

## Despite support, veterans' unemployment high



Military veteran William Adcox speaks about the difficulties of finding work and re-integrating into society after enlistment Thursday at the Veteran's Career House in Biddeford. JEFF LAGASSE/JOURNAL TRIBUNE

*Some struggle with translating military skills into civilian jobs, while others scooped up by eager employers*

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The troop drawdown in the Middle East hit home this week, as a group of about 130 Marines came home to a welcoming ceremony in Brunswick after serving seven months in Afghanistan. But for those who have completed their military service, the question remains: Now what?

The government has many programs in place to help veterans tackle the task of searching for civilian jobs after their service ends, but as a group, veterans' unemployment numbers are well above average.

Dennis Wellman, veterans program manager with the Maine Department of Labor, said about 13 percent of Maine veterans are unemployed, compared to 7 percent of the general population. Each year, about 8,000 veterans go through the state's CareerCenters, said Wellman. He oversees 12 veterans representatives at the centers and helped host a New England-wide resources workshop for the returning troops this week.

When service members first come back, they are sent through a week-long program of transition assistance, he said, during which the CareerCenter staff help them identify employment resources.

Employers are "a lot more eager to hire veterans," said Wellman. "Anybody who's gone into the military is trainable, especially if they've been successful."

For some veterans, the transition is easier than others.

"When I got out of the service, I was a lost child," said William Adcox, a U.S. Navy veteran who completed his service in 1986.

After serving as a radar monitor in the Navy, Adcox said he found steady work at Eastland Shoe for 11 years, but its closure – combined with a divorce – sent his financial situation into a tailspin.

"I found work in minimum wage jobs," he said, "but before I knew it, I was trying to make ends meet and my living situation would be, 'if I pay the rent then I'm not eating.'"

Adcox found himself homeless for a while before he moved into the Veterans Career House in Biddeford, where he's getting his life back on track in a two-year program operated by Volunteers of America.

He recently found a job with Walmart in Biddeford, stocking shelves part-time, and is working toward finding a place of his own that he can afford with the help of a government housing subsidy.

"My work ethic is too high for me to be in the situation I was in," he said. "I didn't look for help. I didn't know how to."

Now Adcox has the support of the Career House staff and has also made use of the CareerCenter in Saco, online job search tools and job fairs, he said.

In contrast to Adcox's experience, U.S. Army Capt. John Dumas, a native of Alfred and 2002 Massabesic High School graduate, has been able to find steady work since his service ended.

Dumas found work at a financial firm in Boston soon after his four years of active duty were over and is now working in real estate in Portland.

"I got good feedback," he said. "People were appreciative of my service. They offered me a job pretty quickly."

Dumas said he took advantage of the Army's career services to rework his resume after coming back from a 13-month tour in Iraq, but still had two years of active duty stateside before serving out his four years in the Reserves.

"I knew what I wanted to do," he said.

While Dumas was looking for a change in occupation, one of the main difficulties some veterans have is translating their military experience into a civilian job resume.

"There are not a lot of jobs extremely applicable to what I had been doing: Leading soldiers in war," he said.

One of the tools the CareerCenter offers is an online program that translates veterans' military occupation specialty code into the civilian equivalent.

"For them to understand what skills they have that are transferable is difficult," said Rich Oberg, disabled veterans outreach program specialist with the Sanford CareerCenter. "A lot of times they don't understand how it translates to the civilian world."

Oberg recalled a recent Afghanistan combat veteran who saw that a job posting required "critical thinking" and wasn't sure if he qualified. The man was a radio operator who knew he would be targeted by the enemy so he would lay down and point his antenna to complete the transmission without getting killed, said Oberg. That's clearly some critical thinking at play, he said, and "when I

pointed it out, it made sense to him, but he couldn't see it before I did that."

When a veteran comes to the center, said Oberg, they meet with him one on one for an assessment of their skills and job readiness. They are then directed to workshops on resume building, interviews and job hunting.

Sanford CareerCenter Director Richard Freund said the center sees about 75 people each day, and 10 percent of those are veterans. For veterans, the center has a 50 percent placement rate, and of those, an 80 percent retention rate, measured within six months of employment, he said.

Employers looking for team players know that veterans "have played on a team," he said, and servicemen and women learn integrity and work ethic in the military and aren't part of a culture of calling out sick.

"For most employers, they become a very valuable asset," he said, and are particularly sought out by government agencies, Cianbro, Pratt & Whitney and other employers.

CareerCenters have employed veteran specialists for about a decade now, using federal grants, but still, veterans have the highest unemployment rate of any group, "and we don't have a handle as to why," said Oberg. "We feel that vets should be more employable."

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