



A Conversation with Curtis L. Coy, Deputy Under Secretary for Economic Opportunity, Veterans Benefits Administration, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

As veterans separate or retire from the military, transitioning to civilian life can be hard. The federal government has the obligation to ensure that returning veterans have access to and use of hard-earned benefits that can ease this transition. With some one million veterans likely to separate or retire in the next five years and many young veterans unemployed, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs manages a portfolio of educational and job training services for eligible veterans to enhance their economic opportunity and successful transition.

How does the VA promote employment opportunities for veterans? What is the VA doing to enhance opportunities for veterans to obtain knowledge and skills to properly transition to civilian life? What programs provide opportunities for veterans to obtain, retain, and adapt a home? Curtis Coy, Deputy Under Secretary for Economic Opportunity, Veterans Benefits Administration, joined me on The Business of Government Hour to explore these questions and more. Here are some insights from our discussion. — Michael J. Keegan



On the Mission of VA's Office of Economic Opportunity

The office was created in 2011 within VA's Veterans Benefits Administration to consolidate different economic opportunity programs for veterans under a single office. There are three business lines: education service administers VA's education programs that provide education and training to eligible service members, veterans, and dependents; loan guaranty service provides oversight of the VA Guaranteed Home Loan Program and ensures veterans' rights are protected when purchasing a home under this program. We also have the vocational rehabilitation and employment (VR&E) service, which oversees programs that provide employment and independent living services including vocational counseling, job search assistance, and post-secondary training. Our portfolio of benefits and services is designed to enable both personal and economic success.

We do this with about 4,000 people located in about 56 VA regional offices across the country, as well as in the Philippines. Our budget for fiscal year 2014 is a bit over \$600 million. To give you a sense of what we are doing, in the last four years we've paid about \$35 billion in Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits to about a million beneficiaries. We have about 800 vocational rehabilitation and employment counselors throughout the country. We just guaranteed the 20 millionth home loan since the program was established in 1944, and those loans for the past 22 quarters have the lowest default rate of all cohorts across the country. You can see that our veterans take their home loans and financial responsibilities very seriously.

On the Strategic Priorities of VA's Office of Economic Opportunity

We've created three specific strategic goals. The first one is to promote employment opportunities for veterans. The second is to enhance opportunities for veterans to obtain knowledge and skills. Finally, we provide opportunities for veterans to obtain, retain, or adapt a home. Each goal has a host of [associated] programs. We want to build the foundation for veterans to succeed. For example, through our education and employment programs—GI Bill, VetSuccess on Campus, VR&E—we want to ensure that we're empowering veterans with the knowledge, skills, and opportunities they need to succeed in the 21st century.

We want to make sure that veterans are equipped with the tools they need to succeed in school ... that we're providing them the resources to ensure that they continue their education and ultimately graduate [and] gain meaningful employment. We're working with many different schools, veteran service organizations, community organizations, and other partners to ensure that our beneficiaries have access to the right information to make informed decisions.

I gave a keynote address to the Student Veterans of America Conference and my message was, in World War II, the GI Bill served about eight million of the 16 million veterans that served. They were called the greatest generation. I called this group in the audience the next greatest generation. We believe that the veterans of today are the engine that will get the economy moving.

On the Benefits of the Post-9/11 GI Bill

It is arguably the most extensive educational assistance authorization since the original Montgomery GI Bill in 1944. It's basically three pieces. One is tuition. Specifically, we pay for the veteran's tuition at public schools. There are some limitations for private schools. We provide up to a \$1,000 book stipend. Finally, we also provide a housing stipend for veterans. Combining these three benefits—tuition, books, or housing—veterans can focus on their schooling.

The Post-9/11 GI Bill provides 36 months of benefits; veterans have up to 15 years to use these benefits. The program increases accessibility to higher education for veterans and their dependents. A unique aspect of the Post-9/11 GI Bill is that veterans can provide some of those 36 months of benefits to their spouses and/or dependents. They have to make that election while still in the service. The GI Bill benefits have never been available to beneficiaries other than the veterans themselves, so that's key.



On the Principles of Excellence

In 2012 the president signed an executive order called the Principles of Excellence to ensure that federal military and veterans educational benefits programs are providing service members, veterans, spouses, and other family members with the information, support, and protections they deserve. It directs agencies to implement and promote compliance with the principles of excellence for educational institutions that interact with veterans. The Principles of Excellence are a set of guidelines with which institutions that receive federal funding, including the GI Bill, agree to comply. To date, we have about 6,000 schools that have agreed to adhere to them. Described broadly, the principles require schools to provide meaningful information about the financial cost and quality of the school. It prevents abusive and deceptive recruiting practices. It calls for them to provide high-quality academic and student support services.

On the Veterans Retraining Assistance Program (VRAP)

VRAP is a joint program between the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Department of Labor. This program provides 12 months of educational benefits to veterans between the ages of 35 and 60 who are unemployed and have no educational benefits. Today, 80% of unemployed veterans are over the age of 35. They may not be entitled to or may have exhausted benefits from either the Post-9/11 GI Bill and/or Montgomery GI Bill. VRAP provides 12 months of

Education and Training Tools

VA's Office of Economic Opportunity offers many tools to help veterans. Veterans can go to www.benefits.va.gov/gibill to access a rich library of information and tools. Here are a few examples:



GI Bill Comparison Tool—The GI Bill Comparison Tool provides key information about college affordability and value so beneficiaries can choose the best education program for their needs.



GI Bill Feedback System—Submit a complaint if your school or employer is failing to follow the Principles of Excellence.



CareerScope Interest & Aptitude Assessment—Helping Veterans Focus on Success.

educational benefits for a certificate program or an associate's degree program. Twelve months may not get you a complete associate's degree, but it'll get you on your way or help you finish it.

We've identified over 200 high-demand occupations. A veteran has to sign up for one of these high-demand occupations. It's been overwhelmingly successful. In just the last couple years, we've had over 143,000 veterans apply. We've approved 126,000 veterans for the benefit. The number one occupation is IT support specialist. The number two occupation is substance abuse and behavioral disorder counselors. [The latter role] shows me that veterans want to continue to serve those in need of help. This is pretty true to form.

On Supporting Veteran Success on Campus

The VetSuccess on Campus (VSOC) program provides supportive services to ensure veteran students are successful in their academic pursuits. We help them adjust to campus life and transition to civilian life. We have trained and experienced vocational rehabilitation and employment counselors on campus full-time. They provide professional counseling on disabilities, vocational goals, and academic achievement and transitions. The counselors are familiar with all the VA benefits and can help veterans navigate them and find the [right] benefits [for] that veteran.

The program started as a pilot in 2009 at the University of South Florida. Since then, we've gone through multiple evolutions. We grew from one pilot site to eight campuses, then to 32 campuses, and today 94 campuses. We're also working with new partners. For example, we're going to be placing AmeriCorps volunteers on several of our VSOC campuses to help us deal with some of the issues surrounding veterans and to give us more boots on the ground. We're very proud of it, very excited about the program. At 94 campuses, we're institutionalizing the program's processes, and we've seen a great deal of success, no pun intended, for this program.

On VA's Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Benefits

The Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment program helps veterans with service-connected disabilities and employment handicaps prepare for, find, and keep suitable jobs. For veterans with service-connected disabilities so severe that they cannot immediately consider work, VR&E offers services to improve their ability to live as independently as possible.

The VR&E has five tracks: reemployment, rapid access to employment, self-employment, employment through

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long-term services, and then independent living. Under this program, veterans who qualify receive the Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits with many additional benefits afforded under the VR&E program. VR&E counselors also help veterans with their resume, job-seeking, placement, mock interviews, networking with employers, and negotiating salary requirements. We do an entire case management for that wounded warrior or disabled veteran.

One of the other things that we’ve started is the integrated disability evaluation system ... it places over 200 vocational rehabilitation and employment services counselors within DOD bases. Before a service member separates from the service, we have a counselor working with prospective veterans explaining benefits and services, developing that case file while they’re still in service.



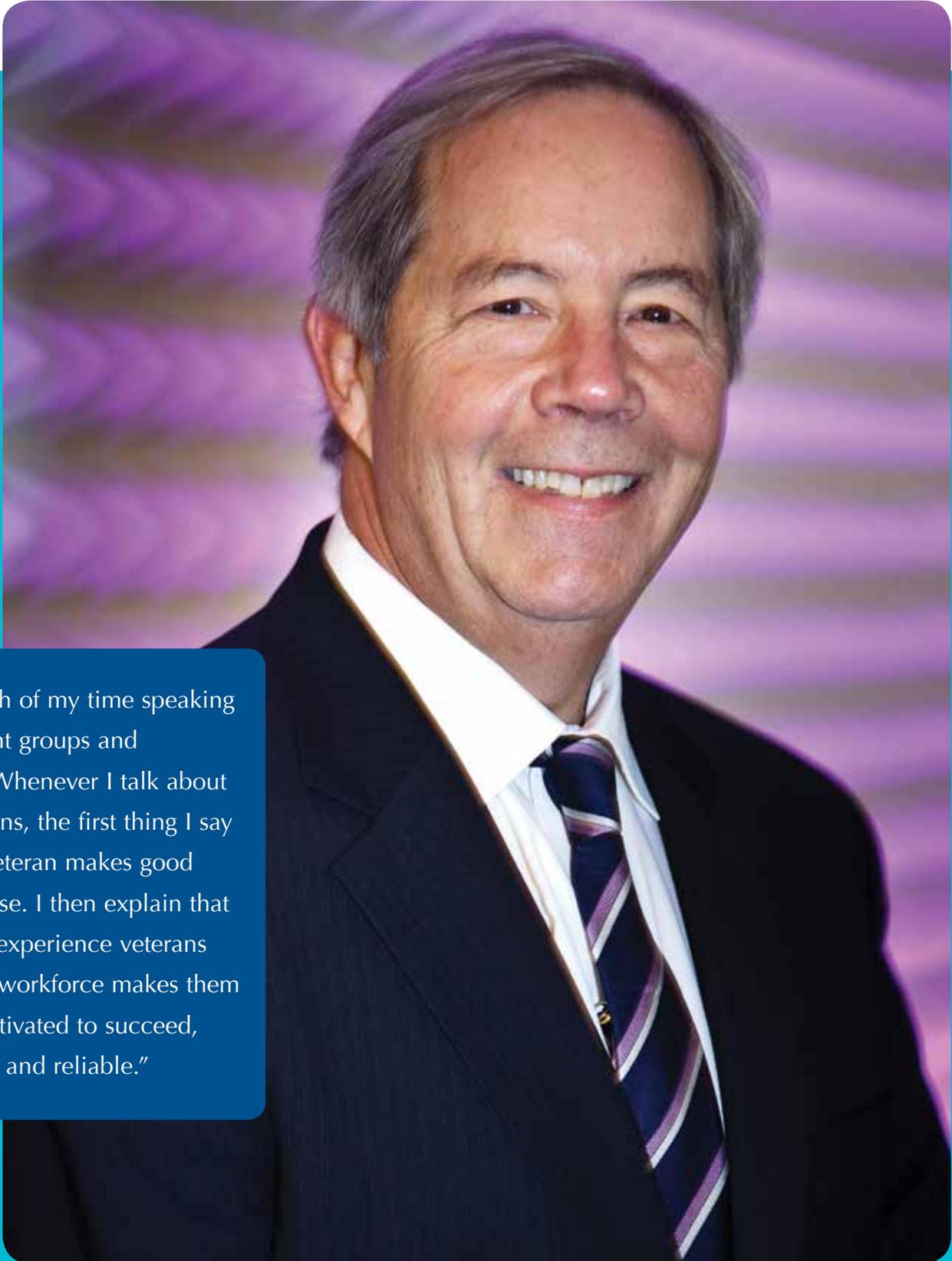
On the Importance of Collaboration and Partnerships

At the VA, collaboration is critically important. We cannot do all of this alone, nor would we want to. What we do rests on the success of our collaborative efforts with other government agencies and the private sector. The Veterans Retraining Assistance Program highlights our collaboration with the Department of Labor. We work with the Department of Education and the Department of Defense. We’re also working on an interagency academic credentialing work group that’s dedicated to identifying and sharing strategies for institutions of higher learning to award or evaluate military training and experience. You earn academic credits while in the military.

We’re working with, for example, the National Student Clearinghouse and the Student Veterans of America. We’re analyzing post-secondary education completion data for one million veterans, both Montgomery GI Bill and Post-9/11 beneficiaries. This will help us measure the outcome of these benefits. We also have a memorandum of understanding with the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation. It hosts job fairs [and the] Hiring Our Heroes program. The Chamber has done over 600 job fairs around the country, having helped well over 10,000 veterans with their efforts to find meaningful employment. We just released a veterans hiring guide for employers. We work very closely with veterans service organizations (American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars, or the Disabled American Veterans). Our collaborative efforts have been incredible.

On the Future

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, about 20 million veterans live in the U.S. Veterans’ unemployment for the month of December 2013 was 5.5%, the lowest since 2008. Though these results are encouraging, veterans still face many employment challenges. We can ensure that veterans have a better outlook by giving them the tools to get the best education and training experiences.



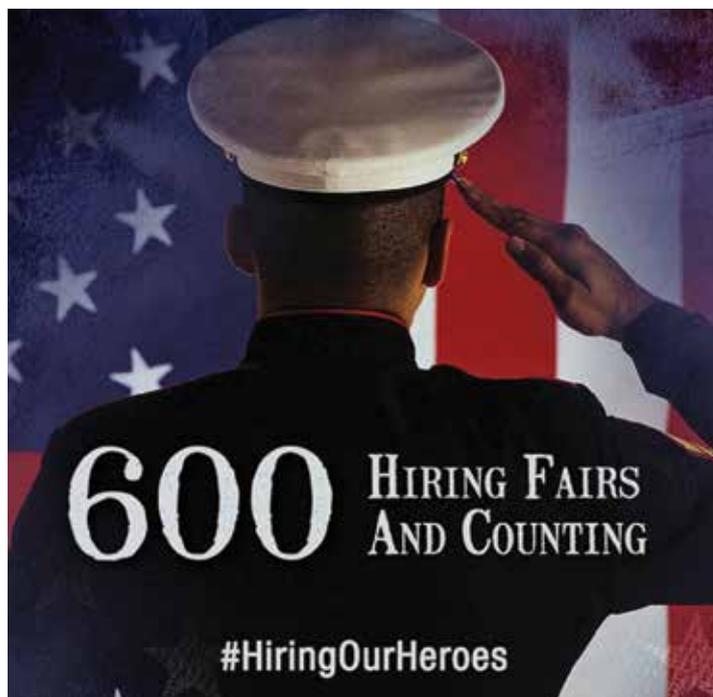
“I spend much of my time speaking to constituent groups and employers. Whenever I talk about hiring veterans, the first thing I say is hiring a veteran makes good business sense. I then explain that the military experience veterans bring to the workforce makes them resilient, motivated to succeed, dependable, and reliable.”

We want to make sure veterans know what their benefits are so they can leverage them in their life-planning goals. Every year, about 280,000 service members leave the services and become veterans. With the coming drawdown, we project that will grow to about 300,000 to 310,000 annually. With more veterans coming into the workforce, we need to be ready to process all the applications and claims for program benefits. It's an incredibly busy time, not only keeping up with the workload that we have, but projecting forward what we anticipate it will be.

On the Benefits of Hiring Veterans

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Billions of dollars have been invested in the training of the specifically Post-9/11 generation of veterans; it's also the most tech-savvy military force in the world. Think about all of these veterans and the amount of tools that they've used in the military and they're now coming into the workforce. I underscore that our veterans are a good investment.



Employers who have established hiring practices that seek veterans are not disappointed.

Our veterans have unmatched skills in team-building, organizational commitment, decision-making, working in diverse cross-cultural work settings, and advanced technical settings. They're driven. They're mission-focused. They have proven leadership skills. Think about the young combat infantry man that's over in Afghanistan negotiating with tribal chieftains that are 80 years old. Think about that young squad leader in charge of the lives of those 10 or 15 squad mates. This is the kind of person you want to have in your company. Our veterans bring DoD state-of-the-art training with them.

On Leadership

I often tell people leaders lead people and managers manage things. We often forget that there's a difference between leadership and management. If you don't know where you're going, it doesn't matter which way you go. Having a vision is key.

As a leader, you're responsible for the organization, so take the blame and hand out the praise. You always need to be ready to make those tough decisions. Governor Tommy Thompson, when he was Secretary of Health and Human Services, wrote: "God gave you two ears and one mouth. Use them in that proportion." ■

To learn more about the Veterans Benefits Administration, go to www.benefits.va.gov.



To hear *The Business of Government Hour's* interview with Curtis L. Coy, go to the Center's website at www.businessofgovernment.org.



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