

Preparing Our Veterans for Civilian Life in the Public Sector

By Monique M. Maldonado

MILITARY REDUCTIONS, through either voluntary or involuntary separation, has raised uncertainty for thousands of airmen in the U.S. Air Force. Four months ago, then-Acting Secretary of the Air Force Eric Fanning reported, "Over the next five years, the service needs to eliminate as many as 25,000 airmen slots, a reduction that's being driven by the mandatory budget cuts known as sequestration."

In 2013, the federal government experienced a prolonged shutdown and federal agencies experienced drastic reductions in their budgets as a result of sequestration's automatic cuts. It led to downsizing across all service departments of the military. Airmen already had been working more with less. Now, they were forced to be even more creative, working with the lowest resource levels the department had ever experienced. The transition of military members became even more important with the expected layoffs.

As individuals separate or retire from the military, how do they integrate into civilian society? Programs assist members in transitioning into the civilian workforce, but how smooth and successful are those transitions? Are we really taking care of our veterans? Are we restoring hope that they will be able to function and find work beyond the war zone?

According to *Stars and Stripes*, "Two-thirds of new veterans say they faced a difficult transition into civilian life...." This was attributed to the stagnant economy and high levels of unemployment. The process for voluntary and involuntary separation adds to this difficulty for airmen.

Take my situation. An active duty Air Force member, I was listed on the 2014 Air Force Retention Board, which meant that I was eligible for involuntary or voluntary separation due to my rank, time in service and influx of airmen in my career field.

In January 2014, I was notified that I could request to stay in the Air Force, but that a board would determine whether I could remain or be forced to separate. Fortunately, my name was removed from the list for this fiscal year, as my rank and experience were needed. I am relieved, but it does not mean I am safe next year. There still is a sense of panic, fear and ambiguity; no matter how many degrees or how much experience I have, if there are no jobs, there are no jobs.

Are Service Members Prepared?

Service members should not feel uncertain about entering civilian life if they are properly advised on transitioning out of the military. Services like the Transition Assistance Program, as explained on its website, was "established to meet the needs of separating service members during their period of transition into civilian life by offering job-search assistance and related services." Military members must participate in this mandatory program, usually 12 to six months prior to their separation or retirement.

Tom Tarantino, policy associate with Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, reported that military members were not getting the proper assistance when looking for jobs in the civilian sector. As a result, they did not feel prepared for the process. One can speculate about gaps in the system given recurring reports from airmen, marines, seamen, and soldiers who feel they are not ready to transition to civilian life.

What's Being Done?

Some state legislatures, like Alaska, have passed legislation to provide assistance to military members to transition into the civilian workforce. This legislation provides that trainings, certifications and other licensing or specialties earned in the military can be applied to resumes and applications for civilian positions.

In 2013, the Executive Office of the President provided guidance in a

document entitled, *The Fast Track to Civilian Employment: Streamlining Credentialing and Licensing for Service Members, Veterans, and their Spouses*. The guide identifies unique challenges that service members, veterans and spouses face when they are preparing qualifications for civilian employment. Under this guidance, President Obama established the Department of Defense Military Credentialing and Licensing Taskforce to "focus efforts on well-paying industries and occupations that have a high demand for skilled workers." The report concluded that 28 states have passed legislation on spousal licensing to make it easier for families to succeed in post-military life. This is a step in the right direction, but there should be consistency and stability across the states as veterans try to find work.

The Future of the Military and the Civilian Workforce

The transition stage is one of the most critical phases of starting a new chapter for airmen and other members of the

Armed Service branches. Following years of defending and protecting the U.S. Constitution, it is ironic that there is such ambiguity about the success of finding a job in civilian society. Job security once was a great advantage of the military, but that often seems to be a distant memory. When members separate or retire from the military, they often are young enough to have a second career. Many still have families to support. Helping veterans transition is not a matter of giving "special treatment" to service members. Rather, it provides certainty to those who put their lives on the line and made sacrifices for Americans' protection and freedom.

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minimal incentives are provided, the public service workforce can and will perform.

The Greek experience provides many lessons for civil servants in other countries, including the United States. Although they may not be facing the intense public scrutiny and criticism or dealing with an unsettling political, economic and social/cultural environment, strengthening the public service workforce comes down to the same leadership challenge: leading with and to the core of meaning. No matter how well intended, layering changes on any kind of social system without a fundamental understanding of human motivation is futile. Meaning

is the solution and the Ariadne's Thread that we have been looking for all along.

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