. The most common past goal, held by 21 percent
of the veterans, was a career in the protective services, followed
by interests in healthcare positions and business management or
operations positions (Table 6).

Table 6.

Past Broad Occupational Interests of Veterans in the
Analysis Sample
Note: Veterans may have identified more than one past goal.

There have been significant shifts in the career goals of the veterans over time. More than three-quarters (77%) of the veterans who identified an earlier goal have had a change in career goals or interests. There are no consistent patterns in how goals change, e.g., one common goal changing to another common goal. However, some have shied away from pursuing protective service careers, with the percentage of veterans interested in law enforcement declining from 21 to 15 percent. Additionally, an examination of whether the veterans’ current career interests varied by the amount of time that they had been out of the military revealed that veterans who had been retired for less than a year were much more likely than those who had been retired for a longer period of time to express interest in protective service jobs and careers. This may be linked to entry-level position disappointments, or to a greater understanding of their physical and psychological limitations. This underscores early and more competent career explorations processes and support. Veterans’ reasons for changing their goals from protective services to something else include the belief that they cannot handle the physical aspects of the work and a desire to do work that does not involve carrying a gun and the risk inherent in police work.
While the overall percentage of veterans interested in healthcare careers remained the same over time, it masks a significant amount of movement in and out of the field. Only one veteran expressed interest in a healthcare career both before and after sustaining his injury. The other veterans who were currently interested in healthcare either did not have an earlier goal or were previously interested in other fields, such as engineering, becoming a police officer, or computer science. Typically, the veterans who abandoned healthcare as a goal said that after their military experience they no longer wanted the stress or exposure to trauma that comes with working in this field. These veterans’ interests have turned to a variety of fields but the most common is counseling or advocacy on behalf of other veterans.

The data reveals that there has been increased interest in careers in management and business or financial operations. Of the veterans now interested in these positions, about half did not identify an earlier goal and those who did had interests spanning most of the occupational categories. As noted earlier, many veterans expressing interest in management feel that their military experience has prepared them for this work. Only two veterans had business operations goals both before and after sustaining their injury. Those who were no longer interested in business management moved into multiple fields; one trend was movement into counseling or teaching.

For nearly all of the veterans currently interested in computer occupations, this represents a change in goals. Previous goals included becoming a police officer or working in healthcare, but after their experience in the military, they have decided to pursue less physical and less stressful employment. The few veterans going into engineering careers are evenly divided between those for whom this is a change in goal and those for whom engineering was also their earlier goal.

A greater number of veterans expressed interest in counseling, social work, and teaching after their military experiences than did before their injuries. For most of these veterans, this represents a change in their goal. As noted, many veterans were previously

Many veterans expressed the desire to take on leadership roles in their post-military careers, and expressed frustration that their leadership in the military did not seem to qualify them for leadership roles in civilian careers.
interested in healthcare, protective service, and business management, but after their military experience and injuries they decided to pursue counseling or teaching for a combination of reasons. Those reasons included the veterans’ perception that they could no longer be successful at their former goals due to their physical or mental health, the appeal of working in less stressful environments, and the desire to do work where they could help others and make a difference in other people’s lives.
Finally, veterans’ past employment and educational experiences, both within and outside of the military, were examined to understand what types of work the veterans are prepared for and to what extent they have experience related to their current interests or goals. Table 7 presents the most common types of work experience and skills that the veterans have gained from their past and current jobs. As is to be expected, some of the most common types of skills or experiences that the veterans have are those gained during their military career. Most of the past management and business operations experiences the veterans cited were obtained in the military, primarily among NCOs who said they were responsible for handling personnel issues, logistics, supply and inventory, and for training and supervising soldiers.
Many of those who have experience as mechanics gained that experience in the military, and many of those who have past healthcare experience were medics in the military. A few veterans mentioned gaining clerical skills, such as word processing, from their military experience.

Some of the other more common types of work experience veterans have came from jobs they held prior to joining the military or jobs they took after retiring from the military in order to earn needed income, including retail, food service, construction, truck driving, warehouse, and customer service work. Many of these past experiences were in lower-skilled, lower-paying jobs that are not aligned with the veterans’ current employment or career interests. Few veterans reported past experience in the counseling, teaching, engineering, or computer occupations in which they are now interested.

However, given the amount of change in the veterans’ goals since sustaining injuries in the military, it is not surprising that many do not currently have experience related to their goals or the education needed to pursue their employment interests. About half of the veterans had no experience related to their current career interests. About a quarter had experience that was related to their interests but was at a lower level or had a different focus. Only one quarter of the veterans had experience, either past or current, performing the work they identified as their current career interest. More than three-quarters of the veterans did not have the education required to pursue their current goals or interests. As noted earlier, nearly half were currently attending school and another 20 percent stated that they planned to go to school or were interested in doing so. Simply said, most do not articulate having the heuristics to self-navigate such a significant career change.

Veterans interested in management or business and financial operations were the most likely to cite past experience related to their future goals. This includes people who had worked in some capacity in operations and whose goal was to advance in their field. As noted, much of the management and operations experience the veterans cited was gained during their time in the military, and they may need assistance translating this experience and making the transition to management and operations positions in the civilian workplace.
The other area where the veterans’ career interests were most likely to match their experience and skills was installation, maintenance, and repair, although only a small number of veterans expressed interest in this field of work. Veterans interested in computer repair or networking were among the least likely to have previous formal work experience in their chosen field, although some mentioned tinkering with computers as a hobby or for personal use. Some of the veterans interested in engineering had related experience but not at the level of responsibility they now sought. All of the veterans interested in computer networking or engineering were going to college (or had just finished a degree) for these fields.

Veterans interested in the healthcare field are evenly split between those who have no related experience and those who have some experience in healthcare, though not necessarily at the level they are seeking, including those who have worked as medical assistants, certified nursing assistants, or medics in the military. All but one are either pursuing or will need to pursue further education in order to achieve their goals.

Veterans interested in protective service occupations are also divided between those who have no related experience and those who either have experience doing the job in which they are interested in or experience that is related but at a lower level than the position they want. A third of the veterans interested in this field were currently attending school for a variety of degrees, including criminal justice, psychology, computer forensics, and government administration.

Most of the veterans interested in counseling, social work, or advocacy did not have related experience in this field. A couple felt that their roles in the military as leaders and mentors to other soldiers had prepared them for this type of work. Most were either currently attending college or planned to do so for a variety of degrees, including family studies, human development, psychology, social work, behavioral science, and business administration. Similarly, most of the veterans interested in teaching did not have previous experience doing so, and all but one was currently attending college in order to pursue this goal.
e. Role and Needs of the Family

i. Introduction

Veterans’ families often have a significant role in the veteran’s care, career planning, and long-term success. In turn, the family is significantly impacted by the disability status of the veteran, including the change in their needs, their contribution to the family unit, and—in some cases—the nature of their personal interactions. For this reason the Return to Careers project interviewed veteran spouses and other family members. The relevant findings are described in this coming section.

ii. The Need for VA Provided In-Home Medical Care

While there are certain kinds of care that veterans’ families may be uniquely situated to provide, there are also certain kinds of care that families should not have to provide; chief among them is wound care. We learned that spouses and other family members (including children when spouses were unavailable) often were responsible for cleansing wounds and changing a veteran’s bandages when the veteran transitioned from inpatient to outpatient care. Furthermore, in the absence of an in-home care provider, family members had to assist the veteran in daily hygiene tasks such as going to the toilet and bathing. While the researchers recognize this finding may seem impertinent to the project’s primary interest in employment, the concern was so frequently named as a primary issue of support, it would have been inaccurate to not make clear its’ relevance. In whatever way a family—the most basic of supports—is put at risk, the veteran’s ability to thrive is jeopardized.

Both veterans and family members reported that the shift from emotional support provider to medical care provider significantly affected veteran and family member relationships. Veterans described the shame and humiliation they felt when their young children had to help them undress to use the bathroom. Spouses described the frustration and resentment they felt when their schedules had to revolve around irrigating deep tissue wounds and dressing them with ointments.
and bandages to stave off infection and maintain proper healing of the veteran’s injuries. Taken with the difficulty of managing childcare and addressing any psychiatric symptoms, this added burden of medical care for the veteran can quickly become overwhelming. It seems absolutely clear that if a veteran’s injuries require intensive and constant in-home medical care, then the veteran should be provided with appropriate in-home medical support by the VA instead of by their children and spouses. If this kind of support were available, it would remove one of the many challenges veterans face when they return home.

iii. The Need for Consistent VA Appointments

Veterans reported tremendous frustration around the difficulty of securing regularly scheduled appointments with VA providers. Most veterans we interviewed said that at every appointment with a VA provider, even weekly appointments, the follow-up appointment was scheduled for a different time or day of the week. This is not only an inconvenience for veterans, especially veterans who are returning to work or school, but it is also a tremendous inconvenience for veterans’ family members who find themselves in the role of transportation provider. Spouses reported having to juggle a new schedule week to week to accommodate the constantly changing schedule of VA appointments and some spouses actually lost or quit their jobs because they were unable to both work and escort the veteran to his or her appointments.

The inconsistency of VA scheduling causes family members further stress and often forces them to make significant sacrifices. For these reasons, we recommend that in addition to consistent scheduling (e.g. a weekly appointment at the same time on the same day of the week), that the VA also provide reliable transportation for veterans to and from their appointments, thereby relieving veterans’ family members of their escorting and chauffeuring duties.

Many veterans cited their family members’ lack of understanding of PTSD and TBI as a primary source of domestic conflict and specifically identified this lack of understanding as a root cause for divorce and separation.
iv. The Need for VA-Provided Counseling for Families of Veterans with PTSD/TBI

Although the majority of the veterans we interviewed were receiving therapy and counseling through the VA, no spouse we spoke with was receiving therapy or counseling anywhere. In virtually every family member interview, spouses indicated that they felt they would benefit tremendously from having access to their own counselor or therapist to have a safe space to voice their personal difficulties of reintegrating as a family. Additionally, family members and veterans often cited the need for counseling for their children (especially teenage children) as the family worked on reintegrating. In several cases, interviewees indicated that family members had engaged in self-harm and contemplated or attempted suicide, yet only the veteran was receiving mental health treatment. Several of the spouse-veteran couples we interviewed had sought marriage counseling outside of the DVA—the DVA does not, at this time, offer couples counseling—and found that it was helpful. Many more families reported that they would like to try couples counseling, but they did not know how to access it, and even if they could access it, they were not sure they would have the financial resources to cover the cost of counseling, as well as the cost of childcare during the counseling sessions.

Based on how frequently we heard requests for family counseling and how dire the consequences can be in the absence of family counseling, we strongly recommend that the VA expand counseling options to include one-on-one therapy for spouses and children of recently returned veterans with PTSD/TBI and to include family therapy and couples counseling as well.

v. The Need for VA-Provided PTSD/TBI Education for Families

Many families first learn what PTSD is or what TBI is when their veteran family member comes home and tells them they’ve been diagnosed with PTSD or TBI. Veterans find themselves in the position of explaining to their families the complexities of a disability they’ve just been told that they have. Veterans and family members described how helpless they felt in those initial exchanges, and veterans described the difficulty of needing to defend the legitimacy of a mental health condition they themselves were still trying to understand.
The returning injured veteran already faces the challenge of reintegrating into a society rife with stereotypes and prejudicial fears associated with this diagnosis. The veteran’s family is not immune to this misinformation. Many veterans cited their family members’ lack of understanding of PTSD and TBI as a primary source of domestic conflict and specifically identified this lack of understanding as a root cause for divorce and separation. To avoid forcing veterans into the role of PTSD or TBI expert and liaison, and to empower family members to learn about PTSD and TBI on their own, we strongly recommend that the VA provide education to family members on PTSD and TBI. Ideally, this education would take place in a group setting and be specifically for spouses so that they could speak candidly with one another and ask questions freely of experts without the veteran present.

If there is sufficient interest, NOD would also recommend a support group for family members of veterans recently diagnosed with TBI or severe PTSD. Many spouses reported frustrations with the changes brought about in their families upon the homecoming of the veteran with TBI or PTSD. Spouses reported not wanting to take their frustration out on the veteran but said they had no one else with whom they could work through those frustrations. We believe there may be an opportunity to try a peer support model for spouses. Family members of veterans may be particularly comfortable with peer support in that within the military, families moving from one military installation to another (PCSing) are typically paired with a sponsor family in their destination so that together they can work through the process of moving and transitioning. We believe that positive previous experience with peer support makes a family support group worth an attempt.

In addition, both veterans and spouses expressed concern over their children’s reactions to the veteran’s PTSD or TBI. Parents often expressed the desire for their children to have PTSD and TBI explained to them by a third-party in a way that might make sense to a child as opposed to an adult (i.e. in plain language, with clear examples of how it affects families). When children were very young (five years old and younger), parents seemed relatively unconcerned about their children’s awareness of or curiosity about PTSD and TBI. But, for parents of older children and teenagers, veterans and

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NOD would recommend a support group for family members of veterans recently diagnosed with TBI or severe PTSD.
their spouses expressed a great deal of concern about the impact of PTSD/TBI on veteran-child relationships (e.g. “Dad always forgets to pick me up from school because he doesn’t love me” instead of “Dad has TBI and so his memory is impaired and sometimes that means he doesn’t pick me up from school on time”).

Based on parents’ concerns, we recommend that the VA develop specific materials for children of different ages that effectively explain PTSD/TBI and the ways in which it can affect families. One family we interviewed suggested the creation of an interactive website or web-based game targeting different age groups that explains PTSD and TBI to children of military families. Further, we would suggest the VA develop materials to assist parents with broaching the subject of PTSD and TBI with their children and that the VA make experts available to meet with families in-person (just parents or parents and children) to address PTSD and TBI for families with children.
V. EMPLOYER RESEARCH

a. Introduction

The following research of the demand side (employers) was conducted in two stages; first, as interviews with leadership from companies contracting with the Department of Defense, and the second as statistical research on occupational and hiring trends existing within these contracts. This section is designed to provide insight into the potential for these contractors acting as appropriate sources of employment for returning veterans with PTSD and TBI as well as the challenges and potential of employment initiatives specifically targeting veterans with PTSD and TBI. The work has focused on DOD contractors in accordance with the funder’s interest in what seems to be a promising potential fit between a federal agency that supports the military and the veterans that have returned from their wars with injuries and the need for employment.

b. Overview of DOD Contractor Interviews

The Return to Careers project conducted a series of qualitative interviews with representatives from DOD contractors from a variety of industries, sizes and locations. These interviews sought to understand:

- Roles occupied by veterans (professional, entry level, managerial, and leadership)
- Experience in hiring veterans/number of veterans with and without disabilities currently on staff
- Challenges experienced by the company in hiring and retaining veterans
- Use of veteran-Serving organizations for sourcing and support
- Provision of formal and informal accommodations (adaptive equipment, flexible work arrangement, natural supports)
- Successes in employing veterans

*Please also see the protocol used for these interviews, included as Appendix 1.

i. Procedure and Challenges of DOD Contractor Interviews

Research staff contacted more than 100 DOD contractors through the primary contact listed in their federal contract records. Only
nine companies responded to these requests, even after multiple calls to each company.

Unsurprisingly, most respondents provided primarily ‘safe’ answers, that is, answers that protected the interest of the company as a federal contractor. Presumably, this is a consequence of the respondent’s knowledge that they would be expected to support diverse staff (including veterans with and without disabilities) as federal contractors.

Further, few respondents either had access to, or were willing to share, solid figures of the number of employed veterans with and without disabilities. Here again, this is not surprising, but it makes formal trends harder to establish. In spite of these challenges, this minor segment of our efforts yielded a number of interesting observations and trends.

c. Table 8.

**Summary of Company Characteristics and Veteran Hiring Practices**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location:</th>
<th>Companies were evenly mixed between rural and urban locations, some with multiple locations in a mix of rural and urban areas</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Company Size:</td>
<td>Ranged from 5 to 2200 employees, with the average size between 50 and 100 employees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industries:</td>
<td>Plumbing/HVAC, Aerodynamics, Training, Research (Military Medical), Manufacturing (MRE’s), Aerospace Engineering, Renewable Energy, Information Technology, Biotech</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job Settings:</td>
<td>Office based, factory, laboratory, field work (varied, with some in labor and dirt intensive conditions, warehouses, telecommuting/home office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Veterans Hired:</td>
<td>All companies confirmed at least a small percentage of veteran hires; some confirmed that a number of veterans had disabilities. Answers ranged from a number (from 1-12 hires) to ‘some’ or ‘quite a few’ with no solid number to report.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Veteran Positions:</td>
<td>Almost all were skilled professional positions, with at least a handful of senior management positions. There was not a trend of veterans in a disproportionately higher percentage of low-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
level positions. In fact, Veterans seemed to fill a disproportionately lower number of these.

i. **Summary of Trends and Findings from DOD Contractor Interviews**

- **Veterans with high-level skill sets are the most prevalent hires for these contractors.**
  
  Very few of the companies interviewed spoke of veterans in entry-level positions. In fact, very few entry-level positions seemed to exist within the work conducted by these companies. Some had administrative and manufacturing staff, but otherwise, the vast majority of positions required formal experience ranging from certified plumbing and HVAC, to information technology, biochemical engineers, engineering, human resources, and management. No trend was detected whereby either veterans or veterans with disabilities were statistically more prevalent in lower-skill positions.

- **None of the companies formally or specifically seek to recruit veterans.**
  
  Every respondent interviewed reported that, though it was often beneficial to them as DOD contractors to have veterans on staff, they did not actively seek to recruit veterans. Most respondents took pains to state that they sought only the most qualified person for each position, and, on that basis, would not hesitate to hire a veteran with or without a disability who was the most qualified applicant.

- **None of the companies interviewed engage veteran-serving organizations for either candidate sourcing or support of candidates hired.**
  
  Some respondents stated that they were aware of such organizations, and would seek them out if the need arose. None reported that they use these organizations at present.

- **Flexible Work Arrangements are a common accommodation strategy.**
  
  A majority of the companies reported accommodating veterans’ health issues via flexible work strategies such as flexible scheduling and telecommuting. Others reported being able to be more expansive in their hiring and more efficient in their management by using semi-formal job restructuring techniques. Notably, in each case discussed, these strategies were first introduced as a means to address
a specific need or challenge faced by a veteran with a disability. Once having been introduced, however, they were expanded to general polices that all staff could avail themselves of, with the effect of increasing morale and efficiency. One company that introduced telecommuting as a means to accommodate a veteran’s health issue quickly expanded the policy to all staff.

- Companies made reference to peer support amongst staff as a means of ensuring the success of all staff with barriers to retention and success, including veterans.

Most companies made reference to a management structure which relied on managers being flexible with staff, and encouraging peer support amongst staff to maximize the performance of all. Of note, this strategy seemed to be used for all staff, in the recognition that every staff member could benefit from the support of others, and would be able to provide support around their own areas of particular capability.

- Companies do not see themselves as providing formal accommodations.

Even companies who provided what we would term as ‘accommodations’ in the form of job restructuring, flexible work arrangements and even adaptive and efficiency-enhancing equipment, denied providing formal accommodations. In some cases, they rejected this strategy as unnecessary based on their having ‘hired the right candidate for the job’. While this finding could be dismissed as an idiosyncrasy of language use, we believe it is significant. If companies regard ‘accommodations’ as a stop gap measure for poor performance or inappropriate job matching, despite actually providing accommodations in the name of improving the performance of already high-performing staff, workforce development support staff need to be cautious in how they communicate around this point.

- None of the companies interviewed believe that the veterans they hired had either PTSD or TBI.

Some respondents shared that it was entirely possible that some employees might have these disabilities, but none knew for certain.

- Most companies have civilians with disabilities on staff.

Furthermore, respondents in almost every case spoke avidly of their hiring and retaining civilians with disabilities, and of the steps they took to ensure their success. Again, they did not use the term ‘accommodations’ but made reference to
peer support, flexible work arrangements, and job modification strategies used to ensure the success of these candidates.

Conclusions: Based on the extremely small number of employers that we were able to gather data from and information reviewed from other resources, we conclude that there are several positive and negative trends in hiring veterans with disabilities.

Positive Trends

- Emphasis on hiring veterans with disabilities by the President and First Lady, on Capitol Hill, and among other military and civilian leadership has produced significant external pressure to hire veterans.
- Numerous employers have made veteran hiring a priority.

Negative Trends

- The rush to hire veterans with disabilities can bypass the needs of these veterans for support in the workplace, which may be necessary for long-term success.
- Hiring processes may not accommodate invisible injuries such as PTSD and/or TBI, which could cause the veteran not to interview as well as other candidates.

Companies reported that flexible work arrangements had been introduced to address a specific challenge faced by a veteran with a disability, but were ultimately implemented as general policy, thereby with the effect of increasing morale and efficiency.

**d. Summary of Trends from DOD Contractor Analysis**

What follows is a summary of trends in staffing needs for Department of Defense (DOD) contractors, including what could be found of the prevalence of various positions, the requirements of these positions and the conditions and environments of the work itself. As is noted at length in the methodology section, this information is not readily available, and thus has been derived from a variety of different sources. Therefore, this section is best viewed as a rough guide to these opportunities, rather than as an exact survey of statistical prevalence of various positions within DOD contractors.
Summaries of available positions have been ordered by their prominence as stated goals by veterans interviewed through the course of the study overall. In some cases (e.g., manufacturing), industries and job types were included that were not among the predominant interests of veterans because of the high number of opportunities reportedly available through DOD contractors.

\[\text{ii. Methodology}\]

Data regarding the types of jobs created by DOD contractors is not compiled in any single format, and thus is not readily available. Currently, there are no reports on employment information of DOD contractors. Contractors give estimates of jobs they will create or eliminate, but there is no monitoring or reporting of that data. The Department of Defense Contract Office, Defense Procurement Agency, Defense Contract Management Agency and the Federal Procurement Data System were contacted in search of this information and all responded that such information is not tracked at this time.

There is great debate over the value of this information and the need for creating transparency and accuracy regarding all government contractors. A bill in the House of Representatives, HR 1435\(^1\), proposes a mandate that DOD contractors report estimated number of jobs they will create or protect from cuts, report actual results, and be held accountable if estimations are inaccurate. This bill, which comes after multiple reports of fraud and misappropriation of funds, is currently in committee as of this writing.\(^2\)

Transparency information regarding Economic Recovery and Stimulus Act contract awards is available at [www.recovery.gov](http://www.recovery.gov), which lists contracts awarded by agency, funds awarded, jobs created/saved and contractors. Additional information is provided about the types of jobs and number of jobs in each type. This includes information on $24 billion in contracts for 2010, which


represents six percent of DOD’s $368 billion 2010 total estimated budget for contracts.³ It is important to note that Recovery funds were specifically slated for repair, renovation, and improvements. As such, the industries awarded funds do not represent the wide scope of all industries that receive DOD contracts.

To gain a more complete picture of jobs created by DOD contractors, eight months of awarded contracts (December 2010 through August 2011), were reviewed⁴ to determine the type of company, corporate culture, type of work done, job openings, job requirements and responsibilities, desired skills, training availability, and education requirements. Additionally, archives of newspapers in cities and states with high number of DOD contracts awarded were reviewed to gather more information about the impact of the contracts on the local job market, types of people having successful employment outcomes as a result of the contracts, additional information about corporate culture, environment, and setting of work being done. States researched were California, Texas, North Carolina, Wisconsin, Virginia, Maryland, Georgia, Florida, New York, Hawaii, Alaska, Washington, Massachusetts and Colorado.

After this review, certain trends became evident; however, there are still glaring gaps in information regarding the jobs themselves: requirements, conditions, culture, and environment. The Bureau of Labor Statistics has detailed information regarding every industry: the types of jobs in the industry, average skill/experience requirements, work conditions, typical job requirements, and potential risks involved in the job. Their information is gathered from national surveys of employers and employees and is published in the Occupational Outlook Handbook released every two years.⁵ While this information is not specific to

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DOD contractors, it does give a representation of what could be expected in specific jobs and specific types of work.

By aligning this data, primarily that which is available on the websites of DOD contractors and the information available in the Occupational Outlook Handbook, it becomes possible to construct a rough picture of the trends in the kinds and prevalence of various jobs available through DOD contractors.

### iii. Prevalence and Types of Employment Opportunities

DOD contracts out for work that provides: supplies, management and infrastructure to four branches of the military, over three million employees, 539,000 facilities, 15,800 aircraft and 500 ships. The needs of the DOD are similar in scope and scale to that of a small country. Contracts are needed for a broad range of things such as agriculture, transportation, vehicle manufacturing, and HVAC repair. DOD contractors offer seemingly limitless options for types of employment.

The top 20 DOD contractors employ hundreds of thousands of employees from secretaries to factory workers to executives. Satellite offices are located around the world, offering a variety of jobs including secretarial, project management, sales, engineering, and development, to name only a few. Veterans that have foreign language skills or greater understanding of a particular local culture will find these traits desired by businesses, particularly in their international locations.

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The top ten contractors also have project areas in which they are conducting additional research or consumer support. These locations include areas of current conflict (Iraq, Afghanistan, and other areas of the Middle East) as well as remote locations like Antarctica. In these locations, there are openings in as wide a range of jobs as would be typical of a small, nearly self-sufficient town. Small cities are thus created, and the contractors must provide for all areas of life of their employees, in addition to meeting the central purpose of the contract itself. In some cases, conditions in these environments can be intense. Climate is extreme, work is often long and demanding because staff is limited. While presenting numerous physical and psychological challenges for potential employees, these settings tend to create tight knit communities. While businesses are eager to fill these positions and are pushing for veterans to be interested in these positions, they represent a small portion of the overall total jobs offered by these contractors.

Employee candidates with military experience, particularly with combat experience, are preferred. As these businesses design, create and manufacture products for the military, there is a need for specific and current data on military life and combat experience. When these products are ready for distribution, businesses need personnel to train others on how to use them. Trainers with military experience are better received than those without, thus businesses look for veterans with leadership experience. Many of these positions require security clearance.

Appendix 8 contains a detailed account of DOD contractor research findings, organized by job-type and delineating the relationship between veteran sample job preferences and contract-type workplace requirements and environment.

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Also, see endnote 1.
VI. DISCUSSION

a. Introduction

The following are the significant findings, next steps, and policy recommendations resulting from this research. Findings have been organized in part based on the priorities of the Institute for Economic Empowerment.

b. Background on Veteran Population nationally

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, over 530,000 of the veterans who have served in Iraq and Afghanistan report a service-connected disability, with more than 114,000 rated as 60% or more disabled by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).

Today’s veterans face new injuries. RAND estimates that due to repeated deployments and exposure to battlefield hazards, as many as one-third of Iraq/Afghanistan veterans will suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), or major depression. These conditions can cause significant transition challenges due to the lack of fully adequate support mechanisms. In view of the fact that as of 2010 2.4 million service members have deployed, and the VA estimates that 1.4 million have separated as veterans of OEF/OIF, as many as 500,000 to 800,000 OIF/OEF veterans may be impacted by PTSD or TBI in the years to come.

As can be seen in earlier generations of veterans with PTSD (notably, Vietnam era veterans) some lose traction in career efforts, experience multiple or unsuccessful employment episodes, or experience significant family and personal stressors. In too many cases, these are “at risk” families. In the worst cases, some descend into self-medication with drugs or alcohol, experience unemployment or underemployment, become homeless, or even commit suicide (the VA reports 18 veteran suicides a day).

In summary, this generation of disabled veterans faces a confusing array of helping agencies (public and private), each with limited ability to meet their needs.
limited ability to meet their needs. In addition, the civilian career world is often completely new to them. Most have known nothing but the federal, military employer, which is a highly structured and paternalistic. Many of them find it difficult to plan a career, enter and succeed at education, training, and work. One result is that veteran unemployment rates are nearly 40% higher than those of their peers who have not served.

c. Demographics and Distribution by Career Field, Rank, Age, and Experience

Based on data from NOD’s Wounded Warrior Career Program, the population of which mirrors the Army Wounded Warrior program, the following demographic information may be broadly indicative of the general veteran population:

**Characteristics of Veterans in NOD’s Wounded Warrior Career Program**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>93% Male / 7% Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racial Identifier</td>
<td>68% White / 14% Black / 12% Latino / 5% Other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Average is 33 years; 41% (21-29) / 40% (30-39) / 19% (40-57)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital Status</td>
<td>71% Married / 14% No Longer Married / 15% Never Married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>64% Have Children / 36% Have No Children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education Level</td>
<td>72% Have High School Diploma / 7% Have Associate’s Degrees / 10% Have Bachelor’s Degrees / 11% Have GEDs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disability Rating</td>
<td>53% have disability Ratings of 60% or Greater</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disability Type</td>
<td>• 66% have PTSD or TBI as a Primary Disability (50% PTSD/16%TBI)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Military Rank</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------</td>
<td>---------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 75% have PTSD or TBI as a Primary or Secondary Disability</td>
<td>6% E-1 to E-3 / 26% E-4 / 35% E-5 / 19% E-6 / 9% E-7 to E-9 / 5% Officers or Warrant Officers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Other Primary Disabilities Include: 10% Amputations / 9% Other / 4% Paralysis / 3% Extremity Impairment / 3% Spinal Injury / 3% Blindness / 2% Burns</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While the numbers of disabled veterans may appear large and growing (particularly with regard to RAND’s estimates), in the scheme of the US workforce, the numbers are relatively small. The broad ranges of rank, age, previous career fields, and career interests suggest that Wounded Warriors may be best incorporated into organizations where their skills and experiences can be part of a larger and diverse workforce. Additionally, this population is interested in a supportive culture, an orientation to the civilian workplace, the ability to advance in their careers, clear career paths, and they often state a desire to be part of an organization with a clear mission.

d. Comparison of Veterans’ Support Needs and Career Preferences to Demand-Side Research Outcomes

i. General Trends within the Return to Careers Sample

While there are prominent trends in veterans’ career preferences, they are not clear enough that it would be advisable to state that veterans and/or veterans with disabilities have predictable preferences for certain types of occupations. Rather, we have identified a number of trends in terms of the likely needed supports (identified at length in the next section), and some trends in the employment conditions that veterans tend to prefer.

The most prominent trends of veteran preferences and support need for employment included:
• Capacity for flexibility, such as working hours and working environment;
• Clear process for management;
• Clear and explicit structure for advancement; and
• The presence of other veterans in management and leadership.

Other trends—e.g., a preference for working outside, a preference for more technical skills, etc.—were too variable to state as likely predictors.

ii. Suitability of DOD Contractors as a ‘Target Market” for Veteran Employment

Based on the research above, it does not seem as though opportunities offered through DOD contractors are any more appropriate to veterans with disabilities than the sum of opportunities available in the labor market as a whole. Based on the data gathered in this report about these veterans’ employment preferences and the ideal conditions of their employment, it is possible that opportunities of interest to these veterans are less prevalent in the DOD contractors than in the marketplace as a whole. Of course, this doesn’t mean there are not suitable opportunities. While there is a great diversity of talent needs and working conditions supported in DOD contractors, this breadth and diversity would likely challenge a targeted hiring initiative. On the whole, it seems that the career areas of greatest interest to veterans are generally less available in these settings, and that the conditions of employment are often, though not always, ill-suited to the needs and preferences of the veterans we interviewed.

The seemingly worst-case scenario would be a veteran employment strategy that focused only on the prevalence of a certain job type (i.e. a demand-exclusive initiative), and not at all on the stated goals and preferences of veterans. Taking manufacturing as an example (where there is a seeming preponderance of opportunity, with no expressed interest on the part of veterans), to build a hiring initiative around only the demand side needs (job opportunities) would increase the quantity of jobs available to these veterans, while potentially limiting the diversity and quality of those opportunities. Based on our research, we feel it is important that any proposed hiring initiative not be seen to relegate veterans with disabilities to a limited range of opportunities.
Of course, by its very nature, the field of DOD contractors is far too broad to be dismissed out of hand for the opportunity it represents for returning veterans. Beyond the diversity of need and large number of opportunities, DOD contractors have many reasons to be more interested in veteran hires than do many other businesses. Furthermore, with a frequent close proximity to the military, employment with these companies may often allow veterans to benefit from many of the aspects of a military career that were their reasons for choosing it in the first place.

Also, based on the limited interviews conducted with leadership from these contractors, they seem to have adopted—as a matter of good business practice—a number of the strategies that have been proven to be successful supports for candidates and employees with barriers to success, including job-restructuring, flexible work arrangements, and peer support strategies. Though the business often communicates about them differently than a workforce development professional would, the essential strategies are the same.

The fact that the businesses interviewed tend to hire veterans fairly consistently without making a concerted effort to do so suggests that there is an untapped potential for increased veteran hiring in businesses that might be ‘employers of choice’ for veterans with and without disabilities.

Finally, the lack of relationships with veteran-serving organizations suggests another possible area of untapped potential. If these companies could form meaningful partnerships with these organizations or, for that matter, with any organization that could act as a reliable source of appropriate veteran talent, the potential of this market as employers of veterans could be realized to a far greater extent.

i. **Recommendations and Next Steps for DOD Contractor Engagement**

To actualize the potential of DOD contractors to act as employers of choice for veterans with significant disabilities, while
recognizing the great diversity of interest and need for support amongst veterans, we would recommend that the following steps be taken by those entities engaged in developing a successful system of career supports for veterans who return with TBI and/or PTSD:

- **A centralized ‘push’ for contractors to hire veterans with disabilities.**

  As is seen in OFCCP’s Section 4215, and given that we now feel certain that individualization of an employment circumstance for veterans with disabilities is required for success, it is unlikely that a wholly centralized effort—i.e., a recruitment or hiring program *managed* centrally—would be effective unless DOD approached the implementation based on a proven demonstration. It would then be key to implement it thoughtfully on a larger scale consistent with a targeted approach that meets DOD’s needs, workforce needs, and the ambitions of veterans. Different DOD contractors have different staffing and talent needs, and different veterans have different goals, interests and needs for support. It may be more immediately feasible for federal or centralized authorities to take on the role of information dissemination and, if possible, incentivizing the hiring of veterans. Information disseminated should include an easy means of making contact with local veteran-serving organizations and other agencies that would provide a link to career-seeking veterans with disabilities.

- **Provision of Tools to Local Veteran-Serving and Representing Agencies**

  A key area for capacity building would be to provide support to local veteran-serving organizations to increase their skill and capacity in servicing businesses, including DOD contractors. DOD contractors seem to have little contact with veteran-serving and other community-based organizations. Increasing the level of contact, and ensuring that these organizations are able to serve businesses and meet their needs is a further means of ensuring more significant hiring of veterans in these sectors. Additionally the DOD health care system, DVA health care system, and Federal and State Vocational Rehabilitation programs have a responsibility to this effort and could make it easier for
contractors to meet the veterans’ needs, as could State Departments of Labor.

**e. Current Unmet Support Needs**

**i. For Veterans**

Transition out of military service into civilian life is a crucial time period for veterans; especially for veterans with TBI and PTSD. In order for veterans to be successful with this transition, several supports need to be addressed:

- **Awareness, Education and Training about TBI and PTSD**
  Veterans need to gain an understanding about their disability and its impact on their lives, including employment. Connectivity to medical and rehabilitation professionals early on as well as modalities for ongoing care and support will begin this learning and self-awareness process and sustain it.

- **Intensive Vocational Evaluation**
  Veterans should be offered an intensive vocational evaluation that includes analysis of their military experience and transferable skills.

- **Improved Military Transition Assistance Program**
  Veterans with TBI and PTSD need a specialized transition assistance program, customized to their specific needs. Included in this program should be connectivity to intensive support services and programs, peer mentors, and education about their disability/legal rights and military benefits.

- **Workforce Development Services for Veterans with TBI and PTSD**
  Provision of direct connectivity to workforce development services that will assist veterans with:
  - Strengths-based and ability-focused career counseling.
  - Assistance with translating military experience into civilian jobs.
  - Intensive career exploration, job search, interviewing assistance, job development, and placement provided by a career counselor they can grow to trust. It is key that this resource does not become merely a part of a bureaucratic process as everything we have learned suggests the
development of a holistic, one-on-one support relationship.

- Ongoing job coaching and on the job consultation as needed.

- **Meaningful Education and Training Opportunities**
  Connect veterans to higher education institutions that offer occupational certifications and credentials for military experience.

### iii. For Families of Veterans

The key finding from interviews with families regarding unmet needs centered in the transition domain of the family’s experience.

- **Transition from Military Community**: spouses reported isolation and worry for their and their children’s loss of friends, community activities and camaraderie on base.
- **Lack of forthcoming information**: spouses reported that they felt excluded from transition preparation information and disappointed by the lack of proactive transition support.
- **Injury-specific education**: spouses reported that they would have benefited from receiving the same education that the veterans receive about the short and long-term impacts of their injury before coming home.

### iv. For Businesses

In order for businesses to succeed in hiring individuals with TBI and/or PTSD, businesses need to feel supported in this initiative. Below are the support needs derived from the employer interview analysis:

- **Awareness, Education and Training about TBI and PTSD**
  Businesses need to learn about the myths and facts of TBI and PTSD specifically in the context of the workplace.

- **Creating Business-Wide Commitment to Hiring Veterans with TBI and PTSD**
  Assist businesses with adopting a commitment to hiring veterans with TBI and PTSD, building a veteran-friendly workplace and creating internal workforce programs that make good business sense.

- **Connectivity to a Pipeline of Qualified Veterans, including Veterans with TBI and PTSD**
  Provide businesses with easy access to a pipeline of qualified job candidates that includes efficient coordination amongst
agencies and organizations that serve veterans with disabilities.

- **Assistance with Reasonable Accommodations**
  Provide businesses with an understanding about the array of reasonable accommodations, accessing accommodations resources, and implementing the accommodations into the workplace for individuals with TBI and PTSD

- **Assistance with Developing a Mentoring Program**
  Provide businesses with the tools and resources to build a meaningful, internal mentoring program that will benefit veterans.

- **Ongoing Support to Veterans with TBI and PTSD and the Business Itself**
  Ensure that both the veterans and businesses have access to ongoing support such as job coaching, accommodations consultation, and training needs.

The principal difference between veterans with PTSD and TBI and other individuals with PTSD and TBI generally is, of course, related to the veteran’s military experience, and the strengths and weaknesses of the infrastructure of support provided specifically to veterans.

A number of the policy recommendations found below specifically address changes that could be made to the programs and policies designed to support veterans. These changes would increase veterans’ self-sufficiency and access to career-directed services. Improvements to the Transition Assistance Program, as well as improvements to the services offered by the DVA, the DOD, and also those offered through community-based providers all fall under this heading. It is notable, by way of comparison, that many of the innovations made in the civilian disability services field—related to gains in supporting self-sufficiency, the Employment First conviction that support to return to work should always be available first, etc.—have yet to find their corollary in many veteran-serving agencies and organizations. For example, micro-lending, or flexible individualized accounts have been lauded as key for populations transitioning to community employment from jail or mental institutions but no such mechanism yet exists for veterans transitioning from military service.

A further difference is the extent to which the veteran identity comes into play in the types of services and supports that are most effective. For example, veterans express a desire to work in
settings with many other veterans in their management and employee peer groups. Veteran-to-veteran mentoring has been repeatedly shown to be effective, and to be a service that veterans seek out in their career search, and in their general transition to civilian life. While it is entirely inadvisable to relegate veterans to certain types of occupations or companies, this finding suggests that companies who have hired veterans and wish to hire more could benefit from marketing themselves as companies that support a ‘veteran-friendly’ workplace, and perhaps further ensure that veterans are prominent faces in their recruiting teams.

f. Policy Recommendations

- **Veterans with Disabilities Transition Services Should Shift from a ‘Medical Model’ to a Model Emphasizing Self-sufficiency:**
  Many of the services available to veterans, particularly early in their process of return, are built around a ‘medical model’ emphasizing medical care over self-sufficiency. Of course, medical care plays an extremely important role in the life and success of a returning veteran with a significant injury; but, balancing this care with the tools to assist the veteran toward self-sufficiency and transition to civilian competitive employment would be of great value.

- **Coordinated and Seamless Services for Veterans with TBI and PTSD Must be Developed:** There are already a wide variety of services for veterans in DVA, DOD, VR, and some public and private community agencies but most that do operate are not well coordinated nor advertised to veterans.

- **Higher Education Institutions Need the Flexibility to Work with Veterans in a Meaningful Manner**
  - Veterans could benefit from the development of a system in which the military bestows them with certificates or credentials that are comparable to those earned at accredited schools and equally meaningful to employers in the civilian sector.
  - Similarly, the military could work with institutions of higher education to develop a system by which veterans could earn credits for military experience equivalent to what they would learn in the classroom.
  - Higher education institutions need to make decisions about redefining the fundamental standards of a
program and consequently, how these standards can be accommodated for students with TBI or PTSD.

- Having a single point of contact within the office of veteran services on higher education campuses, well trained in veteran specific programs and how to assess when and how to make appropriate referrals for the veterans to appropriate services, is crucial.
- **Incentivize Federal Government and Contractors to Hire Veterans with TBI and PTSD**
  Various measures could be taken by the DOD to encourage hiring veterans with TBI and PTSD, to include incentivizing various workforce options including individualized hiring.
- **Implementation of Flexible Work Arrangement Policies within the Federal Government and for Contractors**
VII. CONCLUSION

The National Organization on Disability’s Return to Careers Project is an effort to better understand the process of recovery and re-entry to civilian life faced by veterans with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and/or Traumatic Brain Injury who are returning home from wars in Iraq and Afghanistan; and to help insure that these veterans find success in the career marketplace. Chronically unemployed and underemployed, these veterans often require specific supports to remove barriers and ensure success in the workforce. It is the goal of the Return to Careers project that—by identifying these supports and suggesting methods of delivery—these injured men and women who have served our country will indeed return to civilian life and embark on careers of personal and professional satisfaction.

VIII. APPENDICES

1. Interview Protocols: veteran, family member, service provider, educator and employer
2. Demographic Survey
3. List of Providers Interviewed
4. NOD Wounded Warriors to Careers Project Summary
5. Prevalence and Types of DOD Contractor Employment Opportunities, by Job Type
6. Comprehensive Literature Review
7. Specific Employers Named During Veteran Interviews