

SUNDAY TELEGRAM

WORCESTER, MASS.

BUSINESS MATTERS

OCTOBER 30, 2011

Wanted: Jobs for vets

Veterans of wars in Iraq, Afghanistan struggle to find work

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When Jeffrey S. Berkowitz became bored with the corporate world, he decided to make the military his career.

He joined the National Guard in 2008 and deployed to Afghanistan last year. His job was to provide security at construction sites in the villages of Laghaman province.

But his job - and his life - changed in May when he was wounded in a suicide bomber attack.

"I looked down, I saw the blood - and a lot of other things I didn't want to see," Spc. Berkowitz recalled on a recent afternoon.

He suffered several fractures in his fingers, hand and radius, and shrapnel wounds from his chin to his abdomen. After months in an Army hospital, Spc. Berkowitz, 27, is now home in the Worcester apartment he shares with his wife. But his recovery is far from over. He is many months of doctors' appointments, and at least one more surgery, away from recovery.

When he is healed, he will be discharged from the guard. And he will join the thousands of veterans nationwide, many of them wounded, searching for jobs as the country sluggishly recovers from the Great Recession.

The national unemployment rate for veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars is 11.5 percent, higher than the 9.1 percent overall rate.

People who provide services for veterans say they're bracing for an even bigger group of unemployed vets in the near future. As the U.S. wars in the Middle East wind down, more troops will return home, and many of them will be hunting for jobs.

"The big deployments are coming to a wind-down," said Sherry S. Handel, executive director of Guard Support, a nonprofit organization that serves the Massachusetts National Guard. "We see 2012 as being a big year for ramping up the program."

The program she wants to ramp up is called Hire Guard,



Army Spc. Jeffrey S. Berkowitz of Worcester, who suffered injuries during his tour of duty in Afghanistan, stands next to his parents, Scot and Irene Berkowitz, at his apartment in Worcester.

and it pairs employers with qualified guardsmen seeking jobs.

Guard Support also offers emergency grants for guardsmen who are struggling to pay rents or mortgages, car payments or utility bills. Many of the applicants seeking grants are unemployed, Ms. Handel said.

"We're in a really bad economy, and even if there is a great desire to hire service members, there's the fact that there's more applicants than there are jobs," she said. "It's just a really difficult time to be looking, and it's even more difficult for returning service members."

More than 1,900 Massachusetts National Guard troops are deployed overseas, scheduled to return later this year



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Army Spec. Evelyn Escibano of Worcester, who returned from a tour of duty in Afghanistan in August, stands in her new apartment in Worcester.

or next year. Some of them will have civilian jobs to return to; their jobs are protected by law. But many people join the guard because they can't find civilian jobs. When they come back, most will be unemployed.

On top of financial struggles, service members returning from war face other hurdles as they try to return to the workforce. Many come back with injuries, both physical and psychological. Many have trouble adjusting to changes in their family life. Reservists have to find a civilian job, knowing that they could be deployed again.

Army reservist Evelyn Escibano returned from her first deployment in Afghanistan this summer and applied for unemployment benefits when she didn't immediately find a job. She isn't sure whether her military service will help her resume, or whether it might hurt.

"Nobody wants to hire a soldier that could be gone for a year," said Ms. Escibano, a 33-year-old Army specialist and mother of three children who lives in Worcester. "People just don't want to deal with that."

Discrimination against reservists is illegal, but it can be hard for a reservist to prove that he or she didn't get a job because of military status.

Ms. Escibano, who has experience in secretarial and office work, said her main challenge as she searches for work is her new fear of being around people.

"When I walk in the room, I have to know where all the exits are," she said. "I get really paranoid and scared."

Rafael Rodriguez of Worcester, who became a civilian last year after 14 years in the Army, faced different challenges as he made the transition to non-military life. He worked in security - a natural move for many vets - but he didn't like the work environment.

"The hard part is, after being in charge of so many people in the military, to come back here and be in a security job, to be at the bottom," said Mr. Rodriguez, who earned the rank of sergeant first class.

He's still struggling to adjust to the different pace of civilian life. Compared to the highly structured environment of the Army, civilian life seems disorganized to him.

Mr. Rodriguez is training for work in the medical field. He's optimistic about finding a job.

"In the health care business, absolutely," he said. "I haven't applied, but I have looked online, and there are jobs out there."

In his American Jobs Act, President Barack Obama has proposed tax credits of \$5,600 to \$9,600 for companies that hire unemployed veterans. The proposal has bipartisan support.

Veterans looking for jobs need to learn how to translate

their military skills to the civilian world, according to Chad Storlie, a former member of the Army Special Forces who now works in marketing in Omaha, Neb.

"The military experience has to be translated and applied to how it will help a business," said Mr. Storlie, who has written two books to help veterans make the transition to civilian careers.

One important skill taught in the military, Mr. Storlie said, is planning. In the corporate world, businesses tend to come up with a primary plan. But someone with military experience would be able to design a backup plan, he said. The military also teaches people to adapt and adjust - another useful skill in business.

Bill J. Ryan, disabled veterans outreach program coordinator at the Workforce Central Career Center in Worcester, said a lot of young vets are coming home without the skills they need to find jobs in a tough economy. On the flip side, he said, employers seem more open to hiring vets than ever before.

More than 1,000 employers - public and private - nationwide are part of the Employer Partnership of the Armed Forces, which helps connect service members and their families with job openings.

E.L. Harvey & Sons Inc. of Westboro, a waste management company, joined the partnership this year. Human resources director Mark Levenson said the company is considering applicants with military backgrounds to fill a handful of open positions, which include mechanics and truck drivers.

At Odyssey Systems Consulting Group, headquartered in Wakefield, 70 percent of the workforce is made up of veterans and service members. Odyssey helps government agencies implement new technologies, from weapons to force protection systems.

Military experience is clearly an asset for consultants in the defense industry, but Odyssey's chief executive, Mike Sweat, said people with a military background make good workers in any field.

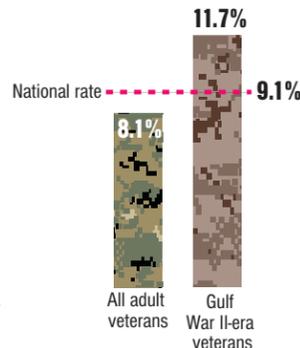
"They are 100 percent dependable," Mr. Sweat said. "They're reliable. They are disciplined. These are people who will give you their opinion ... but when you say this is what we need to do, they execute."

Spc. Berkowitz said he's optimistic that his military experience and his injuries will help him as he looks for a job. He wants to pursue a career in federal law enforcement and is in line for an internship to help get his foot in the door.

"The numbers are bad for everybody," he said. "I have experience that other people don't have. I don't worry about what those numbers say."

Veterans' unemployment rates

U.S., Sept. 2011



Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics
T&G Staff/DON LANDGREN JR.

Local employer partners of the armed forces

Members of online jobs database for vets, service members and their families

- Easter Seals Massachusetts Worcester
- Reliant Medical Group (formerly Fallon Clinic) Worcester
- EMC Corp. Hopkinton
- E.L. Harvey & Sons Inc. Westboro
- Consigli Construction Co. Milford
- TJX Companies Inc. Framingham
- University of Massachusetts Medical School Worcester
- Worcester County Sheriff's Office Worcester
- Massachusetts Department of Correction Milford
- Massachusetts State Police Framingham

Source: Employer Partnership of the Armed Forces
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