

Attract, Recruit, Retain: Creation of a Systemic Pipeline for Veteran Talent to Address  
Tennessee's Current and Emergent Labor Shortages

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## **Abstract**

The U.S. Military Veteran experience in the context of their transition toward civilian life after military service has received a vast amount of research attention. Recently, the U.S. exit from the 21-year long war in Afghanistan has led to a renewed interest in the U.S. Military Veteran transition and the role of social support in facilitating a successful transition and the effectiveness of different interventions and support programs that claim to help Veterans adjust to civilian life. While this issue is certainly complex, our research is scoped to understand how Tennessee can leverage U.S. Military Veteran talent to improve its current and future labor shortages, and thus, increase Veteran Labor Force Participation Rates (LFPR) in the state.

Tennessee is geographically positioned to tap into the transitioning Veteran talent pool yet has not formalized a pipeline for recruitment. State-level initiatives have attracted companies to relocate from other locations, creating further demand to fill certain vocational areas within the states labor force. Given the aforesaid context, Tennessee has no traceable, systematic, or unified presence to systematically tap into this talent pool, further to this point, the State's resources are not organized to aid in the transition. Our research seeks to understand what factors or barriers affect labor participation among Veterans and transitioning military seeking to secure a job as they transition their identity from that of a service-member to a civilian? What are they and how are they understood and by whom are they acknowledged, if at all?

The U.S. Military Veteran experience in respect to reintegration into the civilian labor force forms consistent prominence within research arenas, with particular focus on Veteran mental health crises, resulting stereotypes, and shifting identity paradigms as factors which affect successful reintegration into the civilian workforce after military service. The recent U.S. exit from its 21-year long war in Afghanistan and the resulting uptick in service members departing

the military in search of civilian reintegration induces a compelling need to re-address Veteran reintegration holistically--as a business case attuned to the complexity of Veteran experiences against the backdrop of social identity theories. This study aims to expand knowledge through systematic investigation for which the findings may contribute to further understanding of the complexity of Veteran reintegration as it intersects with business contexts. Although our study does focus on the context of Tennessee's Veteran landscape; public, private and state policy findings may be applicable and generalizable to all contexts outside of Tennessee, given that the military to civilian transition process is a systemic, national issue.

## **Dedication**

This research is dedicated to the brave and resilient men and women who have served in the United States Military. Your selfless commitment, sacrifice, and unwavering dedication to defending our nation inspire us and serve as a constant reminder of the importance of the work we undertake. We express our heartfelt gratitude for not only your service but for dedicating your lives to the well-being of our Nation. This dedication is a tribute to your courage and sacrifice. May your stories and experiences be heard, honored, and never forgotten. Thank you for your unwavering dedication to our country.

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We would like to express our deepest gratitude to the many individuals who have contributed to the completion of this research. While certain figures in the United States Military have played an instrumental role in shaping this work, their identities remain undisclosed due to the sensitive nature of their involvement. Their guidance, support, and expertise have been invaluable, and we are indebted to them for their tremendous contributions.

We extend our heartfelt appreciation to all those who have tirelessly advocated for and supported the resolution of Veterans' issues in the State of Tennessee. Their unwavering commitment and dedication have been an endless source of inspiration throughout this research.

We would like to acknowledge the Veterans, their families, and all those who have bravely served our nation. Their experiences and stories have provided the foundation for this research, and it is our sincere hope that this work will serve as a meaningful contribution to addressing the challenges faced by Veterans in Tennessee and beyond.

We are deeply grateful to our friends and colleagues who have stood by us, offering encouragement and understanding during the highs and lows of this challenging endeavor.

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## Chapter 1. Problem and Background

Since at least the late 1990's (Gnuschke, 1999), Tennessee has experienced a labor-force shortage driven by many factors including the recent pandemic (Armstrong, 2022). Pursuant to the Skills for Jobs Act (*2021 Tennessee Code*, 2021), the Improving the Pipeline for Tennessee's Workforce: Academic Supply for Occupational Demand report and accompanying materials. Identified within the report are in-demand occupations and aligned academic programs within Tennessee. This report was developed as a partnership between the Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC), Tennessee Department of Economic and Community Development (TNECD), Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development (TDLWD), and Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE). The report's intent is to assist in the alignment of education, training, and employment in Tennessee (LeapInnovations, 2023). The evaluation identified 227 unique job classifications and over 720 specific occupation classifications with a high employer demand for qualified laborers to fill those vocational positions. Recently, in August 2022, Tennessee's Government created a list from the Tennessee Department of Labor noting 100 "in-demand occupations" projected to suffer critical labor shortages through 2026 (*Tennessee Department of Labor: In Demand Occupations through 2026*. n.d.). Since Governor Bill Lee assumed office in late January 2019, the state has garnered 86,676 new job commitments with 33.1 billion in investments over 495 projects (Tennessee Higher Education Commission, 2023; Tennessee Department of Labor: In Demand Occupations through 2026, n.d.) State-level initiatives have attracted companies to relocate, creating further demand to fill certain vocational areas within the state's labor force (*Transparent Tennessee*, n.d.-b), such as Ford Motor Company and SK Innovation, Amazon, Oracle, FedEx-Logistics, General Motors,

Mitsubishi, and dozens of other companies choosing to invest in Tennessee's business-friendly environment.

Tennessee Governor Bill Lee has worked to bridge labor shortage gaps with many state-sponsored workforce programs. The Governor has acknowledged a focus area to bridge that gap is to strategically tap into the military Veteran talent pool. For context, Tennessee is bordered by at least 20 major military bases and has a Veteran population of a half a million. In addition, student Veterans enrolled in colleges and universities within the state total 20,000 (These numbers do not consider military affiliates in and/or those interested in transitioning to the state. Nationally 200,000 service-members transition out of the military on an annual basis DOD SkillBridge - Military Discharge Data, n.d.). These service-members also have family members who are eager to work and should be considered capable talent. Therefore, pursuant of the Governor's goal to bridge labor shortages, both current and projected, an informal working group comprised of Tennessee citizens from various backgrounds (all U.S. Military Veterans) formed to not only advance the state's goal of integrating separating U.S. Military service-members into the state's labor force, but to also unify and consolidate Veteran resources to simplify resource navigation.

Initially, around 2020, a working group of representatives from various Tennessee Government offices assembled to improve pathway processes for Veterans transitioning into the civilian workforce through vocational apprenticeships and fill work roles in vocational settings among Tennessee's state and local government and multiple state-wide vocational settings. Further, the working group sought to advance Tennessee's labor-force improvement goals by enhancing the state's ability to attract, recruit and retain separating service-members and Veterans, and their military affiliates. Based on data provided by the Tennessee Economic and

Community Development (TNECD), the agency's active engagement in business development project activities highlights the ongoing labor shortage problem in the state. TNECD's focus on achieving significant economic growth and job creation, with ambitious targets of 20,000 new jobs and \$3.5 billion in capital investment (*Transparent Tennessee: OpenECD | TNECD Performance Metrics | High Quality Jobs*, n.d.), in this calendar year alone for “high-quality jobs,” reflects the pressing need for skilled and qualified workers to fill these positions. Further, the emphasis on creating “high-quality jobs” paying above the county median wage underscored the challenge of attracting and retaining a skilled workforce in Tennessee. The state's desire to locate 48 percent of landed project commitments within rural counties and the specific target of 8,500 new job commitments in these specific areas further emphasize the extent of the labor shortage across both urban and rural regions (*Transparent Tennessee*, n.d.-a).

Now, moving forward into 2024, under the leadership of Governor Bill Lee, Tennessee has restructured efforts to support Service Members, Veterans, and their families by launching the Tri-Stars and Stripes: The Governor’s Council (*VIDEO*, n.d.). This Council, established through Executive Order 102, aims to foster an environment where those who have served the nation can thrive. Consisting of 13 members from various sectors including local leaders, the Lee administration, Veterans service organizations, and Military families, the Council plans to coordinate state agencies related to the Military and Veterans, enhance collaboration between key Military and Veterans programs, and strategically promote Tennessee as an ideal state for Service Members and Veterans. The Council is expected to deliver a strategic plan to the Governor by January 1, 2024, and will continuously provide updates and recommendations to further the interests of Service Members, Veterans, and their families. With the formation of the Tri-Stars and Stripes: The Governor’s Council, it becomes increasingly clear that Veterans, with

their distinctive training, discipline, and military service experience, can be pivotal in addressing labor shortages. Through the provision of customized support and comprehensive resources for Veterans. Tennessee is in a position to harness this valuable talent pool. This strategy can effectively meet the demands of business development projects and burgeoning industries, further reinforcing Tennessee's commitment to the growth and prosperity of Veterans. Given the new council, Veterans to address labor shortages may become evident through their unique training, discipline, and experience gained during military service.

By providing tailored support and cohesive resources to Veterans, Tennessee can tap into this valuable talent pool to meet the demands of the business development projects and industries targeted for growth. The data and overall picture presented by TNECD demonstrate the scope of Tennessee's labor shortage problem. The state's commitment to stimulating economic growth and attracting new businesses highlights the pressing need for a well-qualified and skilled workforce. By recognizing the potential of Veterans to contribute significantly to these efforts, Tennessee can take a proactive approach in addressing the labor shortage, fostering economic prosperity, and creating a pathway for Veterans to successfully reintegrate into civilian life through meaningful employment opportunities (*Transparent Tennessee*, n.d.-b)



Figure 1. Job growth as of August 23, 2023, in Tennessee since 2019. (Transparent Tennessee, 2023)

- **Company Commitments:** TNECD targets to secure commitments from companies to create 20,000 new jobs and invest \$3.5 billion in capital within the calendar year. These commitments are expected to be within target industry clusters and encompass both new business locations and expansions (*Transparent Tennessee, n.d.-b*).
- **High-Quality Jobs:** 84 percent of the new job commitments that receive a FastTrack incentive award are expected to be high-quality jobs paying above the county median wage. This emphasizes the focus on attracting employment opportunities that provide competitive wages (*Transparent Tennessee, n.d.-b*).
- **Rural County Focus:** TNECD aims to enhance economic growth in rural areas. 48 percent of the landed project commitments are intended to be located within rural counties, fostering development outside of major urban centers (*Transparent Tennessee, n.d.-b*).
- **Rural Job Creation:** The agency targets the creation of 86,676 new job commitments specifically in rural counties, further emphasizing the importance of supporting economic opportunities in these regions (*Transparent Tennessee, n.d.-b*).

## Statement of the Problem

A large majority of the U.S. Military's service-members are cultivated to make dynamic decisions with rapid succession in high-stakes contexts. Demonstrated ability and a proven record of leadership acumen gained from military service is inarguably transferable to civic and organizational contexts, and frankly, are highly sought-after character traits required for success in any environment (L. L. Davis et al., 2022). Military service-members seeking reintegration into civilian life undoubtedly carry their dedication, soft skills such as teamwork, and sense of selfless service into civic settings long after their transition. However, although many service-members deeply desire to reinvest themselves into society outside of the military, the most difficult phase of the transition is finding a worthy career after the transition (Bond et al., 2022). Attempting to find a new career after a major change such as the military-to-civilian transition (Ahern et al., 2015), poses many risks and represents missed opportunities suffered among both the service-members (or Veteran), for whom time is of the essence, and for organizations who may not absorb their talent because an unclear path forward for the separating service member, led to other roads traveled.

### **Significance of the Study**

Tennessee stands to unify efforts during the critical window of service-member transition and capitalize on Veteran talent pools to gain a strategic edge, above all other states, to attract, recruit and retain. Therefore, the intent of this study is to determine how Tennessee can leverage the talent of U.S. Military Veterans and their affiliates to improve its current and future labor shortages, and thus, increase their labor participation in the state and be competitive amongst all other states.

### **Guiding Inquiry**



Given Tennessee Governor Bill Lee's Tennessee Labor Force improvement goals for the State of Tennessee, and Tennessee's need to understand factors affecting Veteran labor participation, our study attempts to understand factors affecting Veteran labor participation and thus, ways to attract, recruit, and retain separating service-members and Veterans alike. To that end, our guiding inquiry was as follows:

***Research Question:*** *What factors or barriers affect labor participation among Veterans and transitioning military seeking to secure a job as they transition their identity from that of a service-member to a civilian? What are they and how are they understood and by whom are they acknowledged, if at all?*

***Sub questions:***

- 1. Are Tennessee businesses postured to attract separating service-members, Veterans, and their military affiliates?*
- 2. Are Tennessee businesses postured to recruit separating service-members, Veterans, and their military affiliates?*
- 3. What characteristics do Veterans seek in a business for sustained employment?*
- 4. Are Veterans armed with resources to facilitate their transition to business opportunities in a timely manner?*

**Definition of Terms**

It is important to note that this study defines Veterans as men and women honorably separated from prior service in any branch of the U.S Military: Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, or Coast Guard (*38 USC 4211: Definitions*, n.d.). The definition also extends to individuals mobilized or commissioned while serving in the reserves in one of the five military branches. Service-members are defined as men or women currently serving on active-duty in the U.S military. We also make the distinction between Veterans and men and women serving on active-duty (service-members). This distinction is important because, circumstantially, Veterans and active-duty service-members, specifically those seeking to separate from active-duty military service, face similar challenges transitioning to the civilian workforce, but the challenges are unique in that timing and resulting pressure shapes their experiences differently. Military-affiliated is defined as U.S. Military service-member dependents, partners and their extended family members or caretakers.

## Chapter 2. Literature Review

The U.S. Military Veterans experience in the context of their transition towards civilian life after military service has received a vast amount of research attention (Alonso et al., n.d.; Kamal, 2021; Rabb et al., 2019; Sargent, 2009; *Veteran Transitions. GAO, 2014*, n.d.). Recently, the U.S. exit from the 21-year long war in Afghanistan has led to a renewed interest in the U.S. Military Veteran transition and the role of social support in facilitating a successful transition and the effectiveness of different interventions and support programs that claim to help Veterans adjust to civilian life (Ahern et al., 2015; Messina, 2014). While this issue is certainly complex, our research is scoped to understand how Tennessee can leverage U.S. Military Veteran talent to improve its current and future labor shortages, and thus, increase Veteran Labor Force Participation Rates (LFPR) in the state. Therefore, our review of available sources of literature was scoped to seek information relevant to the research question: *What factors or barriers affect labor participation among Veterans and transitioning military seeking to secure a job as they transition their identity from that of a service-member to a civilian? What are they and how are they understood and by whom are they acknowledged, if at all?*

Given the line of inquiry, and because the topic of U.S. Military Veteran transition within the contexts of vocational settings is so broad, the literature review was scoped to seek information which answers the following guiding questions:

1. How does literature inform the scholar or stakeholder seeking to universally understand Veteran integration into civilian society? Overall, what themes emerge from literature within that context?

2. Does extant literature provide context regarding Tennessee's vocational environment and the Veteran transition context specifically?

In what follows, we provide a brief systematic review of literature closely oriented to our research topic related to U.S. Veteran labor participation and the related issue of the U.S. military Veteran transition (U.S. military service-member and already transitioned Veterans) and the environs of vocational settings. Preliminary sources surveyed included academic journals, presidential and governmental literatures, and other sources. Prior research identified in leading databases (e.g., Google Scholar, WorldCat.org, etc.) demonstrated the emergence of the following broad themes:

### **Preliminary Review of Literature**

The topic of U.S. Military Veterans consists of a large body of research that focuses on various aspects of the Veteran experience, including the challenges and difficulties that Veterans may face as they transition to civilian life. We will first briefly summarize the literature as it pertains to general barriers to reintegration, and then dive deeper into two thematic areas that arose in prominence: physical and mental health barriers to reintegration and stigma and bias around this, and difficulties Veterans have in navigating the social support system in place when they are transitioning.

In one qualitative study, barriers to reintegration were categorized into 4 categories: barriers for transitioning (e.g., financial difficulties and limited job opportunities), resources for transitioning (e.g., postsecondary degree attainment before discharge), gaps in resources (e.g., transportation health-care appointments) and available resources (e.g., veterans service organizations) (Albright et al., 2018). In another study, Black women Veteran participants

reported being ill prepared to enter the civilian labor force (McCommon, n.d.). Keita et al. (2015) emphasize the barriers to reintegration such as the lack of recognition of military skills, unemployment, the substandard income, and homelessness that many former service members face after separation from the military.

When leaving military service, people who serve and their families must forge new post-military identities and navigate transition processes fraught with both challenges and potential (Flack & Kite, 2021). Concerns such as accomplishing the service-connected disabilities award process, translating military skills into civilian employment, creation of a post-military identity and navigating the plethora of post-military benefits can impair a Veteran's ability to successfully transition (Mitchell et al., 2020).

Successful transition to civilian life also requires financial acumen and preparations for the transition period. Unfortunately, many new Veterans do not discover their financial literacy is limited or non-existent until it is time for them to separate from military service (Perkins et al., 2022). Today's Transition Assistance Program (TAP) can assist with finding employment, preparing for higher education, and other benefits that match the service member and family transition needs (Perkins et al., 2022). Some Veterans enter post-military life with significant financial resources already in place. Examples of such resources include monthly military retirement pay, service-connected disability payments, and VA benefits programs (Gregg et al., 2016).

### ***Theme 1: The Veterans are “Broken” Narrative***

The transition to civilian life after military service is negatively impacted by challenges myopically focused on physical and mental health problems. Several studies amplified the existence of challenges Veterans face when they transition from U.S. military service, and

thereafter (Ahern et al., 2015; Albright et al., 2018; V. E. Davis & Minnis, 2017; McCommon, n.d.; Messina, 2014; Mitchell et al., 2020; Sargent, 2009; Shankle et al., n.d.). Overall, most studies illuminated mental health crisis and stereotypes as a leading issue that stymied or hindered the exit from service and successful reintegration into the workforce and civilian life more broadly (Colvonen et al., 2020; Conard et al., 2014; Hellmuth et al., 2012; Mansfield et al., 2011; Markowitz et al., 2023; Nichter et al., 2022). Mental health problems that were said to plague Veterans were PTSD, suicidality, self-harming behavior, violence and alcohol use, the effects of Military Sexual Trauma (MST) and insomnia (Colvonen et al., 2020; Conard et al., 2014; Hellmuth et al., 2012; Mansfield et al., 2011; Markowitz et al., 2023; Nichter et al., 2022).

While most service members enter and exit the military physically healthy, a significant proportion will begin their post-military lives with service-connected healthcare needs. New Veterans commonly report ailments such as chronic pain, gastrointestinal issues, cardiovascular disease, migraine headaches, and osteoarthritis when applying for VA disability benefits (Harrington et al., 2019). Because of the nature of recent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, post-9/11 Veterans are more likely than previous generations to report having suffered traumatic brain injuries and related psychological conditions (Greer et al., 2020).

In addition to physical health concerns, a significant number of service members also leave military service with complicated mental health needs such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), psychiatric diagnoses, substance abuse, and untreated moral injury (Harrington et al., 2019). The emotional, psychological, and social support Veterans need is very individual. Examples of factors known to influence the transition process include undergoing an involuntary discharge, leaving active duty rather than a reserve component, having a comrade who was seriously injured or killed, the presence of pre-transition marital discord, and receiving a less

than honorable discharge (Brignone et al., 2017). Leaving military service requires Veterans to navigate civilian community expectations, cultural mores, and Veteran stereotypes (Feinstein, 2015).

Although these problems are real, they are not isolated to Veterans and do not define the transition experience. Only one article addressed an urgency to remove this bias or stereotype of the “broken Veteran.” This is explicitly acknowledged by Keeling (2018) who argued that investigations of Veterans’ transition to civilian life after military service have tended to focus on the experiences of those with mental or physical health difficulties or on employment challenges and homelessness. Keeling argues this use of the “injury model” is therefore pejoratively assigned to Veterans.

Another significant qualitative study that didn’t focus on the “injury model” or “broken Veteran” in the context of Veteran reintegration draws attention to the importance of theories tethered to identity and its relevance to Veteran transition and future models that attempt to reconcile issues in that context. This research further noted the inclination of Veteran researchers to focus on psycho-social adjustment within the context of PTSD as a leading focal point delaminating success in Veteran transition (Demers, 2011). Moreover, Demers’ research highlights the importance of identities--socially, historically, politically, and culturally constructed (Weber, 1998, as cited in Demers 2011) communities—as major components of how one is situated in a new context, and thus, as a premier factor in whether a person can exist successfully in a given context. Similarly, Keeling (2018) further emphasized the importance of social support but argues that the narratives Veterans and others weave about them holds greater potential to influence the Veteran transition to civilian life. Another key literature source claimed that poor transitional outcomes may be alleviated by securing a “new” sense of post service

belonging, identity, and value in the community in which Veterans live (Albertson, 2019). Lastly, Flack and Kite (2021) found that, consistent with past research, social connectedness was positively related to quality of life and was negatively related to psychological distress. Specifically, private and public regard for the military and not feeling like an outsider was positively related to social connectedness. In contrast, interdependence with other Veterans, viewing the military as family, and the centrality of a military identity was negatively related to social connectedness. Ultimately, social connectedness was related to the ease of the transition to civilian life. Therefore, we argue that given these findings, a focus on theories tethered to identity and its relevance to Veteran transition success will significantly inform future models that attempt to reconcile issues in that context.

### ***Theme 2: The Social Support System is Difficult to Navigate***

Research also showed that despite a wide variety of public and commercial programs, and assistance available to transitioning service-members, Veterans who separated from the military struggled with their transition to civilian life. In the *White Paper-Sea of Goodwill*, a seminal publication produced by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the paper asserted that the well-being and success of a transitioning service-member moving towards Veteran status is hinged upon support by the broader society (Copeland & Sutherland, 2010). This literature further indicates that although the civilian population in the U.S. has consistently demonstrated a willingness to support the military and those returning from service (Kleykamp et al., 2018), the organizations and individuals trying to assist in the transition to civilian life—aptly named the “Sea of Goodwill”—to support Veterans is nearly impossible to navigate—further compounding the issue of the Veteran transition (Copeland & Sutherland, 2010). The theme of chaotic and dis-unified resources emerges as the prominent driver for research undertaken by Syracuse



University's Institute for Veterans and Military Families (IVMF) on behalf of the George W. Bush Institute. According to IVMF's research findings, out of the more than two million non-profit organizations in the United States, approximately 45,000 self-identify as serving U.S. military service personnel and their families (Syracuse University's Institute for Veterans & Military Families (IVMF) on behalf of the George W. Bush, n.d.). Findings in this report are in agreement with Copeland and Sutherland's (2010) assertion that overall, successful Veteran transitions to civic society are highly dependent on unification of resources. However, both papers lack a clear framework for stakeholders to operationalize.

Studies also mentioned the programmatic limitations of the congressionally mandated transition service, the Transition Assistance Program (TAP). It has been argued that alternatives are greatly needed to assist transitioning service-members (Li, 2020; Whitworth et al., 2020; Ziencik, 2020). Overall, literature reviewed acknowledges that although a major tool intended to usher Veterans into civilian society, TAP is not adequately designed to address the multi-faceted issues surrounding the Veteran transition context. Whitworth et al. (2020) re-conceptualized a new model for military service-member transition to reform TAP through a model coined Success in Transition (SIT). The study claims that past investigative studies on Veteran transition were "narrowly focused on employment, education, and benefits and ignores the many complex and dynamic elements present in the military to civilian transition process" (p. 27). This is in direct disagreement with historically authoritative texts such as General George Washington's famous Farewell to the Army (*Founders Online*, n.d.), in which he solemnly indicated that finding a meaningful vocation in civic society was crucial to successful reintegration following service to the country (*Founders Online*, n.d.) . In a similar fashion, Copeland and Sutherland's (2010) dictum aimed to emphasize the importance of unifying the resources available to

Veterans following conflict so that they may successfully reintegrate into meaningful vocations. Kintzle and Castro’s (2018) study also amplifies the "limited support in transition programs, namely TAP,” (p. 124) as the premise for their argument that community support is vital to a successful transition and thus, proposed yet another framework for transition. However, although studies address inadequacies in TAP and offer alternative frameworks for the Veteran transition, none of the studies unify theories or concepts that exist to holistically address other hurdles Veterans face in the transition. Figure 2 describes TAP’s success with transitioning Veterans and notes that 57 percent of Veterans who attended a TAP program found it “very” or “extremely” helpful.

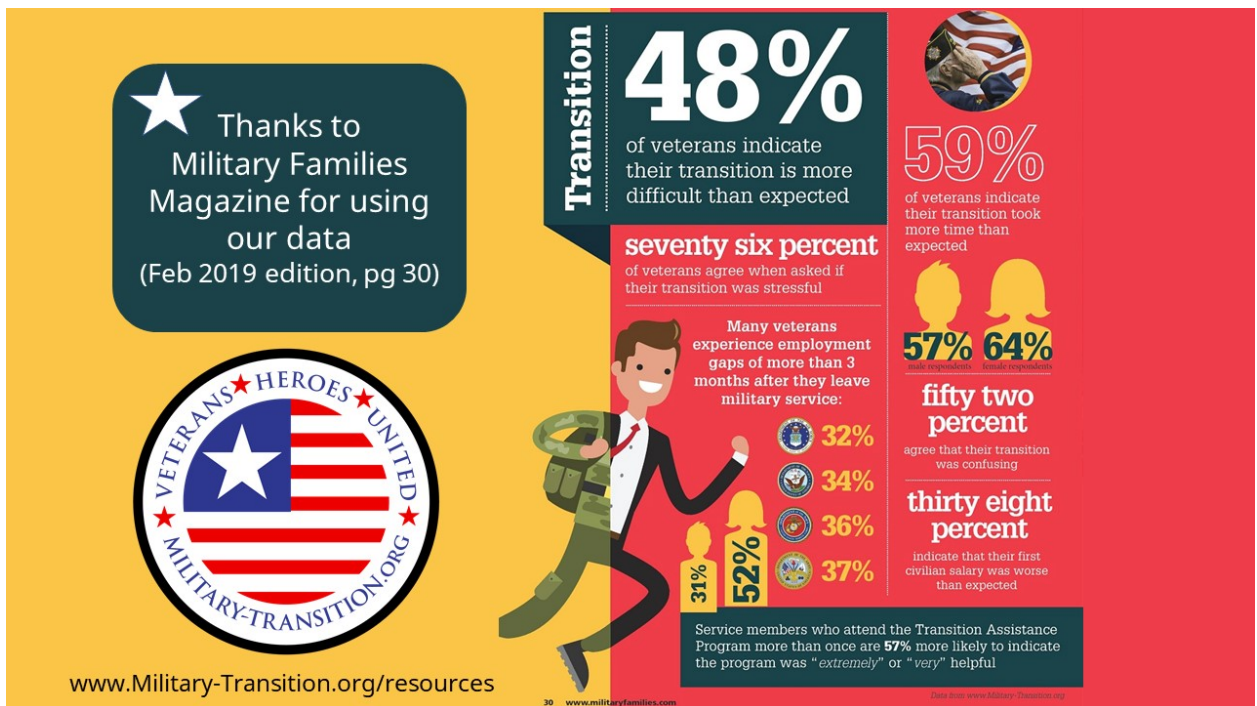


Figure 2. Transition to civilian life and career. Military Transition.org (*Military to Civilian Transition | Military Transition Assistance Graphics, n.d.*)

Our second line of inquiry *does literature provide context regarding Tennessee's vocational environment and the Veteran transition context specifically?* provided limited results, initially. However, a seminal study was published illuminating the context of Veteran's in Tennessee. Specifically, that study aimed to understand the attitudes of Veteran hiring from data collected from focus groups and 10 private sector companies in the general Clarksville and Nashville areas of Tennessee (Mael et al., 2022). For that reason alone, the study was significant and valuable to the context of our research. Moreover, the study echoed parallel challenges Veteran's faced in their transition. As an example, Veterans in this study portrayed their job search as "soul crushing" and "a wake-up call." Veterans who thought that they would be in high demand for significant, six-figure positions learned that they had to lower their expectations (Agovino, 2020, as cited in Mael et al., 2022). This study directly showed that the previously mentioned themes did influence the transition environment within Tennessee.

### **Summary of Preliminary Analysis**

The literature revealed gaps within the context of the transition and reintegration of service members, Veterans and their families into civilian life. More specifically, strategies businesses can employ to attract, retain and recruit transitioning Veterans with efficacy, in addition to private, public, partnerships (P3) and their ability in aligning resources to offer a supportive transition into the labor force. Overall, the literature addresses the challenges Veterans face with reintegration, but to date, a significant gap addressing a unified framework for reintegration nationwide, let alone within the state of Tennessee, seemingly exists.

## Chapter 3. Research Design and Analysis

### Introduction

The intent of this research aimed to determine how Tennessee can leverage U.S. Military Veteran talent to improve its current and future labor shortages, and thus, increase Veteran Labor Force Participation (VLFP) in the state. To that end, our study was guided by the following line of inquiry:

**Research Question:** *What factors or barriers affect labor participation among Veterans and transitioning military seeking to secure a job as they transition to civilian life? What are they and how are they understood and by whom are they acknowledged, if at all?*

### Sub questions:

1. *Are Tennessee businesses postured to attract separating service-members, Veterans, and their military affiliates?*
2. *Are Tennessee businesses postured to recruit separating service-members, Veterans, and their military affiliates?*
3. *What characteristics do Veterans seek in a business for sustained employment?*
4. *Are Veterans armed with resources to facilitate their transition to business opportunities in a timely manner?*

### Research Design

This study employed a phenomenological qualitative research approach. Phenomenology is a qualitative research approach that aims to understand the lived experiences of individuals by exploring their subjective perceptions and interpretations of phenomena. As stated by Creswell (2013), phenomenology is concerned with "the essence or meaning of the lived experience" (p. 62) and involves a detailed analysis of how individuals make sense of their world. This approach is particularly useful when studying complex and nuanced phenomena that cannot be easily quantified or measured.

When analyzing Veteran reintegration into businesses through Veteran experiences and business perspectives, a phenomenological approach allowed for a deeper understanding of the subjective experiences and perceptions of both groups. By exploring how Veterans and businesses interpret and make sense of the reintegration process, researchers gained insight into the challenges and opportunities that arise during this transition. As noted by van Manen (1990), phenomenology can help researchers "gain a richer, more complex, and more profound understanding of human experience" (p. 17), which is crucial when studying complex social phenomena such as Veteran reintegration.

### **Theoretical, Conceptual Framework**

Our research was primarily explored through Tajfel and Turner's (2019) Social Identity Theory and Social Identity Model of Identity Change. Tajfel and Turner's Social Identity Theory (SIT) indicates that membership and participation within certain social groups is an integral part of self-esteem and personal pride, and thus, gives us a sense of social identity and belonging to a social world (Tajfel & Turner, 2019). Tajfel and Turner's theory provides the theoretical framework to understand the social categories and constructs that influence future labor participation of transitioning U.S. Military service-members and already separated Veterans.

Social Identity Model of Identity Change (SIMIC) is a theory that explains how people's identities can change over time (Lyer et al., 2009). The theory proposes that identity change is a social process that occurs within the context of a person's relationships with others. According to SIMIC, people's identities are shaped by the social groups to which they belong, and these identities can change because of interactions with others who have different identities. SIMIC also proposes that identity change can be facilitated by the presence of certain psychological and social conditions, such as a sense of openness to new experiences and a supportive social environment. For this study, Social Identity Model of Identity Change theory was useful in understanding how service-members and Veterans might experience identity change as they transition to civilian life. The process of transitioning from military to civilian life can be a significant and potentially challenging life event that may require service-members and Veterans to adjust to new roles, responsibilities, and social identities. Therefore, that theoretical framework served as an analytic tool to aid the understanding of the phenomenon of the U.S. Military service-member transition to Veteran status and thus, civilian life and Veterans situated in civilian contexts.

While our research was anchored in the concepts from both theories and their unique elements, we drew from those theories to create an overall conceptual framework as an analytic tool for our final analytic synthesis. The final synthesis triangulated both theoretical concepts with elements of Kotter's (2012) Change Management Theory and the theory of Design Thinking, which seeks to combine analysis and creativity to engage individuals across multiple domains in redesigning and exploration of innovative solutions that differ from past solutions (Razzouk & Shute, 2012). Design thinking has been explained in the Harvard Business Review

as “Thinking like a designer can transform the way you develop products, services, processes—and even strategy” (Brown, 2008, p. 1)

Kotter's (2012) change management theory is a framework that helps organizations plan and implement changes effectively. It consists of eight steps: establishing a sense of urgency, creating a guiding coalition, developing a vision and strategy, communicating the change vision, empowering others to act on the vision, creating short-term wins, consolidating gains, producing more change, and anchoring new approaches in the organization's culture (Kotter, 2012). This theory was useful in the context of Veteran transition in several ways. First, it helped create a clear vision and strategy for the change process, which can be particularly important for Veterans as they navigate the transition from military to civilian life. By establishing a sense of urgency and involving a guiding coalition of key stakeholders, organizations can ensure that the transition process is well-planned and supported. Additionally, by communicating the change vision and empowering others to act on it, organizations can help transitioning military members and Veterans successfully and sustainably ease into civilian life. Overall, Kotter's (2012) change management theory can provide a useful structure and set of guidelines for supporting the Veteran transition and thus, integrating that population group into Tennessee’s vocational setting.

On the other hand, Design thinking is a problem-solving approach that involves understanding the needs of the user, generating creative ideas, prototyping, and testing solutions, and implementing the most successful ones (*What Is Design Thinking?*, n.d.) The theory of Design Thinking seeks to combine analysis and creativity to engage individuals across multiple domains in redesigning and exploration of innovative solutions that differ from past solutions (Razzouk & Shute, 2012). Most importantly for this study, Design Thinking addressed the biases

and behaviors that hamper innovation (*Why Design Thinking Works*, n.d.). Because Design Thinking requires iterative processes--meaning that it involves continually refining and improving upon ideas as they are developed and tested (*What Is Design Thinking?*, n.d.) concepts from Design Thinking coupled with the Kotter change management theory promised the prospect for effective solutions to complex problems. As such, both greatly aided the final analysis and preparation of findings intended for wider dissemination.

### **Methodology, Protocols**

To answer our research questions, our study endeavored to capture the complexity and contextual conditions within the context of the Veteran transition. Therefore, the research sought to account for diverse perspectives. Our primary sources were comprised of data collected from one-on-one interviews, unobtrusive focus group observations and focus group interviews. Qualitative research demands that we reconstruct narratives shared by participants in interviews that generate rich, thick descriptive stories intended to contribute to in-depth understanding (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 132). Using people to further research is often the richest tool even in the twenty-first century. People serve as primary sources for data often collected through observation, surveys, or interviews (Bhattacharya, 2017). Further, it was imperative to note that although the nature of our research demanded reconstruction and in-depth analysis of participant conversation analysis, all ethical parameters of qualitative research concerning people and their accounts as primary data sources were strictly observed. Identities were concealed with our explicit aim of “do no harm.” Therefore, data collection methods guaranteed anonymity in that participants were only referenced by the date of the interview and random letters, with no ability to contextually identify a person through any deductive measure.



Our research process made explicit the use of purposive sampling as our main data collection strategy. Purposive sampling is intentional and moves away from any form of random sampling. Adopting a purposive strategy assumed that, given the aims and objectives of the study, specific kinds of people may hold different and important views about the ideas and issues at question and therefore needed to be included in the sample (Mason, 2002; Robinson, 2014; Trost, 1986). The nature and intent of our research was qualitative with goals of yielding depth and not breadth. The researchers believed the rigor of the study would yield better results and confidence in answering our main research question and the four sub-questions, by working directly with a purposive sample that could provide the best outcome, given the niche arena of Veteran labor participation within the state of Tennessee.

This research was approved by the Vanderbilt University Institutional Review Board (IRB) #230397 on 3/26/2023.

## **Protocols**

### **Research Approach**

This research employed four different strategies, namely: 1) document analysis; 2) one-on-one interviews; 3) focus group interviews and 4) unobtrusive discourse analysis. In the next section, we will go through the protocol for each of these methodological approaches.

***Document Analysis.*** All data collection for document analysis was conducted using publicly available and public facing documents; no personal information about individuals or personal documents or artifacts were collected for this purpose.

We conducted a thorough review of relevant documents such as policy briefs, reports, and program evaluations related to Veteran reintegration. Documents were collected from

a variety of sources including government agencies, non-governmental organizations, and academic institutions. Thematic analysis was employed to identify patterns, themes, and trends within the data, including challenges, successes, and recommendations related to Veteran reintegration.

Public facing sources:

- Congressional doctrine
- public and governmental policy
- legal texts
- official U.S. Governmental documents
- websites (state, federal, Veteran affairs, Veteran non-profit and labor)
- state and federal level documents
- empirical studies
- historical texts such as diary entries and letters by prior political and military figures
- original research studies
- Books
- Articles
- review studies
- published dissertation studies
- LinkedIn & Indeed, featuring second-hand account

### **One-on-One Interviews and Focus Group Interviews**

*Participant Selection.* Participants were chosen based on meeting the researchers' criteria. Such criteria included U.S. Military service-members actively seeking to exit military service and enter civilian life, a Veteran who has actively transitioned out of the military and into civilian hood, a Veteran that is working or is seeking employment in Tennessee, a Veteran stakeholder who works in Tennessee state government, and/or is a Veteran stakeholder who works within the state of Tennessee in the field (in any capacity), specifically with the Veteran and military affiliate population, either non-profit, educational or within the business realm.

Participants included:

- U.S. Military service-members actively seeking to exit military service (17 people)
- Veteran (transitioned into TN labor force) (8 people)
- Veteran (transitioned and is seeking entry into the TN labor force) (9 people)
- Veteran stakeholder, Tennessee State Government (5 people)
- Veteran stakeholder, state of Tennessee Veteran space, non-profit (3 people)
- Veteran stakeholder, state of Tennessee Veteran space, education (3 people)

For the Focus Group interviews, the following participants were selected:

- A chamber of commerce gathering that consisted of nine individuals, within one group exchange.
- A collaboration session between career counselors and Veteran students, featuring twenty individuals, within one group exchange.
- A state committee had a gathering centered on educational aspects that involved eight individuals, within one group exchange.

Participation in both one-on-one interviews and focus groups were based on availability, interest, and who was working "at the time" in the focus group agencies. Approximately ten people participated in both one-on-one interviews and focus groups, which was beneficial because the one-on-one interviews and focus groups had different interview protocols and focused on different issues. The aims of the one-on-one interviews were different from the aims of the focus group interviews. The one-on-one interviews aimed to gather personal insights and personal experiences, whereas the focus group interviews focused more on state-level issues. It was important to have both these formats because people may not be comfortable sharing personal experiences in a focus group setting, and both kinds of information (personal and state-level) lent a significance to the goals of the study.

Participants meeting such criteria were referred to the researchers by the Military Transition team via phone and/or another participant (i.e., "snowball recruitment" (Emerson, 2015). The researchers believe this approach of engaging in advance afforded candidates the ability to decline participation in a trusted environment, while maintaining confidentiality before

engaging in the research, and not feel targeted within a public forum. This approach adhered to the ethical value to do no harm, thus removing the feeling of solicitation on such a critical topic.

### **Inclusion, Eligibility Criteria**

Inclusion in the study carried minimal risk, given that participants were autonomous adults who freely participated without coercion and expectation of benefit; the study aimed to be equitable by having inclusive and non-discriminatory criterion for participant selection. The study did not exclude participants based on race, ethnicity, gender, age, sexual orientation, or any other protected characteristics.

While the study aimed to recruit a diverse sample of participants, the Veteran participant criterion was scoped to service-members who have completed their service and have transitioned to civilian life. There is a long-standing history of procedural safeguards and regulations covering U.S. Military research involving human subjects, yet U.S. Military are not classified as a vulnerable population. This does not negate a U.S. Military member from being classified under a different class (Ravitch, n.d.), if for example, in addition to being a U.S. Military member, one has a disability. Status of a disability, whether physical, mental or psychological, was never requested from the potential participants.

***Validity Protocol.*** Ravitch and Carl (2021) emphasize the importance of validity within qualitative research. In their view, validity is not a set of boxes to check, rather, it is a complicated goal that is intended to be met by introducing a set of techniques and processes to achieve rigor and validity (Ravitch, 2021, p. 165). Since the study was qualitative, the researchers aimed to adhere to the same standards to not only ensure rigor and disciplined inquiry, but to lend a uniform framework that enabled the research to truly illuminate the complexity of research participants' experiences, contextualizing their lives, perspectives, and

experiences to help present the most complex and therefore valid renderings possible (Ravitch ,2021, p.168). Each grouping followed their framed prescriptive protocol and predetermined questions aimed to capture multiple perspectives to answer the research question, which once again, is as follows:

**RQ:** *What factors or barriers affect labor participation among Veterans and transitioning military seeking to secure a job as they transition their identity from that of a service-member to a civilian? What are they and how are they understood and by whom are they acknowledged, if at all?*

The research question was created to lend a guiding framework to ensure consistency and uniformity throughout the qualitative inquiry process, which also incorporated multiple perspectives to ensure the validity of the research through active engagement in *descriptive validity*. Descriptive validity is the means to which the accuracy of data is recorded and transcribed, therefore complete, and not interpreted through the researchers' lens (Ravitch, 2021 p.172). In doing so, this lent *credibility* given the aims were to consistently capture the complexity of participants' experiences synonymous to what research credibility demands: consideration of all the complexities that present themselves in a study and to deal with patterns that are not easily explained (Ravitch, 2021, p.168). Moreover, the notion of validity was reinforced through credibility by also incorporating *participation validation* (Ravitch, 2021, p. 176). This strategy ensured participant perspectives were accurately represented in the data findings and thus, represented in the research results. In keeping with Ravitch and Carl's suggestions to achieve the end goal of participation validation, presentation of findings to

participants were delivered with the following prompts (Ravitch, 2021, p.176) to solicit their review:

1. Does this transcript reflect and resonate with your perspective?
2. Were your words, perspectives and ideas accurately captured in this study?
3. Do you have any specific concerns related to our interpretation that need to be addressed?

Finally, another touchstone of validity assurance within our research framework was achieved during the nascent stages of our research project's conception; we employed *investigator triangulation*, which focuses on multiple researchers being involved in the study (Ravitch, 2021, p. 174). Our research intended to continue employing elements of investigator triangulation by the different participant interviews and researchers carrying out the study. Each researcher shared their interviews' recordings and transcription among the two researchers to ensure maximum peer scrutiny for data collection and interpretation. This achieved the end goal of validity assurance, given that investigator triangulation demanded multiple researcher perspectives and participation to reduce bias or the potential thereof (Ravitch, 2021, pp. 174-175). With the above protocols in place, the researchers aimed for stable findings to emerge.

It is critical to ensure validity carries through not only from the nascency of research design, but even more critical was the planning for the data analysis. Thus, early in our methodology and interview protocol process design, we baked in "validity" by ensuring all stakeholder views and opinions, even our own as researchers, were accurately represented to the best of our ability. To that end, the researchers ensure validity during the data analysis process by

strictly adhering to the ideas of investigator triangulation, stakeholder validation and also excessive peer review and transparency with collecting, recording, and synthesis of the data.

### **Interview Protocol**

Interview participants were first read the consent, thus allowing the participants the right to stop participating at any time, without penalty or consequence. If consent was rendered, participants were made aware of privacy mitigations and confidentiality protections. Participants were provided the ability to withdraw from the interview at any time, and any data collected up to that point would be destroyed to balance the ethical protections of participants' rights and wellbeing, at the participant's request. Each participant was notified that the interview questions were designed to gather information to answer the research question. Each interviewee was given the opportunity to answer the interview questions. See Appendix A for the interview questions for both the one-on-one interviews and focus groups. All interview questions were open-ended. Participants were notified that although the interview format was structured, the most candid answers were requested. To that end, participants were encouraged to elaborate to encourage a natural conversation format.

Participants were notified that answers to any questions were considered data and would be coded to illuminate themes prevalent across all interviews. After all questions were asked, participants were thanked for their time and debriefed with assurances that collected data would be rigorously analyzed. The researchers explained to the participants the processes of analysis through investigator triangulation, participation validation, and an iterative process of analysis involving regular checks and feedback from participants to ensure accuracy and representativeness of the findings. Further assurances were given of commitments to ensuring the validity and reliability of the research, and further, that responses would be treated with

utmost confidentiality. This protocol applied to both one-on-one interviews and interviews conducted via focus groups.

Altogether, we conducted 15 one-on-one interviews and 3 focus groups, which ranged in size from 8-20 participants.

### ***Unobtrusive Discourse Analysis***

Governmental stakeholder meetings consisted of prearranged dates scheduled by outside constituents. Such predetermined meetings of state-level opportunities encompassed the educational, governmental, and business sector and revolved around opportunities available for Veterans on the state-level and barriers Veterans may face. Therefore, the meetings the researchers observed were not selected by the researchers and were observed based on researcher availability, as well as factors such as confidentiality which determined the researchers' actual ability to observe. These meetings were not all Veteran specific but offered touch points that allowed the researchers a lens into state and business operations. The researchers were attuned to observe what may exist or *not* exist that may serve as an avenue or barrier for Veterans seeking to reintegrate into civilian life.

In this qualitative research study, several assemblies across different platforms were observed and their implications analyzed. Here is a summary of these gatherings:

- At a military base, a meeting was held that encompassed nine individuals and a collective discussion.
- A chamber of commerce conducted gathering that consisted of fourteen individual interactions and a group discourse.
- Collaboration sessions between career counselors and Veteran students were observed, featuring nine individual consultations and a group discourse.



- A working group, hosted by a governing office, had a meeting comprised of nine individuals and a group deliberation.
- A state higher education committee had a gathering that involved eight individuals and a collective dialogue.
- Further collaboration sessions between career counselors and Veteran students were also observed.
- Lastly, a private group, for which names have been withheld, included a session with five individuals.

These meetings were characterized by rich exchanges of ideas, dynamic dialogues, strategic planning, and collaborative decision-making processes. The diversity of participants' perspectives offered a wealth of insights into the phenomena under investigation, providing invaluable data for this qualitative research study.

A separate protocol applied for unobtrusive group observations due to the nature of the data collected. Unlike one-on-one interviews and interviews conducted within focus group settings, the unobtrusive group observations were not researcher led, nor were they audio or video recorded because of the confidential nature of the discussions. According to Bhattacharya (2017) peripheral membership requires that the researcher only become minimally involved in the group that he or she is observing and does not participate in activities but documents what he or she observes from the sidelines (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 140). Thus, the researchers applied for a separate IRB protocol to ensure data gathered in such contexts was as unobtrusive as possible so as not to bias the observation and maintain detachment between the researchers and participants. Therefore, the group observation protocol employed only offered direct observation.

A group discourse analysis template was created in advance of observations to gather qualitative data. See Appendix C for this template. It ensured the researchers' ability to systematically analyze and interpret the language and interaction patterns of participants in the group they were observing. To use this template effectively, the researchers took measures to reduce potential bias in the analysis, such as ensuring that multiple coders (both researchers) were involved in the analysis and that inter-rater reliability was established.

In summary, the scope of the data collection involved the gathering of notes from the one-on-one interviews, the focus group interviews and the observed unobtrusive discourse analysis. Data collected was used to triangulate with other data sources (e.g., interviews, findings from document analysis) to gain a more complete understanding of the research topic and participants' perspectives and experiences. A predetermined protocol and template allowed for a systematic and uniform approach for the researchers to gather data and focus on language and discourse used by participants to gain insight, triangulate, validate, and offer reliability to the findings, thus weaving out discrepancies and researcher bias that might not have been immediately apparent from observations of behavior alone.

### **Data Storage Protocol**

Electronic safeguards, as well as safeguards for hard copies, notebooks, binders, reports, etc. were enacted to ensure privacy and confidentiality. An electronic folder was created to hold evidentiary sources, which required credentials and two-factor authentication of authorized users. The file was password protected with access granted only to the two researchers.

Qualitative interview and focus group data was collected on ZOOM ("Zoom (Software)," 2023) OTTER AI ("Otter.Ai," 2023) platforms, and in person. Orderly anonymous naming conventions were applied for each file that resulted from any data analysis process.

Interviews and focus group electronic documents held a uniform naming convention so that data was easily located and accessible, yet anonymous.

A filing cabinet with a key was used to store hard copies of related documents and materials to include handwritten field notes, notebooks, memo notes, and binders. Each researcher maintained a notebook for note taking and a binder for memo notes, which consisted of ideas and recommendations as sorting through the research process, which were also stored in a safe located in a secure area only accessible by the researchers. In addition to the described data protection methods, all ethical parameters of qualitative research concerning people and their accounts as primary data sources were strictly observed. Identities were concealed with the explicit aim of "do no harm," both in data collection processes, and the final report. Any data collected involving personnel involved with interviews or focus group observations did not contain Personally Identifiable Information (PII) or any biographical data--only correlating codes were used for personnel. Overall, data collection methods employed ensured participant anonymity.

### **Limitations**

The researchers acknowledge the existence of strengths and limitations of the proposed research study. Further, the data obtained by the human subject ethnography experience is believed to be a contributing factor in overcoming integrity issues, such as data and research triangulation. With that said, the research group also acknowledged weaknesses that are inherent to qualitative research. For one, qualitative research is heavily dependent on the individual skills of the researcher and is easily influenced by the researcher's personal biases and idiosyncrasies. At times, the researcher's presence during data gathering could have affected the subjects' responses. Moreover, processing and analyzing large volumes of data can become a cumbersome

and a time-consuming endeavor. Therefore, to compensate for those weaknesses amongst qualitative research, the researchers reemphasized the plan to curtail this design weakness by implementing validity measures captured throughout the methodological processes. This was achieved by having triangulation amongst both researchers.

Secondly, the gathering of quantitative data was considered but was decided against. We decided against adding a mixed-methods component to this research on the grounds that it would be time consuming to gather and because the complexity of the questions the researchers were seeking to answer required more depth than breadth. It was necessary to leverage existing quantitative data resources and operationalize prior research and make it available directly to the state decision makers.

### **Data Analysis Approach**

After conducting 15 interviews, three focus groups, and observing seven meetings, data saturation was achieved. These qualitative measures allowed the researchers to collect in-depth information, create a space for participants to justify reasons for their responses, and offer more of an expressive story-style avenue in collecting data. Each of the interviews and focus group meetings that were taped via ZOOM (founded in 2011, ZOOM Video Communications, Inc.) produced transcripts and notes which were then transcribed using a third-party software, OTTER.ai (founded as AI Sense in 2016, now doing business as Otter.ai, as of Jan 2020 ); transcripts were then verified and confirmed through the process of replaying the transcripts for quality control purposes then coded thematically by hand, and ideas that emerged were noted, thus the data was reduced into themes. Ravitch and Carl (2021) claim that themes represent important concepts in the data and are often generalizable to a data set, yet themes do not necessarily need to reflect patterns and commonalities (p.283).

The researchers sought to document axioms that presented themselves as themes tethered to components of Veteran identity during transition, their effects on integration into the Tennessee labor force, and further, identification of possible barriers Veterans and businesses may face with meeting employment goals. Because coding is a way to assign meaning to data (Ravitch and Carl, 2021, p. 264), this phase of the data analysis approach is intended to aid the researchers' ability to boldly represent analytic ideas and thus, draw out themes.

Data collected for this study employed both primary and secondary qualitative sources from various contexts. The primary data sources for this research project included previously mentioned one-on-one interviews, interviews via focus groups, observations of selected group meetings (as described in the group selection protocol), and analysis of congressional doctrine, public and governmental policy, legal texts, official U.S. Governmental documents, websites (state, Federal Government, U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, Veteran non-profit and labor), state and Federal Government-level documents, empirical studies, historical texts such as diary entries and letters by prior political and military figures, networking sites such as LinkedIn and Indeed, featuring first-hand accounts of employer posts and candidates seeking employment, all of which were publicly facing. Additionally, original research studies were utilized as primary data sources. As for the secondary data sources, they consisted of books, articles, review studies, and dissertation studies that offered analysis or interpretation of data. In addition, studies focusing on the Veteran and military context were included in the secondary data sources.

### **Phased Data Analysis**

To answer the research questions, the study endeavored to capture the complexity and contextual conditions within the context of the Veteran transition. After all data was collected, a phased approach was used for data analysis to fully interrogate all available data sources.

The first phase analyzed data sources relative to Tennessee's vocational environment and the Veteran transition context. Secondly, this phase also included analysis of data sources from the document analysis part of the study to then understand aspects and influences affecting Veteran reintegration.

The second phase involved qualitative thematic analysis of conversations from interviews and focus and observation groups composed of various individuals, U.S. Military service-members actively seeking to exit military service and enter civilian life, Veterans, and individuals who intersect with business sectors and Veteran contexts relevant to this study. In the context of unobtrusive observational group research, conversation analysis involved studying the conversations of group members, according to principles outlined by Onwuegbuzie et al. (2009). This method was used as a starting point for analyzing group discussions and for relating larger questions to theories and interactional discourses (Myers, 1998, 2006 as cited in Onwuegbuzie et al. 2009). By utilizing conversation analysis, the researcher was able to examine the way in which focus group members communicate with each other (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009). The second phase involved analytic triangulation of data to culminate a final synthesized analysis and preparation of findings intended for wider dissemination.

### *Phase I*

Ravitch and Carl (2021) indicated that the exercise of data analysis can be performed in many ways (p. 263), and emphasized that reading and thinking about interview transcripts, observation notes and analyzing narrative structures all are valuable forms of data analysis, (Ravitch and Carl, 2021, p.264). To that end, the research group's data analysis approach began with a review of key documents and literature surrounding Veteran identities in seeking to

transition from the military into civilian life to contextualize an approach in answering the research question centered on:

**Research Question:** *What factors or barriers affect labor participation among Veterans and transitioning military seeking to secure a job as they transition their identity from that of a service-member to a civilian? What are they and how are they understood and by whom are they acknowledged, if at all?*

**Sub questions:**

1. *Are Tennessee businesses postured to attract separating service-members, Veterans, and their military affiliates?*
2. *Are Tennessee businesses postured to recruit separating service-members, Veterans, and their military affiliates?*
3. *What characteristics do Veterans seek in a business for sustained employment?*
4. *Are Veterans armed with resources to facilitate their transition to business opportunities in a timely manner?*

Drawing on Ravitch and Carl's (2021) practical advice for "Immersive engagement" (p.261) a great deal of effort was undertaken to, as Ravitch and Carl (2021) suggest, "critically engage" the existing literature. As the researchers planned and delved into data collection, even in the nascent stages before and after the literature reviews, the researchers continued to analyze data to deduce critical ideas that were derived from, and drove the methodological processes, as they were iterative.

Document analysis was conducted using publicly available and public facing documents; no personal information about individuals or personal documents or artifacts were collected for this purpose. In turn, a thorough review of relevant documents such as policy briefs, reports, and program evaluations related to Veteran reintegration was conducted. Documents were collected from various sources including government agencies, non-governmental organizations, and academic institutions. Thematic analysis was manually employed to identify patterns, themes, and trends within the data, including challenges, successes, and recommendations related to Veteran reintegration. Field notes pertaining to the document analysis and collection process were memorialized in the initial phase of exploration. Notes were then interrogated against the backdrop of the research questions, while on other hand, notes were shared for reflection and extrapolation of overall themes to conceptualize broader themes. Researchers then engaged in dialogic discussion and held multiple review sessions in which the validity and integrity of overall findings were critically analyzed.

## ***Phase II***

In turn, the second phase of our data analysis approach included conducting an inductive analysis from the coding process. The key aim of the inductive analysis approach was to implement a method referred to as clustering similar analytic ideas drawn from the codes and categorizing them to draw out salient patterns (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 150) and thus, the thematic qualities of Veteran participation and possible barriers to entering the labor force.

The researchers employed open coding to allow for fluidity as qualitative data emerged through different rounds of data collection. This was achieved by breaking down the qualitative data into descriptions which then naturally evolved into distinct categories. There were multiple rounds of coding as each time data was acquired the researchers would triangulate the data



amongst themselves, analyze it and decide if new themes should become more granulated or merge. At the beginning of the coding process, eight themes emerged, which expanded to encompass several hundred sub-codes. These were later distilled into four “prongs,” with eight needs. According to Bhattacharya (2017) the inductive analysis phase is required in qualitative research because themes will not emerge out of the data without the iterative and involved process of inductive analysis (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 151) to become intimately connected to data. Once this phase of the analytic approach was completed, the researchers triangulated the data already analyzed in the cumulative data scan, from Phases I and Phases II, to re-acquaint their understanding of the patterns with possible theoretical frameworks, particularly SIMIC & SIT frameworks. This served as a sound and iterative approach, given Bhattacharya’s (2017) recommendation to look across and within categories to identify patterns that arise to the surface (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 153). Further, with respect to research validity, a key tenet of qualitative research, the data analysis approach employed observed a uniform framework, in concert with researcher triangulation. This approach enabled analysis to illuminate the complexity of the research participants’ experiences while contextualizing their perspectives, therefore rendering the most complex and valid picture possible (Ravitch and Carl, p.168).

## **Chapter 4. Discussion of Findings and Recommendations**

### **Introduction**

Transitioning from the U.S. Military to civilian life can present significant difficulties for service-members and Veterans, who must not only find new employment but also adapt to a new civilian identity. Syracuse University researchers aptly referred to this period as a unique transition unlike any other, given that Veterans experience the transition as a form of disruption less visible to society, even amid the multiple transitions Veterans typically experience (Semaan et al., 2016). For Veterans (and service-members seeking to separate from military service) in particular, whose self-identity is often intertwined with the character traits gained from military service and the influence of military ethos, finding a meaningful career path is crucial to achieving a successful transition towards a civilian identity. However, the process of finding a suitable career path after the transition can be challenging. Thus, the transition holds potential to present certain implications for identity, potentially leading to missed opportunities for the service-member and non-military organizations. According to Tajfel and Turner's (2019) social identity theory, an individual's self-identity is partly determined by their membership in different social groups.

Military service is a significant social group that confers a strong sense of identity to its members. This identity is composed of shared beliefs, values, and experiences distinct from those of civilians. By transitioning out of the military, service-members are leaving behind a significant aspect of their social identity. This loss of identity can cause a major shift in one's self-perception and lead to challenges when trying to establish a new sense of identity as a civilian. As Tajfel and Turner (2019) note, individuals tend to favor the groups they belong to and may struggle to integrate into new groups due to a preference for their previous identity. This can make the transition from military to civilian life particularly challenging and can

contribute to difficulties in finding a new sense of identity and purpose. Thus, as Semaan et al. (2016) noted in their research regarding this context, there is a critical need among researchers and society to understand how to aid Veterans as they reintegrate into civilian society post U.S. Military service.

To that end, this research aimed to understand the context surrounding a unique problem landscape centered on the premise that finding a meaningful career path is crucial for military Veterans to transition successfully to a civilian identity. This may be especially in Tennessee, which seemingly lacks a formalized pipeline for recruitment or sustained effort to capitalize on the transitioning Veteran talent pool even amid the state’s mounting industry growth (as of 2023) and projected future labor shortages referenced earlier.

Through the commentary shared in numerous interviews (and the resulting qualitative coding and discourse analysis processes), and data in existing literature, prominent themes emerged, revealing substantial barriers Veterans and separating service-members faced during their attempts to transition back to civilian life. Moreover, the perspectives of businesses and non-military organizations—how they see the problem of absorbing military talent—were also equally represented. The following section outlines the themes which emerged in this qualitative study, and in turn, revealed the barriers and challenges Veterans face as they seek new intergroup membership in civilian contexts, specifically in the state of Tennessee. Here, we present the 9 main findings from the study and their associated recommendations.

### **State-level Challenges**

#### **Challenge 1. There is disunification of resources, unaligned efforts, and miscommunication within private, public, partnerships (P3).**

“We have Vets in the state in rural areas we can’t even account for.”

This statement comes from a state executive who is charged with supporting active service military, families, and Veterans within the state. State-funded contracted programs are initiatives or services provided by the government through contracts with private or nonprofit organizations to address specific needs or deliver essential services to the public. The government allocates funds to these contracted programs, which are then implemented and managed by external entities. States may contract out social services like homelessness prevention programs, substance abuse treatment and mental health services. The state will often contract with healthcare providers and clinics, and education-related services like tutoring services, vocational training, and adult education.

The use of contracted programs allows states to leverage external expertise, resources, and specialized services while maintaining control over the delivery and outcomes of public services. These contracts can be subject to changes in budget priorities, legislation, and administrative decisions.

According to the nonprofit organization Charity Watch (Nov. 2 & 2015, n.d.), there are more than 40,000 nonprofit organizations dedicated to serving the military, Veterans and their families. This represents 41 percent growth since 2008. The number represents 10 organizations for every county in the United States. In Tennessee, there are thousands of nonprofit contracted programs supporting state Veterans, active military members and their families. State officials made comments such as, “I make a note of who is responsive and only refer to them. Otherwise, you really don’t know who to trust that will help.” Others made statements such as, “XX is the gold standard, if we can only get her to operate in every region.” In addition, Veterans noted as not knowing where to turn and finding it overwhelming with the number of resources offered, all operating but unvetted.

## ***Recommendations***

### ***A. Design and prioritize policies that make Tennessee the most attractive Veteran-Ready state by codifying practices to streamline P3's, insert fiscal accountability performance measures, and alleviate Veteran barriers toward employment.***

By understanding the impact of social identities on Veterans' employment experiences, policymakers can design initiatives that foster a sense of belonging and inclusion in the workplace, while promoting cultural competency among employers. This approach will help create an environment that supports Veterans' successful transition into the civilian workforce and reduces barriers to their employment opportunities borne from the unintended consequences Veterans have endured merely for serving. This recommendation is consistent with General George Washington's dictums in his Farewell Orders, Address to the Army, 2 November 1783 (*Founders Online*, n.d.) imploring the Nation to understand and embrace its moral obligations to those returning from service:

"It is universally acknowledged that the enlarged prospect of happiness, opened by the confirmation of our Independence and Sovereignty, almost exceeds the power of description. And shall not the brave Men who have contributed so essentially to these inestimable acquisitions, retiring victorious from the Field of War to the Field of Agriculture, participate in all the blessings which have been obtained? In such a Republic, who will exclude them from the rights of Citizens and the fruits of their labors? In such a Country so happily circumstanced, the pursuits of Commerce and the cultivation of the Soil, will unfold to industry the certain road to competence. To those hardy Soldiers, who are actuated by the spirit of adventure, the Fisheries will afford ample and profitable employment, and the extensive and fertile Regions of the West, will yield a most happy Asylum to those, who fond of domestic enjoyment, are seeking for

personal independence. Nor is it possible to conceive that any one of the United States will prefer a National Bankruptcy and a dissolution of the Union, to a compliance with the requisitions of Congress and the payment of its just debts—so that the Officers and Soldiers may expect considerable assistance in recommending their civil occupations, from the sums due to these from the Public, which must and will most inevitably be paid (*Founders Online*, n.d.).

The reparation effort must start with societies and communities--among all civic and business settings--in each state. In a modern, post-war America, consider Washington's dictums (*Founders Online*, n.d.) as advice applicable to the context of Tennessee's modern vocational landscape and labor-force attraction goals. U.S. Military service-members seeking a seamless return to civilian life are motivated to find a new vocation after their service has ended, but research has overwhelmingly shown that all separating service-members are motivated to secure that prospect **before, not after**, they depart the military. Therefore, both the service-member and the State's needs can be mutually served: valuable volunteers are seeking seamless integration into civic settings and Tennessee's economic prosperity depends on filling jobs with people whose character espouse the honorable qualities of values that are codified in the U.S. Military, and those people are the service-members who are on their way towards Veteran-civilian status.

Consider that as of 2019, the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) accounts for Department of Defense Data indicating that as many as 200,000 service-members leave U.S. Military service and transition to civilian life each year (*Transitioning Service-members: Information on Military Employment Assistance Centers | U.S. GAO*). Moreover, lest we not forget that some service-members are not a singular entity: many are married to individuals who,

if not already, are equally valuable civic assets, particularly for the state of Tennessee. Retaining these valuable assets is crucial to Tennessee's transformation as the most "Veteran-Ready" state, and thus, the most attractive state to all military-affiliated.

At present, Tennessee holds the potential to capitalize on the military population geographically situated between the state and the neighboring state of Kentucky, where U.S. Army base Fort Campbell is located near Tennessee's border. According to various data sources, the military population is roughly as follows:

- 17,429 active-duty service-members in Tennessee (*Tennessee Military Legislation & Policies | Military State Policy*).
- 10,365 spouses of active-duty service-members in Tennessee (*Tennessee Military Legislation & Policies | Military State Policy*).
- 27,057 active-duty service members in Kentucky (*Fort Campbell | Base Overview & Info | Military INSTALLATIONS*); and
- 51,480 active-duty service-member-family members (data from the source did not delineate between spouses and other dependents) (*Fort Campbell | Base Overview & Info | Military INSTALLATIONS*).

Although the separating service-member and Veteran population is a major component of Governor Bill Lee's strategy to successfully fill critical labor shortages and grow and sustain Tennessee's economy, Tennessee must first posture itself as a prominent interlocutor in the Nation's conversation about the value of separating military members and U.S. Military in civic society. The Soldiers, Airmen, Sailors, Marines, and Veterans seeking to find their place in

civilian society are relying on a state's "Sea of Goodwill" as a beacon back to civilian life. However, the Sea of Goodwill must be first unified, and second, navigable.

Service-members, Veterans primarily (and their military-affiliated counterparts), as then-General Washington stated (*Founders Online*, n.d.), are owed a considerable amount of assistance in recommending their civil occupations, from the public writ-large, who must uphold their moral obligation. To achieve its goals of increased Labor Force Participation Rate (LFRP) among Veterans and the tertiary goal of posturing Tennessee to be the leading "Veteran-Ready" state, the State's single most prominent voice, the Governor, and all State-media platforms that represent Tennessee's statehood, must communicate clearly that Veterans are valuable civic assets to a society that embraces their service as equal or greater experience, not a gap-period because of their time in the military. Further, the state must strategically employ communication science that clearly communicates that all players in the state not only understand but first recognize the value of Veterans. To that end, the post-COVID-19 pandemic U.S., and most of the world, has become hyper-reliant on technology, so it would stand to reason that the most logical start for reframing the Veteran narrative, with the goal of Veteran retainment and attraction in the state environment, begins at the state level on the state's website and technology platforms. Once there, Tennessee's "Sea of Goodwill" would ideally be navigable. Service-members seeking their reentry--and Veterans and those who are military-affiliated would ideally inherently know to seek out a state's governmental presence online as a starting point to find regional Tennessee-community resources within the state by a modernized communication strategy that fosters an abiding imperative indicating "you belong here, the door is wide open," but more importantly, "here's your map to navigate the road here."



Tennessee could consider emulating the state of Florida, which has codified every possible benefit and affordance for Veterans that strongly promotes Veteran belonging and state citizen membership, a key tenet of social identity theory's idea of intergroup membership. Examples include Florida's website. Florida's website demonstrates clear pathways to fulfilling long-term employment with no certification/licensure barriers in a variety of industries that other states failed to create access to for Veterans; networking and access to labor pipelines. Moreover, the state's policies and employment opportunities that promote those ideas and thus, successful reintegration of Veterans, are traceable and easy to find.

***B. Establish a coordination of care network.***

The same concept of the "*After the Sea of Goodwill: A Collective Approach to Veteran Reintegration*" (ASOG) also applies to veterans in Tennessee. Despite initial public support and gratitude for their service, veterans in the state face unique challenges when transitioning back to civilian life. Like the rest of the United States, Tennessee still lacks a unified framework to consolidate and optimize veteran resources effectively. Establishing such a framework would be crucial in providing coordinated and efficient support to veterans throughout the state, addressing their specific needs, reaching those in rural areas, and ensuring a smoother reintegration process.

However, it is important to note that the operationalization of this framework lies in the hands of the state, in this case, Tennessee. Each state may have unique challenges and resources, and it is up to Tennessee to tailor and implement the framework according to its specific needs and requirements. By doing so, Tennessee can create a more effective and efficient support system, ensuring that the goodwill towards Veterans is translated into tangible and sustained assistance throughout their journey back home. Therefore, in our research, we took the liberty to map the following according to the ASOG concept:

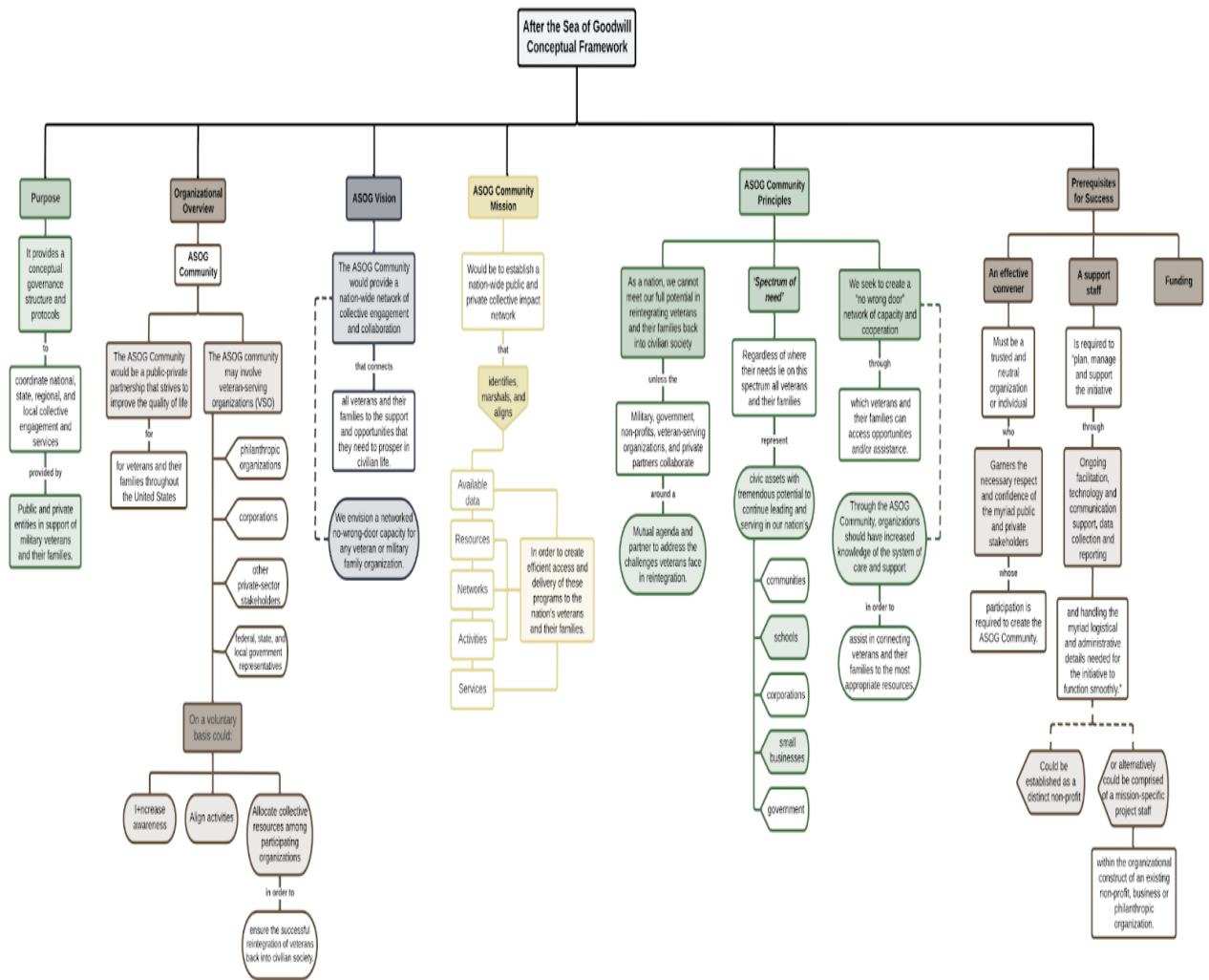


Figure 3a. *After the Sea of Goodwill*, Conceptual Framework, constructed using “mind map” software by the researchers.

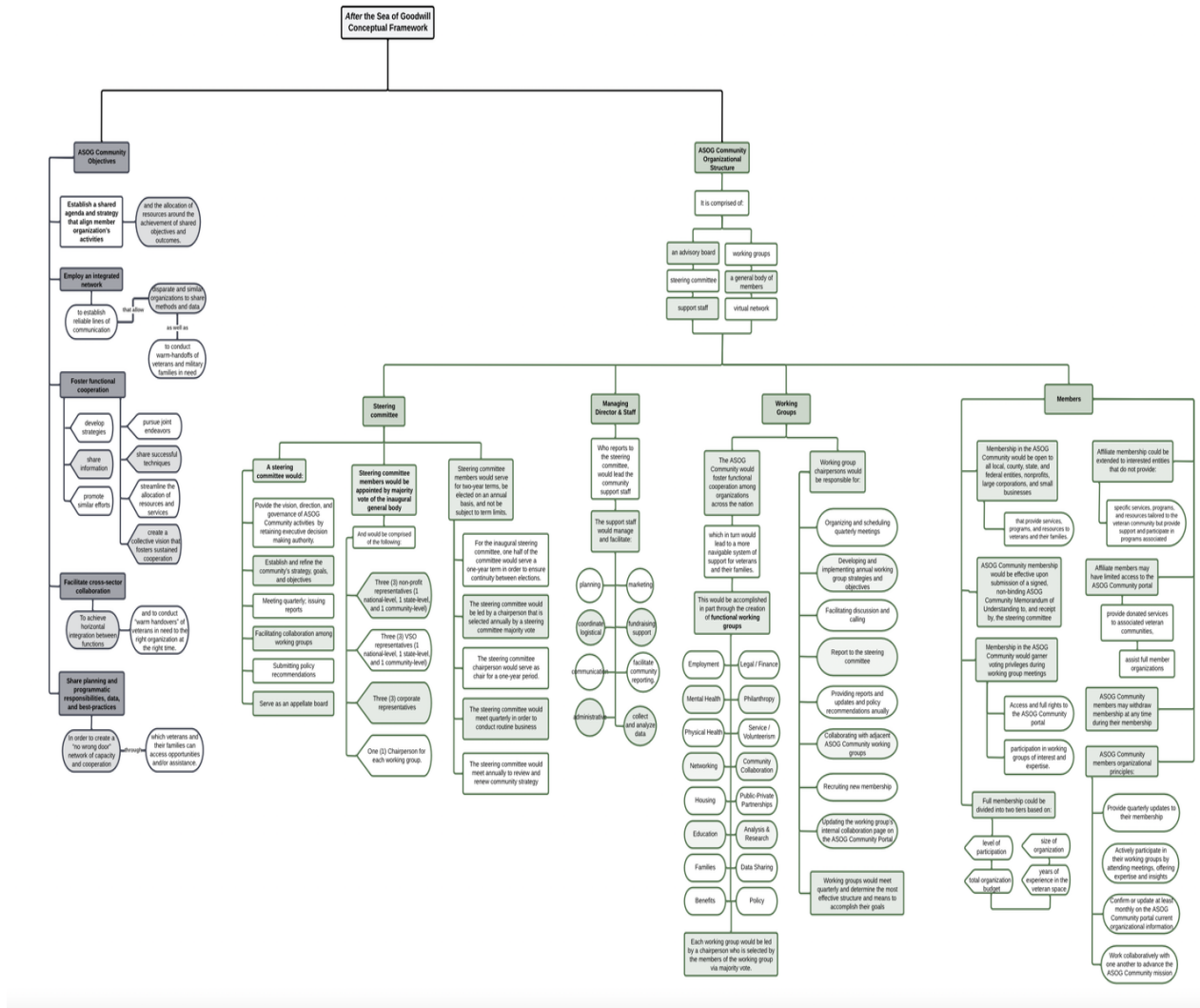


Figure 3b. *After the Sea of Goodwill*, Conceptual Framework, constructed using “mind map” software by the researchers.

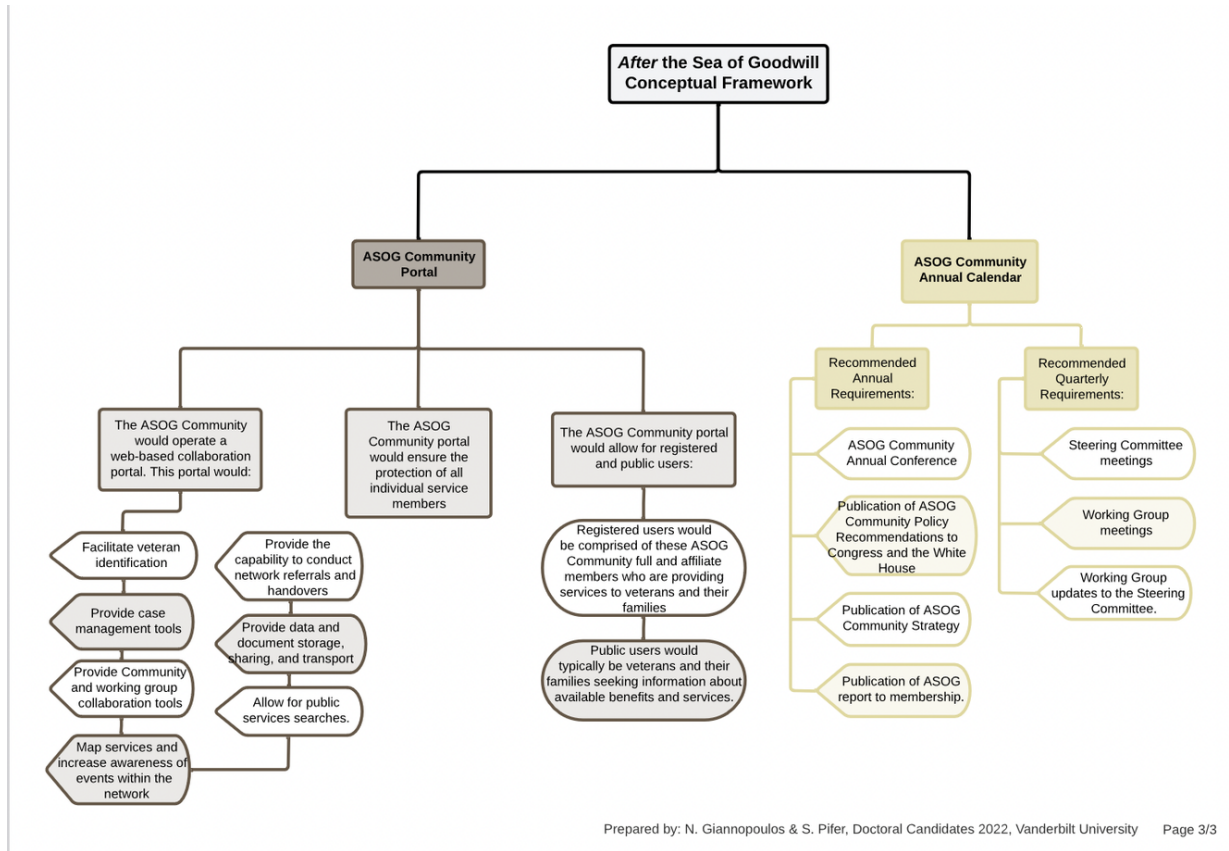


Figure 3c. *After the Sea of Goodwill*, Conceptual Framework, constructed using “mind map” software by the researchers.

Tennessee could enact legislation and a program similar to Florida State Statute 2022, Title XXIX, Public Health, Chapter 394, Mental Health, section 394.9087 (*Chapter 394 - 2022 Florida Statutes - The Florida Senate*, n.d.), which establishes the Florida Veterans’ Care Coordination Program. Under this program, the Department of Veterans’ Affairs may contract with a nonprofit entity that is accredited by the Council on Accreditation, a trusted accreditor of human service providers since 1977. The nonprofits must also be fully accredited by the National Alliance of Information and Referral (NAIR) Services. Their Certification Program is based on established standards for the field of information and referral in addition to a psychometrically

based job task. The certified nonprofits must also have the capacity to serve Veterans to provide them and their families in this state with dedicated behavioral health care referral services, especially mental health, and substance abuse services. This process keeps the quality of services high and, with annual scrutiny of financials, ensures funds are serving the needs of Veterans, active military and families and their families.

***C. Partner to support research toward strategies for improving Veteran & military-affiliate outcomes and leverage their talents. A research group in a leading university could shift the narrative.***

There is a narrative about Veterans as students which must be addressed, such as a perception of their lack of formal education, incompatibility with a traditional university classroom and issues related to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and suicide. Delving into these issues illuminates the many reasons why Veterans on campus are beneficial to a university, faculty and student body. Insight into how the military education system cultivates students and the unique learning styles and challenges of Veterans is beneficial to faculty members, curriculum developers, student advisors and those who advocate for Veterans. Business and civilian officials interviewed through focus groups and one-on-one meetings consistently lacked awareness of the leadership training Veterans receive and the value of the Veteran.

The military experience is unique and demanding. Members take an oath to protect and defend their country, even if it means sacrificing their own lives (or taking the lives of others) in the process. Understanding what it feels like to serve and the apprehension that comes with leaving the military “nest” to attend school and/or establish a new post-military career is key to any recruitment effort. As if there aren’t enough obstacles for the transitioning Veteran, those who want to attend universities also must face a narrative which makes them feel unwelcome and misunderstood.

Our military is an untapped talent pool and there is a gap in research to identify strategies in breaking down the barriers that prevent their success in academia and in business contexts for both Veterans and civilians in assisting in reintegration. The goal is to leverage the student body, alumni, faculty, and community partners to conduct research that will inform and allow levers to be pulled in the government, private and public sectors.

Research allows for ongoing systemic change. This is an opportunity to leverage the Vanderbilt community to aid in systemic change for our local government and country at large by contributing to initiatives to make real change where permissible for our active service military, Veterans, spouses, and military-affiliates.

Research changes the narrative. Very little research exists about “who” Veterans are outside of mental health and suicide challenges. Data revealed through our qualitative analysis and literature review indicated most feel that since those topics are urgent, they naturally take precedence, therefore seem to be more vigorously researched. The lack of urgency related to researching the rest of the Veteran population leads to a perpetual model of maintaining a false narrative and skewed vision of our military in academia.

Vanderbilt University is a private research university located in Nashville, Tennessee, United States. It was founded in 1873 and named after Cornelius Vanderbilt, a philanthropist and business magnate who provided a significant endowment to establish the university (*History of Vanderbilt University*, n.d.). Vanderbilt University's mission is to foster intellectual growth, collaboration, and innovation while promoting a strong sense of community and societal impact. It is recognized as one of the leading universities in the United States, offering a comprehensive educational experience and contributing to research and knowledge creation in various

disciplines. Vanderbilt University admissions is most selective with an acceptance rate of seven percent (*Everything You Need to Know About Applying to Vanderbilt University*, n.d.).

Vanderbilt offers a vibrant and diverse student life experience. There are numerous student organizations, clubs, and extracurricular activities catering to a wide range of interests. The university also hosts cultural events, guest lectures, performances, and sports competitions throughout the year. The school has a strong commitment to community engagement and public service. The university encourages students and faculty to participate in community service initiatives and provides opportunities for engagement with local organizations and social issues.

Vanderbilt is already a strong supporter of military Veterans and their dependents using the post-9/11 GI Bill. As a participant in the Yellow Ribbon Program, Vanderbilt has committed to providing annual gift assistance (typically, this will be in the form of scholarships and/or grants) from institutional funds up to \$6,000 per academic year based on unmet need to each undergraduate student who meets the eligibility criteria for the Yellow Ribbon Program. In addition, Vanderbilt is also host to the *Military Bass Scholars Program (Frequently Asked Questions, n.d.)* which grants awards up to \$30,000 a year to highly talented Veterans pursuing graduate and professional degrees across the five Vanderbilt schools. A Scholar Selection Committee selects scholars based on excellence of their military record, academic history, and their potential to impact society after graduation. Approximately ten to fifteen scholars are chosen each year. These serve as only a few examples, there are a plethora of engagements Vanderbilt is already a part of which exemplifies a commitment in engaging with and valuing the military community.

Vanderbilt is strategically geographically positioned with direct access to Fort Campbell, one of the country's largest military bases. Research is our constant, our proof. Vanderbilt academically is positioned to be the pinnacle university in informing military wide academia for the country. Bringing in other entities such as the NSA and the Army would add to the research framework and enrich the data collection and analysis process. Funding for the group's initiatives could come from Discovery Vanderbilt, an effort that commits major resources to dramatically increase faculty, student and staff engagement and success in pursuing bold new ideas through disciplined, rigorous inquiry. In 2022–23, Discovery Vanderbilt is postured to make targeted investments, totaling more than \$50 million (*Discovery Vanderbilt*, n.d.) in the first year, across the schools and colleges to support current research efforts while positioning the university to expand and diversify research activities, innovation, and entrepreneurial scholarship. The Governor's office could also set aside monies in the budget annually to pilot programs, gather data on implemented initiatives to allow research and publications through Vanderbilt to better serve this community nationally and locally. By prioritizing allocations in funding to allow research toward barriers experienced, strategies for improving outcomes related to business transition and reintegration into the labor force would be achieved.

**Challenge 2. Tennessee lacks a system for attracting, retaining, and tracking Veterans.**

There are approximately 500,000 veterans living in Tennessee. The state hosts 8 major military installations, 72 Army Reserve and 5 National Guard Units. According to Military One Source, the State of Tennessee hosts over 100,000 active duty, Guard and Reserve member and their family members:

- 17,092 active-duty service members
- 9,675 active-duty spouses



- 17,056 active-duty children
- 25,359 National Guard and reserve members
- 12,820 National Guard and reserve spouses
- 18,858 National Guard and reserve children

Thousands of military members separate or retire from the military in the State annually, including approximately 400 a month from Ft. Campbell alone (*Four New Career Skills Programs Unveiled at Fort Campbell*, n.d.). During the data analysis phase, the researchers confirmed with multiple agencies that the State does not maintain residency data on individuals leaving local military bases or of those coming into the state. No one was able to provide information as to which states Veterans are migrating to and why or whether transitioning service members are coming into the state from where and why. The migration of skilled Veteran workers to other states may increase competition, making it harder for Tennessee to attract and retain this talent. Furthermore, the lack of a clear pipeline for recruiting and integrating separating U.S. military service members into the labor force could put Tennessee at a competitive disadvantage compared to other states. In addition to filling labor shortages, attracting and retaining Veterans also offers statewide incentives. For example, during an interview a state official shared, “if you increase 10 percent of \$119 million per month coming into pensions, well then you already paid for itself on the back end. So, if you invest 5,000,000 you get 200,000,000 in the year. In addition, the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> order effects.... Vets transitioning out. The talent pool is framed in an economical way, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> order effects. Same impact as GI Bill offered.”

### ***Recommendation***

***A. Military bases and the State Veteran Affairs (VA) office to track data on all service members regarding their decision to stay or leave the state upon separation.***

Tennessee military bases to track data on all transitioning service members regarding their decision to stay or leave the state upon separation. This can be accomplished during the Congressionally mandated Transition Assistance Program (TAP) course. Tennessee can also track Veterans staying or transitioning into the state from the office of Veteran Affairs when Veterans register for benefits and/or services. Tennessee faces significant labor shortages in 100 "in-demand occupations" until 2026, according to the Tennessee Department of Labor. CITE The separating military population in the state is a critical resource to quell the labor shortages and prepare for the state's continued expansion in national security and technology sectors. Tennessee's lack of a structured and traceable pipeline for recruitment, and lack of formalized policy that streamlines efforts to improve the situation for service members or businesses alike means Tennessee may not capitalize on its Veteran talent pool. This is most certainly a threat to Tennessee's economic prosperity posture. To build effective programs to retain and attract Veterans, we must know why they choose to stay, why they leave, the benefits they found attractive outside of the state and barriers precluding them from staying in Tennessee.

Additionally, there are approximately 20,000 student Veterans enrolled in Tennessee's colleges and universities, providing a potential source of qualified labor for the state, according to Tennessee's Higher Education Commission (*051823\_VETS Campus Data 2023 Report (Final). Pdf*, n.d.)

### **Challenge 3. The “Sea of Goodwill” is overwhelming and difficult to navigate.**

Despite their best efforts and years of transferable experience, many service-members undergoing military service to civilian transitions are further plagued with uncertainty as they navigate the overwhelming “Sea of Goodwill,” a term coined by President Obama’s administration. The “Sea of Goodwill” refers to the idea that communities rise to meet the needs

of service-members and their families to reach the greatest number of Veterans (*Service Members Connected by the "Sea of Goodwill,"* 2011). Support from the public for our returning and reintegrating service personnel, Veterans, and families is strong and can be found all around our country. They are government, non-government, private, and faith-based groups whose only goal is to look after our military personnel and their families (Copeland & Sutherland, 2010). Nonetheless, however well intended "the Sea of Goodwill" concept is, there is mounting evidence, such as that highlighted in the literature review, that the numerous nonprofits and organizations are all aimed in different directions and are thereby overwhelmingly disunified, and therefore, ill-postured to assist service members slated to reach Veteran status or Veterans who already separated from military service. Years after the "Sea of Goodwill's" conception, in 2021, John Malfitano, a U.S. Navy Veteran and program manager for Onward to Opportunity Institute for Veterans and Military Families, aptly remarked "They're drowning in a sea of goodwill...so many services but there's no one place to go" (Ress, 2021).

According to a search in Guidestar.org, a nonprofit report platform which hosts complete non-profit data, there are roughly 45,000 nonprofit organizations with the word "Veteran" in their title. 45,000 non-profits who are all focused in different directions. With so many possibilities, there's a danger that decision overload will prevent any action, or even the right actions, from being performed, or found in a timely manner by those who need it most.

According to data from qualitative interviews and focus groups, Veterans overwhelmingly illuminated the fact that the number of available resources was exhausting, some indicating they "did not even know where to begin because there was just too much." Another salient point made was that within the state of Tennessee specifically, there were no traceable resources, at least none that were obvious, for the state of Tennessee to even begin a job search that was

tailored to Veterans. According to one Veteran, “When I go to Tennessee’s .gov Veteran tab, I think all I can find there is a way to get a gravesite. That’s great, my family needs me now, not when I am dead.” This result was consistent with another key finding, specifically in Tennessee’s digital presence.

### **Navigating Tennessee’s “Sea of Goodwill” digitally**

Our analysis began with a simple Google search to emulate the average user experience. A simple search criterion of "Tennessee Veteran Jobs and benefits" or any combination of those variables, regardless of using Boolean logic--which most people do not typically employ--will, all the time, offer the searcher the following URL *at the top of Google's search results*:

- <https://www.tn.gov/veteran/veteran-benefits/tn-state-benefits.html>

More specific searches employing Boolean logic, will offer this *at the top of Google's search results*:

- <https://www.tn.gov/workforce/jobs-and-education/services-by-group/services-by-group-redirect/job-placement-for-veterans.html>.

Both sites are hosted on Tn. Gov, the official website for the Tennessee state government. The first site, <https://www.tn.gov/veteran/veteran-benefits/tn-state-benefits.html>, is the State of Tennessee's dedicated site for Veteran benefits. The Tennessee.gov/Veteran site depicts World War II Veterans, which does not reflect Veterans from current U.S. Military campaigns. Moreover, the site only tells Veterans where they can apply for a “Veteran gravesite” or seek mental health—all findings which further advance the stigmatized narratives about Veterans and

fail to consider assistance Veterans truly need. One Veteran who participated in our study indicated “I know where to go if I want to die” in observance of the website’s overall appearance and prominently displayed application for a “Veteran gravesite.” Another transitioning service member noted knowing many Veterans moving to Florida without even having visited the state. Having noted Florida as being “Veteran-friendly” given the digital navigability and pleasantries offered online.

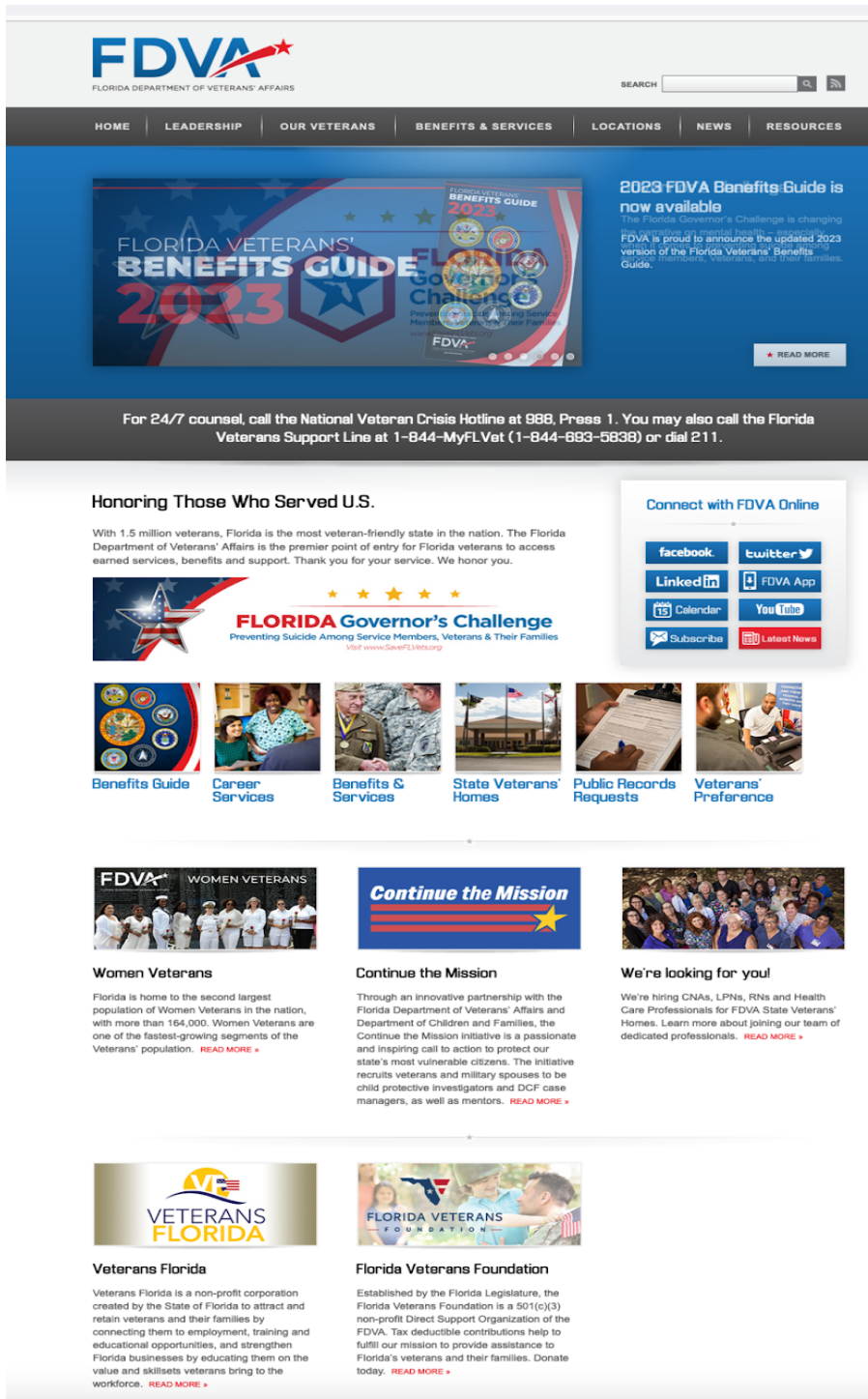


Figure 4. Florida’s Veteran Services main page website, <https://www.floridavets.org/>

The second site, <https://www.tn.gov/workforce/jobs-and-education/services-by-group/services-by-group-redirect/job-placement-for-veterans.html>, pertains to Veteran-centered

employment programs and opportunities in Tennessee. This site was found only by browsing various links on Tennessee’s Department of Labor and Workforce Development, but only via the employment of specific Boolean logic search criteria. Otherwise, one must know it exists or create the Boolean logic in search criteria. Linkage to these two sites may pose more opportunity for discovery, and thus, improve user experience and opportunities.

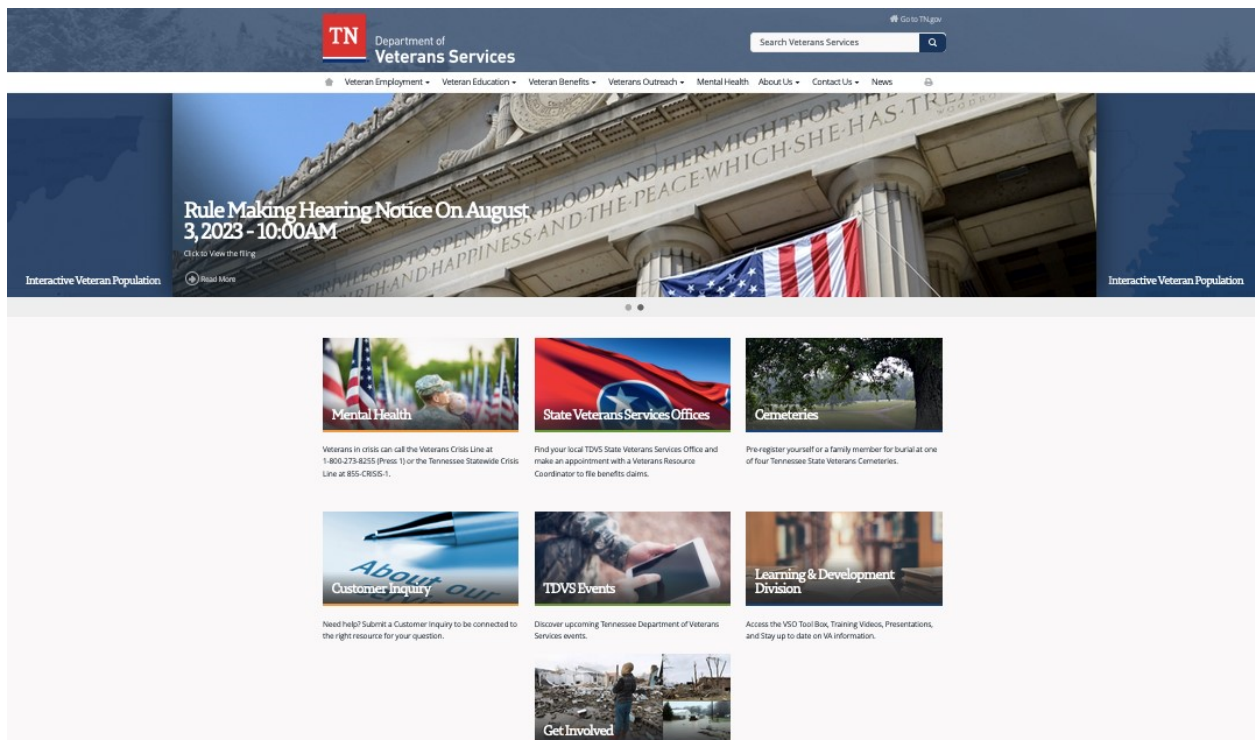


Figure 5. Tennessee’s Veteran Services, main page Website.

## ***Recommendations***

### ***A. Create Tennessee State “Seal of Approval” vetting designation.***

Tennessee should create their own vetting system of nonprofits providing services to Veterans, military members, and their families. Service providers participating in an annual review would garner the State “seal of approval” designation, which would ensure quality, fiscal

and programmatic accountability of public and private monies and encourage collaboration. Each vendor, regardless of corporate structure can contract with the State upon state approval and serve the same function contingent on the contract they are agreeing to, which could include a 3-year reapproval process encompassing statewide oversight both programmatically and fiscally.

Nonprofits and vendors should rise to this level of rigor. A formal review of nonprofits funded to provide programs for Veterans, active military and their families would ensure adherence to the State's requirements. This review would assess fiscal and programmatic progress and garner a "seal of approval." The nonprofits would maintain status on the Governors working group website and be a part of the liaised group with vetted and transparent status.

***For non-contracted state vendor programs, they too should be held to the same standard of having to apply for this seal.***

Applying this "seal of approval" designation across nonprofit agencies and/or private businesses supporting Veterans, military and their families would force productivity and fiscal constraint, as well as streamlining efforts. More specifically a direct initiative... a unified effort meeting the need of a public, private, partnership (P3) of Active Service, Veteran & Military families state-wide. For those that would choose not to participate, they would eventually be weeded out as individual's would gravitate to those with vetting, proven ranking and designation.

This level of programmatic and fiscal oversight avoids over saturation and duplication of services (as they must be regionally approved by the state); includes a vetting process; adds accountability; avoids wasteful spending, and most importantly aligns efforts to achieve the



State's goals of serving this population in all aspects – labor, mental health, education, State benefits, etc.

- Step 1: Query agencies state-wide about the “Seal of Approval” process and gather feedback; regional consolidation and consideration.
- Step 2: An email and formal letter sent to each nonprofit, supplying a link with a Google form hosted on the State website, to allow for ease of organizing and analyzing. The survey would ask questions about the nonprofit's mission, vision, outcomes, leadership, years in practice and financials from their last two years of their returns. The survey will be open for a specific window; if the nonprofit does not reply, one follow-up will be provided and then they are excluded from the exclusive group.

A state official mentioned, “Although the governor would likely back this effort, and can back the gathering of the information, the state lacks the analytical capacity to analyze the data. The Institute for Veterans and Military Veterans (IVMF) could be utilized in this capacity.” This annual review would serve as a vetting process and also create a form of meritocracy rating.

### ***Implementing the review system and State Seal***

An example of a system which Tennessee could benchmark and use for the Veteran-related nonprofits can be found with the Charities Bureau Registry Search, hosted by the New York State Office of the Attorney General. The Charities Bureau is responsible for supervising charitable organizations to protect donors and beneficiaries of those charities from unscrupulous practices in the solicitation and management of charitable assets. Companies who wish to be listed on the registry must submit the appropriate paperwork and renew annually with the State.

The renewal package includes fiscal documents to show accountability in accepting and using State funding, public and private monies.

The state also includes guides and publications for the charities, as well as helpful websites and online webinars. There is also a complaint form for the public to report concerns about a specific charity.

The Healthy Business Certification seal, issued by the Tennessee Chamber of Commerce and Industry is shown below. Nonprofits meeting the standards set in the annual review would be able to display a similar seal on their website and marketing information.



Figure 6. Tennessee's Healthy Business Seal of Approval

***B. Create an interactive map of resources and state partners.***

An interactive map of nonprofit organizations bearing the Seal would plot the location of resources across the state. This would assist Veterans in locating assistance. This process is easily accomplished by using business data mapping software. A secondary outcome would be visually identifying areas of need and gaps in services across the State (*Mapping Software for Business | Small Business to Enterprise*, n.d.)

**Challenge 4. No network, no work. Veterans face unemployment after transition, as there are barriers and not enough time to find their “after.”**

Networking plays a crucial role in job searching. Veterans voiced difficulties facing building a civilian professional network since they have primarily interacted within military circles. Quite a few worried they would not find a job of value since they were not a “BRAT;” a military term reserved for a child of an enlisted member, or a child of a career officer. Many job opportunities are never advertised but are filled through personal connections and job referrals. Networking is not just about asking for favors or job leads. It's a two-way street where employers and prospective Veteran employees find value, build genuine relationships, and help each other. With that being said, if one does not have a network, they essentially don't have access to the same opportunities as others and are forced to settle for work that may not align with their skills, values, wants, or feel a sense of belonging just because they are pressured to accept a position quickly to meet fiscal demands.

Tennessee has several state departments, nonprofit and other organizations in the state trying to assist Veterans in their post-military job and school search. However, networking opportunities are limited, and efforts are dispersed throughout the state. Recognizing these challenges and opportunities, Tennessee can implement various initiatives, better leverage, and

consolidate the efforts of existing organizations and government programs to build a networking bridge and better support Veterans in their transition to civilian employment.

### ***Recommendations***

#### ***A. Create a pipeline into the labor force during transition.***

Implement a State sponsored employment and training hub as a direct pipeline and form the relationship during transition. This program would have to be codified to allow for funding allocation and permanency. This department would serve under the Tennessee Veteran Affairs branch. Fortunately, Florida is a model state that Tennessee can emulate to create a policy that will streamline efforts and improve the situation for service members and businesses. Florida has three times as many Veterans living in the state as Tennessee, therefore has robust Veterans support programs and services. For example, Florida's Veteran Employment and Training Program (VETP), which has only recently been implemented, as of 2021, codifies these offerings through policy and serves as a clearinghouse for Veteran support programs. This helps fill the gap created by a Veteran's lack of ability to network.

The creation of program similar to Florida's VETP (*Statutes & Constitution: View Statutes: Online Sunshine*, n.d.-a) will serve as an informational hub and interlocutor for the transitioning Veteran, providing resources, guidance, training, and mentorship, and break down the barriers in pursuing their next step in the labor force and education realm. Service members will have a systemic pipeline in place to guide and be mentored until reaching the point of successful reintegration. This pipeline will also be monitored by the state, data will be gathered, accountability measures will be put in place to allow for funding, accountability and avoid wasteful spending on disaggregated programs.

VETP activities include:

- State informational hub and interlocutor for the transitioning Veteran and military affiliate community
- Available resources, guidance, training and mentorship would be allocated in funding by the Governor's office to liaise the benefits and training necessary to enter the Tennessee business sector.
- A VETP office would train Veterans and military affiliates pertaining to resources available to them both federally and through individualistic Tennessee state statutes.
- Veterans would receive resume building assistance, be briefed and trained on open state vocations and be directed in using their federal apprenticeship benefits if so desired.
- VETP officers would work with Veterans and military affiliates in sharing labor opportunities available throughout the state including GI Bill benefits if they choose to not pursue labor and instead pursue their education to lead into a specific open vocation.

By having this office as a buffer, service members have a place to guide and break down the barriers in pursuing their next step in the labor force by not merely being pointed to seek information on their own, but through their assigned manager have an interlocutor in navigating the business sector and be mentored until reaching the point of successful reintegration. The mentorship and comradery components thus have an ability to carry over.

Our policy recommendations aim to enhance Tennessee's ability to Attract, Recruit, and Retain separating service members and Veterans, and their military affiliates, and sustainably capitalize on the human talent pool, as follows:

**A VETP-like Model:**

1. Formalize a Recruitment Pipeline
2. Develop a Unified Presence
3. Expand Vocational Apprenticeships
4. Provide Educational Opportunities

Florida also hosts other Veterans initiatives worthy of emulation in Tennessee to increase networking opportunities for Veterans and ease the difficulty of their transition to the civilian sector. For example:

Florida Veterans' Employment and Training Services (Florida VETS) program, administered by the Florida Department of Economic Opportunity, provides employment assistance and training services to Veterans. It offers job search assistance, resume writing support, career counseling, and job placement services specifically tailored to Veterans for both in-state and those seeking to transition into the state.

- Florida Transition Assistance Program (FL-TAP): FL-TAP helps transitioning service members and their families prepare for civilian employment, by offering workshops and resources on resume writing, job search strategies, interview skills, and connecting with local employers. The program provides networking opportunities and aims to facilitate a smooth transition from military to civilian employment.
- Operation Paychecks: This initiative is a partnership between the Florida Department of Veterans' Affairs and the Department of Economic Opportunity. Operation Paychecks connects Veterans with job opportunities by organizing career fairs, virtual job fairs, and

hiring events throughout the state. The program encourages employers to hire Veterans and provides resources to facilitate the recruitment process.

- Employ Florida Vets (*Statutes & Constitution: View Statutes: Online Sunshine*, n.d.-b) Employ Florida Vets is the state's online jobs portal to provide employment services to Florida Veterans. The initiative helps match service members to the jobs and training opportunities that suit the skills and experience gained in the military. This initiative fills the gap Veterans experience by being unable to meet with employers face-to-face and inability to learn about vacancies through personal connections and referrals. It also allows Veterans from out of state the ability to job interview with ease and seek employment to attract from out of state and secure employment in the state of Tennessee.

**Challenge 5. The Transition Assistance Program (TAP) and Dept. of Defense (DOD) SkillBridge have limitations.**

Each year over 200,000 service-members transition from the military (*Transition Assistance Program (TAP) for Military Personnel*, n.d.). Although TAP programs have been significantly revised since 2011, their primary focus remains on preparing separating military members for post-service employment and improving their awareness of benefits. Little emphasis is placed on supporting and building up the resilience of the military members to address the broad range of challenges they frequently face during their transition to non-military life (Whitworth et al., 2020). Overall, TAP's aim is to ease the burden of finding a new career after the military through employment resources, information and assistance in crafting resumes but was never designed to ensure service-members gained meaningful careers thereafter. However, the program is not available until the end of a military term of service. To that end, the



military to civilian transition requires a tremendous amount of calculated planning and personal responsibility: 83 percent of recently separated service-members represented in data collected by Military-transition.org (*Military to Civilian Transition | Military Transition Assistance Graphics*, n.d.) recommended early preparation (Niswander, 2022). Military-transition.org (*Military to Civilian Transition | Military Transition Assistance Graphics*, n.d.), which provides Military separation education literature, emphasized the largest barrier and most overlooked issue tethered to early preparation while still wearing the service uniform: *Preparation for civilian life while serving is a full-time job that can only be done part time* (Niswander, 2022). To that end, A Syracuse University Institute for Veterans and Military Families (IVMF) study (Syracuse University's Institute for Veterans & Military Families (IVMF) on behalf of George W. Bush, n.d.) further emphasized that 44 percent of Veterans who separated in the three years since the 2021 study expressed feeling unprepared for the transition, with 66% describing it as "difficult" or "very difficult." Respondent perspectives in that study noted that difficulty was compounded by the immediate need to adapt to a number of new systems including new healthcare systems, the need to translate military job skills into an appealing resume, the need to secure employment, and the overwhelming need to make decisions about further education or training to succeed in the civilian world or just take a job in the meantime-- all needs which compete with one another and are not covered in TAP (Bradbard & Maury, n.d.). In addition to that gap of support in TAP, the study further postulated that Veterans surveyed felt unprepared for their transition, even after participating in TAP (Bradbard & Maury, n.d.).

One Stakeholder indicated: "TAP deliverables and standards are not made by the people in the frontlines close to the actual Veterans, they are made by people who are disconnected from the transition problem and worse, TAP folks are having to enforce the ridiculous standards that

are created by policies that don't serve the people or solve the immediate problems connected to transition. The "box checking" to meet standards for the U.S. Government to feel good about "doing something" seriously underplays how much of a high touch human business the idea of TAP really is. They keep inventing new stuff to look good on a surface level, but the program doesn't address the competing problems underneath service member transition." A Veteran participant claimed "TAP, while it is well intended, there is a lot of room for improvement. The program did not really apply to me, especially if you really are seeking to find a job. They can't find you a job, they can only help, but the help is not really connecting people to meaningful jobs or career leads. I relied on my network for that."

### ***Recommendation***

***A. Codify Veteran employment and education initiatives to break down barriers and serve as interlocutors for retention in the state.***

There are scores of nonprofits, agencies, state, and non-state sponsored public, private partnerships, each with a specific focus. While Tennessee's state government website certainly hosts a space for Veterans, the state must create, adopt, and employ a traceable reintegration pipeline where separating service-members and Veterans --can easily find and navigate consolidated resources postured to help. Any effort that falls short would inadequately serve separating service-members whose holistic wellbeing, not just their transition, depends on an organized system to smoothly navigate. Bolstering this claim and underscoring the urgency for this, Kintzle and Castro (2018) emphasized that, "Securing employment post-transition from the military is one of the most important factors related to post-service well-being and success. To those who serve in the military, employment is often considered much more than a job. It is a

call to service, an identity, community, and a way of life that produces profound meaning (Kintzle & Castro, 2018, p. 117)

In 2022, Florida created and codified, Title XX, Veterans, Chapter 295, Section 295.21 (*Chapter 295 Section 21 - 2022 Florida Statutes*, n.d.), by doing so the state created a nonprofit corporation known as “Florida Is for Veterans, Inc.” This corporation administers the Veterans Employment and Training Services Program under 2022 Florida Statutes, Title XX, Veterans, Chapter 295, Section 295.22, *Veterans Employment and Training Services Program (Chapter 295 Section 21 - 2022 Florida Statutes*, n.d.), to perform all functions related to preparing for and findings employment, learning about benefits and breaking down network barriers. It is recommended Tennessee create a corporation to aid in the same manner to actively engage Veterans, spouses and military affiliates to identify barriers and help retain in the state, directing to employment options.

## **Veteran Challenges**

### **Challenge 6. Veterans are unclear of what their vocation should be after transition.**

Through the commentary shared in numerous interviews, and data in existing literature, a prominent challenge was consistently emphasized and demonstrated: Veterans—meaning those who transitioned, experienced prolonged difficulty finding a meaningful career and often aren’t sure of what their next vocation will be. Stakeholders interviewed in both the public and private sector shared comments such as, “I ask them what work they’re interested in pursuing and they share with me, ‘I don’t know.’ I think it’s because life has been so structured up until this point, they step into an area of the unknown.”

In many cases, data from both interviews, focus groups and literature emphasized that the Veterans were not finding a career in which they intrinsically valued until long *after* the military-to-civilian transition. Kintzle and Castro (2018) collected data from separated Veterans which indicated that many of the Veterans had trouble making the transition between military and civilian employment, most often attributing the difficulty to the "job search" phase of the transition (Loughran, 2014, as cited in Kintzle and Castro, 2018). One Veteran said, "It's been three years and I still keep switching jobs. I don't feel valued. I can't stay somewhere where I don't feel I belong or can grow, but I obviously have to pay the bills." According to Military-transition.org (*Military to Civilian Transition | Military Transition Assistance Graphics*, n.d.), a media outlet founded by U.S. Air Force Veteran Brian Niswander to posture and educate transitioning members of the U.S. Military, Veterans reported a 3-month gap in employment after separating honorably from military service (Niswander, 2022). Kintzle and Castro's (2018) study illuminated an especially crucial point that merits a great deal of relevance following the U.S.'s recent exit from Afghanistan: Over half of separating post 9/11 Veterans will experience a period of unemployment after discharge from the military (Kintzle & Castro, 2018). This finding is consistent with Department of Defense (D.O.D) data which indicated that the D.O.D. spends nearly \$1 Billion on unemployment on separated service-members for the first 15 months of the post-separation period (Fraynt et al., 2018).

### ***Unfamiliarity with GI Bill benefits and Educational Opportunities***

On the other hand, Veterans who wish to continue their education in Tennessee, utilizing their robust post-9/11 GI Bill, may not realize they have many options within the state. Since Tennessee is usually not their home of record, they may not know of opportunities to attend state

universities. For example, at the University of Tennessee, two programs have an agreement with Veterans Affairs to accept Yellow Ribbon funding: The Haslam College of Business's Professional master's and the College of Social Work graduate program (MSSW). Yellow Ribbon universities offer money to bridge the gap between GI Bill benefits and tuition costs (*Yellow Ribbon Program*, 2022). This also makes attendance at private colleges more accessible for Veterans.

Facts like that are hard to ignore, and in turn, the highest levels of U.S. Military leadership, the U.S. Department of Defense's Joint Chiefs of Staff, have remained keenly aware of the struggles separating service-members face. Nonetheless, their primary focus remains aligned with their National Security priorities: with a focus to maintain a capable military posture. That goal grossly conflicts with ensuring a successful transition from military service to civilian life. Successful transition falls within the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) lines of stewardship, specifically within the parameters of the Congressionally established military Transition Assistance Program (TAP) (Kamarck, 2019).

***Veterans face unemployment after transition, as there is not enough time to find their "after."***

Military benefits not only include fair compensation, but free health care for members and their families, as well as housing on-base or off-base through an allowance. The loss of these benefits impacts Veterans and their families financially and psychologically. In extreme cases, Veterans will become homeless and often are generally too proud to ask for or take help. Female Veterans are especially prevalent in the homeless population, and at risk. Tennessee is engaged to help homeless Vets in the state, through programs such as Operation Stand Down in

Tennessee (OSDTN) and its VA facilities. However, in addition to providing this assistance, we should also focus on *why* Veterans become homeless and address the corresponding issues.

Unemployment and homelessness are directly connected. Without permanent and reliable work and income, the likelihood of a person ending up homeless is inevitably increased. States appreciate the sacrifices made by Veterans in defending the nation and protecting its values; attracting and retaining Veterans is a way to demonstrate gratitude and honor their service. Tennessee seeks to retain Veterans for many reasons, one being economic benefits. Veterans bring valuable skills, experiences, and work ethics to the civilian workforce. By virtue of their military experience, they enhance productivity, have managerial, leadership and team building skills plus a strong sense of discipline. The state aims to develop a strong and diverse workforce to meet the demands of various industries, therefore by attracting and retaining Veterans, states can enhance their talent pool and bridge skill gaps in critical sectors. Veterans are valuable members of communities, often displaying strong civic engagement and a commitment to service. Tennessee contributes to national security through many sectors, military installations and defense-related industries. Veterans possess knowledge of military operations, security clearances, and expertise to support work in this critical sector. Qualitative data through focus groups and interviews revealed Veterans jumping between jobs over not feeling valued, not finding value, not having a sense of belonging, and/or not having mentorship opportunities or leeway for growth.

### ***Recommendations***

***A. Implement a Chamber of Commerce-driven, internship model, Veteran Internship & Talent Acquisition (VITA) to expand experience upon transition and retain in the labor pipeline.***

Tennessee could do more to ensure Veterans have a “lifeline” in the state following their service, not only at the state but local level. We propose a new Chamber of Commerce-driven initiative, Veteran Internship & Talent Acquisition (VITA). The acronym “VITA” has a dual meaning; *vita* is derived from the Latin word *vitae*, a noun meaning life, career, livelihood; mode of life. The word has been used through the years in literature, art, philosophy, and in mottos to encapsulate ideas about life, purpose, and mortality. For instance, *vitae* is used to "curriculum vitae" (CV), which translates to "course of life" or "career path." The Chamber of Commerce (CoC) is a business and social network funded with private and public monies and is best positioned to harness this funding and assist Veterans where they reside, in their communities. CoC could also leverage VA internship & apprenticeship benefits by matching Veterans with needs in the community. This activity would serve as a bridge between military service and the civilian sector, while growing the local workforce.

How does this benefit the 123 CoCs in Tennessee (*Tennessee Chambers of Commerce, TN Chamber List*, n.d.)? VITA would not only serve as a new mission and much needed revenue source for the CoC but would reconnect the organization with the community they serve. Due to the proliferation of the Internet, and the subsequent increased popularity of online business social networking platforms such as LinkedIn and Facebook, businesses have reduced their reliance on membership organizations like the Chambers of Commerce and moved to online to grow their business and find new opportunities and customers. Businesses can “buy-in” and pay for the internship, leverage apprenticeship benefits and/or choose to hire at the end of the internship if both parties agree it’s a good match.

## ***CoC is best positioned for VITA***

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation's 11th Annual *Building Resilience Through Private Public Partnerships Conference* was held in June of 2022. This year's conference explored the need for readiness strategies to improve resilience – bringing together key players from government, nonprofits, and the private sector to drive effective resilience programming through greater collaboration across sectors. Topics covered included partnering with small businesses to assist with their needs and growth. The Veteran workforce is key to community resilience and progress.

The CoC's efforts through VITA would support transitioning and transitioned Veterans, those wishing to reintegrate, and a variety of military-affiliates in the community. We envision that activities like resume building, mentorship, and business relationships would happen in house through partnerships with nonprofits. CoCs are in a private, public, partnership (P3), a long-term arrangement between the government and private sector institutions and can leverage this unique relationship to secure funding and use a combination of taxpayer funds in a way that best benefits the community.

The VITA manager position should be publicly funded to manage and oversee this new department. We envision they could eventually be a region or statewide VITA leadership structure. VITA would meet the Tennessee governors' goal of achieving the state's labor force goals by accessing various workforce sectors including an emphasis in rural regions.

The CoC is familiar with their local businesses and needs. They also have access to data related to positions and vocations with current vacancies. They know about industries moving into the community or region, such as factories, commercial warehouses, and technology hubs



like server farms. Possible future add-ons to the VITA program would be formal training, internships and certificate programs.

The goal of VITA is not just to find jobs for Veterans but find *meaningful* employment. The CoC could model VITA activities based on the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation's program "Hiring Our Heroes" and Salesforce, a leading technology company recently partnered for the "Hiring Our Heroes Salesforce Fellowship" program (*Hiring Our Heroes Salesforce Fellowship Puts Veterans, Military Spouses on Path for In-Demand Tech Careers*, 2020). This effort aims to provide Veterans and military spouses with opportunities for career advancement in the technology sector. The fellowship offers training and certification in Salesforce technology, equipping participants with valuable skills that are in high demand in the job market. It focuses on providing Veterans and military spouses with the necessary knowledge and resources to pursue successful careers in the technology industry, specifically in customer relationship management (CRM) using Salesforce tools. The program includes a six-week intensive training period, followed by a paid three-month fellowship at a host company. During the fellowship, participants gain hands-on experience, work on real-world projects, and could demonstrate their skills and potential to prospective employers. The goal is to bridge the gap between military service and civilian employment by offering Veterans and military spouses a pathway to rewarding careers in the technology sector. Nearly 40 Veterans and military spouses took place in the pilot program and several transitioned into full-time positions after completing the fellowship.

***Other programs serve as models.***

The non-profit organization Futures and Options' mission is to empower New York City's youth, particularly youth of color and students from historically underrepresented communities, to acquire transferable professional skills, pursue higher education, and successfully compete in a global 21st century economy (*The Internship Program - Futures and Options*, n.d.) They collaborate with New York City employers to provide transformative career development opportunities to young people, enabling them to succeed in college and inspiring them to pursue meaningful careers.

The Futures and Options Internship Program provides paid, mentored internships and career readiness workshops to high school juniors and seniors. Students acquire hands-on experience, gain entry to small businesses, nonprofits, government agencies and multinational corporations and earn needed money. If the company chooses and it's a good fit from both ends, they can choose to formalize the working relationship thereafter. Such a model allows for both the employer and intern an opportunity to see if the position is a good fit, while giving the business the necessary help needed at such juncture without the red tape. If used in the context of the CoC, it would allow the Veteran and military spouse the opportunity to gain valued experience in different business contexts while pursuing their permanent placement of where they feel is the best fit for their skills and acquire experience within different contexts in the process. This model could easily be applied to assisting Veterans in Tennessee communities (*Futures and Options*, n.d.).

***B. Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC) and universities to engage in the retention of transitioning Veterans and explain educational pathways during transition.***

Another recommendation is for the Tennessee Higher Education Commission to engage in the retention of transitioning Veterans, as the state approving agency for Veteran education benefits. Passed into law in 2014, the Tennessee Veterans Education Transition Support (VETS) Act establishes a program of recognition for higher education institutions which allocate resources for Veterans' successful transition from military service to college enrollment. An institution receiving VETS Campus certification not only prioritizes outreach to Veterans, but successfully delivers the services necessary to create a supportive environment where student Veterans can prosper while pursuing their education. There are currently 30 VETS campuses across the state.

THEC's Veterans Education Transition Support (VETS) 2023 Report includes data related to enrollment trends of student Veterans and military dependents at the VETS Campuses across the state (*051823\_VETS Campus Data 2023 Report (Final). Pdf*, n.d.) The data shows the enrollment of Veterans and military dependents remained stable, but the enrollment of the currently serving student Veterans—a combination of Reservists, members of the National Guard, and active-duty service-members—declined by 36 percent from CY 2019 to CY 2021 (*051823\_VETS Campus Data 2023 Report (Final). Pdf*, n.d., p. 3). However, no analysis is provided as to why the state is experiencing this decline, therefore the state is unable to address the driving factors.

### ***C. Offer College Fairs During Transition on Military Bases.***

The retention of Veterans in Tennessee is directly tied to the state's economic prosperity. Regarding the departure of Veterans from states that don't facilitate their licensing, Colonel Amidon states: "These are lost opportunities, as each state needs to attract the right talent to

ensure its economic vitality.” The 2022 report *Improving the Pipeline for Tennessee’s Workforce Academic Supply for Occupational Demand*, created by the Tennessee Higher Education Commission, Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Tennessee Department of Economic and Community Development, and Tennessee Department of Education discusses in-demand occupations and ways academic and other pipelines can help deliver a trained workforce (Tennessee Higher Education Commission, 2023). Several of these job sectors are directly related to skills Veterans attain in the military, such as aerospace and defense; engineering and construction; protective services and public safety.

Engaging Veterans prior to the transition process is critical to retain them in the state. In addition to assisting with licensing, the state should offer career fairs with representatives from various industries. Soon-to-be Veterans could submit resumes, learn more about potential employment options in the state and interview for jobs. Another idea is for representatives from state community colleges and universities visiting TN military bases to explain education benefits for Veterans, spouses, and military-affiliates. The post-9/11 GI Bill provides extensive and generous educational benefits, including tuition, a monthly housing allowance, financial support for books and supplies, additional financial aid through the Yellow Ribbon Program for attending private or out-of-state institutions, support for vocational and technical training, coverage of licensing and certification exam costs, and access to support services like counseling and tutoring. These benefits contribute to the pursuit of higher education, acquisition of valuable skills, and successful transition into civilian careers, alleviating the financial burdens associated with education and training while fostering personal and professional growth. We should encourage Veterans leaving the military to use these benefits in Tennessee. After a military member leaves government service, they must claim their home of residence. By helping

Veterans find work and educational opportunities in the state and removing barriers contingent on their state of origin, a pathway to state residency is then formed.

**Challenge 7. Veterans are unable to apply relevant military training and education toward state certification, licensure, or credit toward, upon transition.**

The transition from military to civilian life can be a time of excitement, but also stress for Veterans and their spouses. The military provides a sense of purpose, well-defined roles and hierarchy, camaraderie, honor and mission – things that can be hard to find or define in the civilian world. When they depart the military, Veterans leave behind full time jobs with a decent salary and housing benefits. When many Veterans leave the service, they are unable or unwilling to return to their hometowns for a variety of reasons. One reason is a lack of understanding of the unique demands and sacrifices of their prior profession, and another is little or no Veteran support services. Qualitative data revealed a sense of feeling lost. Veterans upon leaving the military left with a feeling of a loss of identity as their acquired skills were no longer transferable or recognized in the civilian world. One Veteran, an engineer, voiced having attended a job fair hosted on a military base. He dressed up in a suit and was expecting to be matched with an opportunity aligning with his skillset, upon arrival the only jobs available were to be a commercial driver. The Veteran shared the disappointment felt as the perpetual stigma and coming to terms with a loss of identity all surrounded over a piece of paper, a credentialing document, which in fact falls under the scope of the Governors purview. Another Veteran shared having to leave the state as his wife is an attorney who is licensed in a different state. With all its vast resources to assist Veterans and military affiliates with education, medical and other needs, Tennessee is an attractive place for former military people to resettle. And by providing a pathway to their success, the state stands to retain these important resources.

Transitioning Veterans voiced having faced challenges when seeking work after their military service came to an end. Finding it difficult to translate their military education, training and experience to the civilian workforce. The terminology, job titles, and duties in the military are often different from those in the civilian world. Veterans shared a struggle to effectively showcase their qualifications and experiences on resumes or in interviews. Veterans also lack civilian work experience translatable on paper; most join the military at a young age and spend a significant part of their early adulthood serving. Veterans expressed difficulty seeking employment as employers often prioritized candidates with specific industry experience or a track record in the civilian job market, putting Veterans at a disadvantage.

Education and training are the backbone of the military leader development process. One retired officer interviewed shared, “when you hire a Veteran, you hire a leader.” What most businesses and employers are unfamiliar with is that there is targeted training and professional military education for each rank and position. A Veteran with just four years of service has spent at least one year in the classroom attaining proficiencies and qualifications. By giving credit for these skills and facilitating an easy transition to the workforce, the state will retain more Veterans and spouses which will inevitably improve its economic position.

### ***Recommendation***

***A. Give credit for relevant military training and education and make a codebook for what accounts as transferable for not only the Veteran, but for the spouse and military affiliates.***

Governor Bill Lee, in the 2023 State of the State said, “No other state in the country comes close to Tennessee’s legacy, resources and potential to be a leader in nuclear energy.” (*Supply and Demand Report*, n.d., p. 80). He is proposing \$50 million in a Nuclear Fast Track fund to recruit companies to the state that will establish a nuclear development and

manufacturing ecosystem. Tennessee should leverage Veteran engineering talent to fill this demand.

Tennessee policymakers should pursue legislation to give credit for relevant military training and education like other states and make their own codebook for what they account as transferable for not only the Veteran, but for the spouse and military affiliates. They should also seek to remove barriers and accelerate pathways for Veterans to retain these valuable citizens in the state. Legislation would provide a foundation for programs to retain and attract transitioning Veterans. A good example can be found in the Florida 2022 Statutes, Title XXXII - Regulation of Professions and Occupations, Chapter 493: Private Investigative, Private Security, And Repossession Services, paragraph 493.61035, *Credit for relevant military training and education (2022 Florida Statutes, n.d.)*. The statute emphasizes the importance of recognizing and utilizing the relevant military training and education of honorably discharged Veterans when applying for licensure. The Florida Department is mandated to establish a comprehensive method that includes granting credit, to the maximum extent feasible, for military training and education that aligns with licensure requirements. Additionally, the Department must identify any overlaps and gaps between licensure requirements with Veterans' military training or education and inform Veterans about these areas. They are further required to assist Veterans in finding suitable programs providing necessary training and education to meet licensure requirements. The Department is directed to submit an annual report to key government officials, which includes vital statistics and information such as the number of Veteran applicants, approved and denied license applications, processing times, efforts to assist Veterans in program identification, common overlaps and gaps, and recommendations to enhance the Department's ability to support Veterans during their transition from military service and pursuit of regulated professions or

occupations. By gathering this type of data, we can illuminate our state’s activities related to Veteran licensure and then create the appropriate laws, policies, procedures, and remedies.

In the George Bush Institute report entitled *Veteran Licensing and Credentialing What’s Next: Ensuring Economic Opportunity* (Policy Recommendation *Veteran Licensing and Credentialing*, 2023) Colonel Matthew Amidon makes four primary recommendations which could serve as an outline for Tennessee’s action plan:

- Governors should lead assessments of the current state of Veteran and military family support systems.
- State education leaders should accelerate educational pathways, particularly into licensed professions.
- State legislatures should remove onerous professional licensing requirements.
- The Veteran-supporting community should push a narrative that Veterans are a resource.

Tennessee says it cares about Veterans, but this aspirational goal requires a legislative and programmatic foundation. The George Bush Institute report (*Policy Recommendation Veteran Licensing and Credentialing*, 2023) sums it up by stating:

“State leaders and legislators often say they care about Veterans but must demonstrate this through their actions. It’s in the best interest of their states as well as those who served and their families to remove obstacles caused by licensing requirements. The state will benefit from the talent and leadership it needs in its businesses and communities, while Veterans and military families can shape fulfilling lives in the civilian workforce.”

## **Business Challenges**

**Challenge 8. Civilians & Business practices lack military cultural competence, leading to the proliferation of stereotypes and bias.**



The military has its own unique culture, structure, and processes. Adjusting to the different work environments, organizational structures, and expectations of the civilian sector revealed to be challenging for some Veterans. Veterans stated feeling alone and having to adjust to the abruptness of having mentorship and comradery to operating solo. Veterans acquired tools and a skillset to successfully navigate the workplace transition process took time. There are also misunderstandings and stereotypes about Veterans that may hinder their job search. Veterans noted that some employers may have preconceived notions, such as concerns about PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) or assumptions about rigid military mindset, which may create biases during the hiring process.

Data from qualitative analysis of interviews and focus groups overwhelmingly revealed that when Veterans leave the military, they feel like they've lost a part of themselves. One Veteran said, "[...] feels like a huge part of myself will disappear when I take off my uniform and all this is just so overwhelming because in the last 21 years of my life, I knew exactly what to execute, what my goals are, now, the future is not clear." Others said, "It's harder taking the uniform off than putting it on." To compound matters, Veterans, and service-members (soon to transition from the military) acknowledged that the military provides a sense of identity and belonging that can be hard to replace in civilian business environs. Significant research completed by military social workers and developers of Military Separation Theory, Kintzle and Castro (2018), further demonstrated that securing employment post-transition from the military is one of the most important factors related to post-service well-being and success, but nonetheless, persists as an insurmountable challenge. To those who served in the U.S. Military, employment is often considered much more than a job. It is a call to service, identity, community, and a way of life that produces profound meaning. Nonetheless, Veterans repeatedly emphasized that they were

expected to navigate the military-civilian boundaries, change and translate their skills, and adapt their resumes to civilian vernacular, which often meant that the value of their experiences was either lost in translation or mis-represented altogether. For example, one Veteran said,

“When I got out, some hiring managers would ghost me, but when I asked for feedback, they would just simply say my resume did not qualify me as currently written and told me to write my resume to a job description, but I felt that really failed to consider how much experience in leadership and task management I had. I also felt like it was a clear indicator to me that in order to be understood, the burden is all mine. I also felt extremely undervalued because of that. I was treated like a pariah who could not even get a job doing essentially what I did in the military.”

Moreover, many Veterans indicated that they felt screened out of consideration for careers because they were labeled as rigid or misunderstood due to their use of "military" vernacular on their resumes, personal interactions, and interviews. Similarly, qualitative data gathered from civilians also indicated that transitioning military and already transitioned Veterans were screened out of jobs and career candidacy because of “failure to effectively translate skills” or “inability to act like a civilian and less military-like.”

There are, however, laws and policies in place that aim to promote successful reintegration of Veterans. One example is the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act (USERRA) (*USERRA - Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act* | *U.S. Department of Labor*, n.d.). USERRA aims to protect the employment rights of individuals who serve in the military and prevent discrimination against them; and Veterans' Preference law, enacted by both federal and state governments that requires

eligible Veterans to receive prioritized consideration for federal and some state government jobs. While laws like USEERA exist, their legal frameworks cannot always prevent discrimination given that it manifests as implicit bias, which can be difficult to prove or even prevent. Consistent with that idea were Veterans who overwhelmingly illustrated, both in this study's qualitative data and sources of literature, that a successful transition required them to quickly ascertain the cultural competency of civilians and their environs, but with no reciprocal expectation for civilian contexts to demonstrate or enact measures to ensure cultural competency of military culture and the value of Veterans. Cultural competency refers to a set of attitudes, knowledge, skills, and behaviors that enable individuals or organizations to effectively interact and work with people from diverse cultural backgrounds. It involves understanding and respecting the beliefs, values, customs, practices, and needs of individuals or groups from different cultures (Moule, 2011).

Qualitative interview and focus group analysis triangulated in this study demonstrated numerous examples which supported the idea that cultural competency among civilians is expected, as captured in this statement:

“I served my country and was expected to solve high stakes problems that required me to mitigate and creatively solve problems. My captured experience of my service in both combat and non-combat situations sufficiently highlighted key competencies that are undoubtedly relevant in most civilian business, like teamwork, innovation and strong examples of problem solving, yet I am constantly told by recruiters, ‘your resume needs to change to be understandable by our hiring staff.’ Then, when I do change my resume, I am told my examples are not strong enough and I was not considered a candidate. There

is a clear double standard, and I am the one expected to change, even to the point of diminishing my experience, which is frustrating.”

Veterans reported feeling like a “fish out of water” when relating to civilians, including civilian employers. One Veteran said, “I felt having conversations about my experience was a difficult conversation because not only did it always lead to “did you kill anyone?” It also led to jokes and these interactions stood out to me as insensitivity but also as a major clash of cultures [...]” Another Veteran reported, “I couldn't even relate to people and actually avoided conversations about my service and experience because I knew I would always be talking to people who never took the time to understand it or even really care.” In the realm of employment-specific cultural clashes, one Veteran said, “I could adapt to this- but it seemed like my civilian managers could not and they got frustrated when my questions of trying to understand the purpose of tasks, which is what my training led me to always do, made me seem obtrusive or made them feel insecure.”

Overall, Veterans indicated that they are not afforded the same demonstration of cultural competency and understanding from civilians in hiring processes as that which is extended to other marginalized groups, even amid the existence of laws and overwhelming number of programs and resources that promote successful military to civilian transition.

### ***Veteran identity is stereotyped, leading to bias***

Transition hurdles aside, Veterans must also overcome the employment barrier borne from stigmas and stereotypes surrounding Veteran mental health. The national narrative has unintentionally stigmatized service-members and Veterans as broken shells of spent expendables who will invariably become society's liability rather than its asset (Waller, 1944). However, to

overcome this problem, one must first come to understand under what assumptions the problem is hypothesized to exist as a first step towards recasting the story of Veterans so that ideas of their value will be most prominently recognized in all settings.

The Veteran story is often weaved through dramatic reconstructions of U.S. involvement in foreign conflicts that created broken human shells fraught with mental health issues, leaving them unfunctional after military service (Burgess, 2018). More recently, stories arise from America's view tied to post-9/11 legislation focused on the mental health of Veterans who served in the Global Wars on Terrorism in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria. From those stories, second-hand narratives of Veterans are amplified by legislation that, although well intended, has consequently overshadowed Veteran and service-member identities as faithful volunteers who represent only 1 percent of the U.S. population who volunteered to serve their country long after conscripted service requirements faded (Burgess, 2018).

As Veterans seek the promise of continued and meaningful service to worthwhile endeavors after their service, research shows that advancing in civilian life is burdened by the stigma assigned to them merely for dutifully serving their country. The most vulnerable for this type of stigmatization are the combat Veterans from the post-9/11 service-member and Veteran population groups whose careers have overlapped with conflicts that arose from the Global Wars on Terrorism in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria (Syracuse University's Institute for Veterans & Military Families (IVMF) on behalf of the George W. Bush, n.d.). To that end, the United States' most senior ranking military officer, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, authored a 2014 white paper titled "Veteran Stereotypes: A Closer Look." General Martin E. Dempsey indicated that "stereotypes of Veterans always emerge post-conflict, and consequently, lends a great

disservice to the Veteran now branded through the stereotypes and stories of the narratives created about them” (Office of the Joint Chairman of Staff, 2014).

Dempsey further contended that while U.S. Military service-members transitioning to civilian life, and Veterans who have already transitioned, have certainly been challenged by risk factors like mental health challenges such as PTSD and other issues--all of which are typically highlighted by the media and legislation-- those challenges are not insurmountable and should not overshadow the value of Veterans and their future potential into civic settings. Dempsey further asserted that PTSD is a natural human response to a traumatic event that many suffer from, not just Veterans. Nonetheless, the pervasive belief is that Veterans pose the highest risk of suffering from mental health issues such as PTSD merely for their service experience. While many Veterans experience PTSD, their susceptibility to post- traumatic stress is not necessarily greater than that of the average American.

A study from Duke University’s Fuqua School of Business Veteran Transitions Research Initiative (VTRI) (*Duke Fuqua Insights | Duke’s Fuqua School of Business*, n.d.) reinforced the notion that media narratives about Veteran mental health and assertions that PTSD is overly ascribed to Veterans was a pervasive factor that negatively impacted Veteran reintegration (*Duke Fuqua Insights | Duke’s Fuqua School of Business*, n.d.). Data from that study concluded that there was evidence that those ideas about Veterans had permeated the studied business environments. Examples included the belief that Veterans held poor anger management, were prone to violence, exhibited rigid personalities, and experienced problems adapting to civilian work culture while simultaneously attempting to adapt to civilian society (*Duke Fuqua Insights | Duke’s Fuqua School of Business*, n.d.). The study further demonstrated that hiring managers in those environments were intimidated by Veterans or harbored other negative stereotypes towards

Veterans (*Duke Fuqua Insights | Duke's Fuqua School of Business*, n.d.), further reinforcing negative Veteran stereotypes. The study found that employers believe Veterans are less suited for jobs that involve social-emotional skills and interacting with people than their non-Veteran counterparts (*Duke Fuqua Insights | Duke's Fuqua School of Business*, n.d.). The study also demonstrated unconscious bias in that employers automatically screened out employees whose resume or cover letters explicitly cited military experience without even reviewing the rest of the resume (*Duke Fuqua Insights | Duke's Fuqua School of Business*, n.d.). Moreover, the Society for Human Resources Management (SHRM) concluded that the civilian perception of Veterans' skills and abilities is one of the biggest barriers to Veteran hiring (Society for Human Resources Management, 2019). The biases applied unconsciously to Veterans by employers represent lost opportunities not just for the Veteran but also the businesses who either do not hire them or who fail to retain them. Overall, the skills and experiences that Veterans bring to the table can be an asset to businesses, providing businesses are attuned to appreciating the value of Veterans, and understanding the potential their experience can bring.

Qualitative data within this research revealed business stakeholder perspectives demonstrated a gross misunderstanding of the value of Veterans and the competencies they gained from military experience. This further confirms the notion that military cultural competency is not applied during hiring processes and the value Veterans can bring of skills and experiences to businesses is underappreciated. Many Veterans have received extensive training in areas such as leadership, teamwork, problem-solving, and decision-making, which can be beneficial in a variety of business settings. Evidence from research has demonstrated numerous reasons why hiring Veterans can be advantageous to civilian organizations (Mael et al., 2022). Some of those reasons include the fact that Veterans hold advanced leadership skills, cross-

cultural experience, strong work ethic, and integrity (Mael et al., 2022) with applied experience in real-world scenarios.

According to the Rand Research Institute, (2014) military Veterans bring a wide range of valuable skills, experience, and leadership to businesses. Some of the specific values that Veterans can bring to businesses include:

1. **Leadership:** Military service often requires individuals to take on leadership roles and make decisions under high-pressure situations. As a result, Veterans often have strong leadership skills that can be valuable in the business world.
2. **Teamwork:** Military service requires individuals to work as part of a team towards a common goal. Veterans have experience working in diverse teams and can contribute to team success.
3. **Adaptability:** Military service often involves working in rapidly changing environments and adapting to new situations. Veterans can adapt to new environments and roles quickly.
4. **Resilience:** Military service can be physically and emotionally demanding, and Veterans have developed the mental toughness and resilience needed to handle challenging situations.
5. **Technical skills:** Military service often involves learning and using specialized technical skills, such as operating complex machinery or using advanced technology. These skills can be valuable in a range of business settings.



***“Veteran-Friendly” environments are inferior to “Veteran-Ready” workplaces***

Analysis of qualitative data revealed that transitioning military personnel, Veterans, and civilian-business sector participants often highlighted difficulty with Veteran’s finding appropriate careers, and thus, sustained employment. This challenge was attributed to unfamiliarity with civilian employment opportunities, misalignment of military training skills with requirements of civilian careers, and businesses lacking in their familiarity with the skill sets Veterans possess. To that end, observations of data emphasized that businesses inadequately attuned their hiring practices to best suit Veteran skills and abilities. This was especially evident in non-specialized vocations, where Veterans' unique skill sets were not immediately apparent, such as in the case of a Veteran with credentialed bona fides (medical doctor, nurse, lawyer, aviator, etc.). Given the previous finding in which Veterans felt the burden of understanding civilian contexts and culture lies squarely on their shoulders with no reciprocation, data further revealed that some businesses have either a limited concept of how to attune their hiring practices to the cultural competencies of the military or are unaware of a need to do so, as evidenced in the following examples:

A hiring manager indicated:

- “Veterans don’t know how to write their resumes. No one understands what they are saying on their resumes when they say, “led this, or led that.” None of those things even matter because they don’t have relevant experience leading anything not related to the military, so it's hard to justify how that person can be a candidate. Sometimes I don’t even read resumes from someone who cites military experience as relevant experience.”

A business representative indicated:

- “We want to hire Veterans because they are responsible and motivated people, but they seem really rigid and can’t adjust well in a more relaxed environment. They actually intimidate people with their motivation”; and
- “We are a good place for Veterans to work. If someone is a Vet, we give them a paid day off for Veteran’s Day, but that doesn’t seem to be enough to lure Veterans to work here.”

Veterans indicated:

- “When I was in the military, we had very clear-cut performance ratings and measures that correctly aligned with a clear promotion pipeline, but now that I am a civilian, I find that civilian jobs are terribly lacking some sort of clear path for progression. I have no clear path for progression and sometimes don’t even know if I am successful or can be successful in my new job, so I leave because those are just jobs, not careers.”
- “Unlike the military, when I showed up to my civilian job, I had no one who was clearly willing to mentor me. That, and the fact that I had no clear support system outside of that job, made me scared for my future because I felt like I did not belong where I landed. I felt like I did not exist.”
- “They kept telling me to change my resume, but why don’t they try to understand what is on my resume?” In addition, the leader of a combat support team stated, “where I said I overcame adversity and actually solved major issues with no resources, sometimes preventing loss of life, how is that not understandable? I

can't even write anything else because that was my actual experience. It's not like I can lie. That's a huge barrier for me. I feel like I have to lie or reduce my experience on my resume to be accepted. That's a huge barrier for me.”

These findings agree with findings from Mael et al.'s study (2022) which was conducted in collaboration with the City of Clarksville, Montgomery County, the Tennessee Department of Labor, and the Tennessee Department of Veterans Services, hiring managers, human resource directors, veteran employees from private sector companies and public sector organizations in the Nashville and Clarksville areas, as well as spouses of transitioning Veterans. Specifically, some of the findings the study emphasized indicated civilians believing Veterans needing to better align military experiences with job requirements, a need to "civilianize" resumes, and demonstrate calm confidence during interviews (a finding premised on civilians saying military members were too rigid), and better integrate into civilian organizations (Mael et al., 2022). Overall, these findings bring to light the urgency and need for greater awareness and understanding among civilian businesses of the valuable skills that Veterans possess, and for these businesses to adapt their hiring practices accordingly.

### ***Misconception of Inclusivity in “Veteran-friendly” practices***

Qualitative data analysis illuminated an overall misconception among businesses and employers regarding the inclusivity of "Veteran-friendly" practices, such as reliance on superficial measures such as granting Veterans Day off or displaying "we hire Veterans" slogans without truly demonstrating a holistic understanding of U.S. Military ethos and culture in their hiring practices or attitudes. Without a genuine understanding of military values, identities, and experiences, these businesses may inadvertently create an environment that lacks inclusivity and

fails to meet the unique needs of Veterans. While practices such as the previously mentioned are perceived as inclusive, the tenets of Social Identity Theory in the Veteran context postulate that that true inclusivity encompasses a more extensive set of considerations and extends beyond mere friendliness because there must be deeper commitment to understanding and addressing the unique needs and experiences of Veterans. Observed through that lens, Veterans emphasized that in their view, inclusivity requires deeper commitment from businesses and employers. While Veterans' perspectives shared in both this research viewed "Veteran-friendly" as a positive step, they also believed more deliberate and targeted initiatives and policies beyond broad surface-level approaches were needed to advance business imperatives to not only welcome Veterans but also actively support their successful integration and long-term growth in civic society. This advancement was referred to by some as "Veteran-ready." Overall, this finding also re-emphasized the importance of demonstrating cultural competence in understanding military culture, values, and identities across different contexts. While both "Veteran-friendly" and "Veteran-ready" organizations express a willingness to hire and support military Veterans, it is the "Veteran-ready" businesses that display a deeper understanding of the unique needs and experiences of Veterans. These organizations go beyond mere positive attitudes and take deliberate steps to acquire the knowledge and sensitivity required to effectively integrate Veterans into their workforce.

Nonetheless, this finding, juxtaposed with other findings, also highlights the overall need for businesses to prioritize being at least "Veteran-friendly," if they are not already, before aiming to become "Veteran-ready." The research findings highlight that some businesses demonstrate a lack of cultural competency towards Veterans, resulting in an environment that is not even "Veteran-friendly." To create an inclusive and supportive workplace for Veterans,

businesses must begin by fostering a positive and welcoming attitude towards Veterans. This entails developing an understanding of their unique needs and experiences and implementing basic support measures. By starting with “Veteran-friendly” practices, businesses lay the foundation for building cultural competency and can then progress towards becoming truly “Veteran-ready.” Recognizing the importance of this initial step is essential in creating a workplace environment that is inclusive, supportive, and conducive to the successful integration and retention of military Veterans.

### ***Recommendations***

#### ***A. Establish a marketing campaign and communication strategy.***

The state must create and operationalize a communication strategy that reaches and embraces Service-members seeking to return to civilian status and Veterans in a manner that induces a sense of belonging in both present and future contexts. The urgency for this to materialize is exemplified in the work undertaken by Syracuse University's Institute for Veterans and Military Families, who authored the executive report *Serving our 9/11 Veterans*, sponsored by the Bush Institute. The report emphasizes that "organizations and the communities in which Veterans live are a critical part of the transition--they set the conditions for a successful re-entry and fill a critical ‘services gap’ at the national, regional, and predominantly community level (Syracuse University’s Institute for Veterans & Military Families (IVMF) on behalf of the George W. Bush, n.d., pp. 3–4)

Further supporting the need for this recommendation is that an overwhelming amount of literature (as discussed in the literature review) focuses on Veteran mental health issues and Veteran-suicidal ideations as pervasive factors that contribute to reintegration challenges. Although this was observable in a finding which illuminated stigmatized identities of Veterans,

the State and all stakeholders must juxtapose that finding with a strong link to the idea that the stress of transition holds potential to be compounded by failure to secure quality employment after military service. A 3-year qualitative and quantitative Yale University study centered on mortality patterns in Europe and the United States found direct correlations between unemployment and mortality. Brenner (*Rising Unemployment Causes Higher Death Rates, New Study by Yale Researcher Shows*, 2002) principal investigator of the study, poignantly remarked that “Economic growth is the single most important factor relating to length of life...employment is the essential element of social status, and it establishes a person as a contributing member of society and also has very important implications for self-esteem,” said Brenner (*Rising Unemployment Causes Higher Death Rates, New Study by Yale Researcher Shows*, 2002, p. online source). “When that is taken away, people become susceptible to depression, cardiovascular disease, AIDS and many other illnesses that increase mortality (Karen N. Peart (Yale University), 2002) Brenner further emphasized that the correlations could not be dismissed in consideration of national policies relating to inflation, health services and education, and thus, Brenner elevated the findings to the national and government policy settings (*Rising Unemployment Causes Higher Death Rates, New Study by Yale Researcher Shows*, 2002). These findings are compelling reasons to prioritize shaping an optimal state system and environment for separating military and Veterans.” (*Rising Unemployment Causes Higher Death Rates, New Study by Yale Researcher Shows*, 2002)

Establishing a marketing campaign to recruit Veterans to the state and encourage retired and recently separated military personnel to remain in the state or to make the state their permanent residence is a priority. A unique program in Florida is building an effective marketing campaign targeted at transitioning Veterans and could be benchmarked by Tennessee. A quick

glance at Florida’s Veteran Affairs website appeals with an inviting feel with a user-friendly dashboard and bold statements such as “Honoring those who served U.S.” and “Let us serve you.” It’s imperative to codify marketing and recruitment efforts.

First, through 2022 Florida Statutes, Title XX, Veterans, Chapter 295, Section 295.21 (*Chapter 295 Section 21 - 2022 Florida Statutes*, n.d.), the state created a nonprofit corporation known as “Florida Is for Veterans, Inc.” within the Department of Veterans’ Affairs. The purpose of the corporation is to promote Florida as a veteran-friendly state that seeks to provide Veterans with employment opportunities and that promotes the hiring of Veterans by the business community. The corporation is directed to encourage retired and recently separated military personnel to remain in the state or to make the state their permanent residence. The corporation promotes the value of military skill sets to businesses in the state, assists in tailoring the training of Veterans to match the needs of the employment marketplace, and enhances the entrepreneurial skills of Veterans.

(a) Conduct marketing and recruiting efforts directed at Veterans who reside in or who have an interest in relocating to this state and who are seeking employment. Marketing must include information related to how a Veterans military experience can be valuable to a business. Such efforts may include attending Veteran job fairs and events, hosting events for Veterans or the business community, and using digital and social media and direct mail campaigns. The corporation shall also include such marketing as part of its main marketing campaign.

(b) Assist Veterans who reside in or relocate to this state and who are seeking employment.

The nonprofit is also tasked by the State with conducting research to identify the target markets for Veterans and their educational and employment needs. They are also responsible for developing and implementing a marketing campaign to encourage retired and recently separated military personnel to either stay in Florida or make it their permanent residence. Additionally, they must establish a process for disseminating information to the target market, ensuring it is tailored to Veterans' interests and needs to enhance their awareness and access to benefits. From a fiscal perspective, the nonprofit corporation is a separate budget entity and is not subject to the control, supervision, or direction of the department in any manner, including, but not limited to, personnel, purchasing, transactions involving real or personal property, or budgetary matters.

After the establishment of the nonprofit, a marketing corporation was directed to assist with their work on a campaign directed at transitioning Veterans. The 2022 Florida Statutes, Title XX, Veterans, Chapter 295, Section 295.23, *Veterans Research and Marketing Campaign (Chapter 295 Section 21 - 2022 Florida Statutes, n.d.)*, the State directed the Florida Tourism Industry Marketing Corporation to work with Florida Is For Veterans, Inc. on the scope, process, and focus of a marketing campaign to encourage retired and recently separated military personnel to remain in the state or to make the state their permanent residence. The Florida Tourism Industry Marketing Corporation allocates \$1 million annually, combining existing funds from the Legislature and private funds, to promote Florida as a permanent home for Veterans and improve their access to benefits through information dissemination.

**Challenge 9. “Veteran-Friendly” employers attract, but “Veteran-Ready” workplaces achieve successful integration and retention.**

Well-established or growing businesses in Tennessee hold the potential to advance their business and networking community by hiring U.S. Military Veterans (and their spouses) --an underutilized pool of talent whose leadership, dedication, and potential are unmatched. Mounting



research and case-studies spanning across many disciplines consistently demonstrates that Veterans possess character traits proven to yield positive performance and achievement outcomes businesses need to thrive, expand and remain competitive, if only Veterans and their spouses can get in the door, and then, find intrinsic value in their roles to successfully advance within the business. This recommendation triangulated evidence from multi-disciplinary research-informed perspectives and this qualitative study's findings observed through the lens of social identity theory to operationalize sustainable business imperatives to create Veteran-ready hiring and retention initiatives. The return on investment promises unimaginable growth, capacity and potential not just for businesses, but also for Tennessee communities. However, the qualitative data demonstrated Tennessee businesses are ill-postered because of their hyper focus on being "Veteran-friendly" and not "Veteran-ready."

Veteran-friendly and Veteran-ready are terms that are used to describe organizations that have an interest in hiring Veterans. The difference between the two terms lies within whether the business has policies or programs in place to support the employment or education of military Veterans for successful integration and retention. Overall, both Veteran-friendly and Veteran-ready organizations are committed to supporting the needs of military Veterans and helping them succeed in their transition to civilian life. However, there is a distinct difference. Businesses stand to benefit from understanding that difference and elevating their status to "Veteran-ready." "Veteran-friendly" generally refers to an organization or business that is open to hiring and supporting military Veterans but may not have specific programs or resources in place to actively recruit or support in integrating and retaining. A veteran-friendly organization may have a positive attitude towards hiring Veterans but may not have specific policies or practices in place to ensure that they are supported holistically.

"Veteran-ready," on the other hand, refers to an organization or business that has specifically designed programs and resources to actively recruit, support, and retain military Veterans. A Veteran-ready organization may have a dedicated Veterans' affairs office, employee resource group, or specific policies and practices in place to ensure that Veterans have access to the support and resources they need to succeed. This might include initiatives such as targeted recruiting efforts, training programs for military skills translation, and dedicated support services for military Veterans. For example, Veteran-ready businesses attend military job fairs and set targets for military hires. It doesn't stop there, once they hire, they ensure to create a supportive environment, a sense of belonging, of value, mentorship and comradery for retention. Some may even hire military liaisons to assist with the onboarding process for Veterans and military affiliates. These examples are helpful, foundational practices that tend to design imperatives for a successful workplace that meets the needs of Veterans and their spouses.

From a business lens, the goal of attracting and recruiting is enveloped with the scope goal of retention. These businesses are in tune with the art of longevity encompassed in skill development, comradery, being valued and finding meaning, the tenets of retention. The transformation of a "Veteran-friendly" to "Veteran-ready" business environment lies once the retention component has been baked into the business model.

Overall, the main difference between "Veteran-friendly" and "Veteran-ready" is the level of dedicated support and resources that are provided to military Veterans to be successful in their work environment. While both terms indicate that an organization is supportive of military Veterans, Veteran-ready organizations go a step further by actively seeking out and providing specific resources and support to help Veterans succeed and most importantly tending to the core tenets of ensuring that Veteran's civilian career gives them a sense of purpose as being attained

where the work that the Veterans are tending to has intrinsic value. The four-prongs encompass, “recruitment and onboarding practices, clear pathways for growth and training, business resource group (BRG) and mentorship, and leveraging public, private partnerships (P3).” The core tenets of identity are met within each of the four-prongs within the “Veteran-Ready” business model which is scoped to also encompass and accounts in meeting the “8 Areas of Focus During the Military-to-Civilian labor transition.” Therefore, by operationalizing, incentivizing and promoting to employers from the state-level the use of the “**Veteran-Ready Business Model: A Four-Prong Approach**” within Tennessee business contexts, the State would demonstrate their commitment to military cultural competency and aid in the overall goal of successful retention and assimilation within business contexts.

### ***Recommendation***

Operationalize the following framework, which is scalable to any business, of any size. This framework, “**Veteran-Ready Business Model: A Four Prong Approach**,” considers all the challenges illuminated in this qualitative study, as observed through the lens of social identity theory. This framework represents quadrants that lend opportunities attuned to the tenets of social identity theory. One of the strongest facets illuminated within the scope of the qualitative research was the overwhelming support of businesses and government officials who made statements such as, “we want to hire Veterans; we just don’t know what to do.” This constant affirmation of wanting but questioning “how to” exemplified businesses as operating with a heavy reliance within the “Veteran-friendly” domain. This led the researchers with a limitation in targeting literature regarding support in attracting, retaining and recruiting Veterans for successful reintegration in the business sector, thus it was made clear a framework for such, simply does not exist. The researchers then triangulated all qualitative findings, studied

individual businesses classified by the researchers as Veteran-ready businesses, by coding their Veteran employment practices, and employed Design-thinking strategies to grapple with how best to meet the need of designing a framework supported through the lens of social identity theory. The researchers ensured to create actionable steps whereas businesses of all sizes could seamlessly transition this framework as a tool to aid attracting, recruiting, and retaining Veterans. Companies large and small were analyzed that employ local and global Veteran preferential hiring programs and have data that proves retention of talent and sales having skyrocketed once employed. Companies the researchers individually examined included FedEx, Mercedes-Benz USA, Starbucks, 7-Eleven, Office Depot, Hilton Worldwide, etc. and individual case studies of companies that had success with reintegration and retention of Veterans, many of which are current Fortune 500 companies, and others smaller, local businesses. Upon examination each revealed to share interests in operations concerning their Veteran pipeline and programming which gleaned commonalities used in constructing this framework, found in Figure 9a and Figure 9b. The researchers realized companies come in all shapes and sizes as do the resources and success should be for all, therefore, within the following four prongs, each prong offers recommendations to businesses of all sizes to support the successful integration of Veterans during the scope of each Veteran transition more commonly referenced as “attract, recruit and retain” phases of the military-to-civilian transition into the business sector, which in turn if balanced may alleviate antecedents of Veteran reintegration into civic business settings. It is up to the business to use this framework as a checklist or menu within each quadrant (Figure 9a) to decide what fits within the scope of their company as an offering and what is most suitable for each individual Veteran they are seeking to hire. The most important factor is maintaining a balance from each prong which must coexist in equilibrium so that this model can be successful.

A business is considered successful in employing this model if they check off at least one box within each prong and maintain consistency in their policies in meeting these goals. Figures 9a and 9b are a dissemination product for business use, Figure 7 reveals the underpinnings that are paramount in constructing the "attract, recruit and retain" components found within the four-prongs, which provide a foundational structure for success. This is grounded in the fact that during the qualitative research process eight areas of emphasis consistently revealed themselves as needing to be met in the career for successful retention.

### ***The 8 Areas of Focus During the Military-to-Civilian Transition***

1. Sense of Belonging
2. Being Valued
3. Finding Value
4. Identity
5. Networking
6. Sense of Community
7. Sense of Purpose
8. Veteran Narrative

Each of these eight constructs are addressed and supported through the balance of the quadrants. These needs must be met not only for a successful transition into the labor force, but for success with reintegration into society. It is important to remember that the first step of transitioning out of the military is finding employment, therefore employment encompasses so much more than just "finding a job." Thus, a framework supported with roots in social identity theory and gleaned with intrinsic value is foundationally equipped for success. This model is also applicable to employees who are not Veterans, therefore upon implementation will have residual effects of recruitment and retention for businesses writ large and upon implementation will have a seamless transition for all staff given the goals of mentorship, training, comradery and being

valued, only a few of the tenets met within this business model are beneficial for all employees in all business contexts. Implementing this model will increase the Social Return on Investment (SROI) that companies realize by being Veteran-Ready. The SROI is a measure of the social, economic, and environmental benefits of a business practice that are not traditionally reflected on a financial statement (*What Factors Go Into Calculating Social Return on Investment (SROI)?* n.d.).

## 8 Areas of Focus

During the Military-to-Civilian Labor Transition

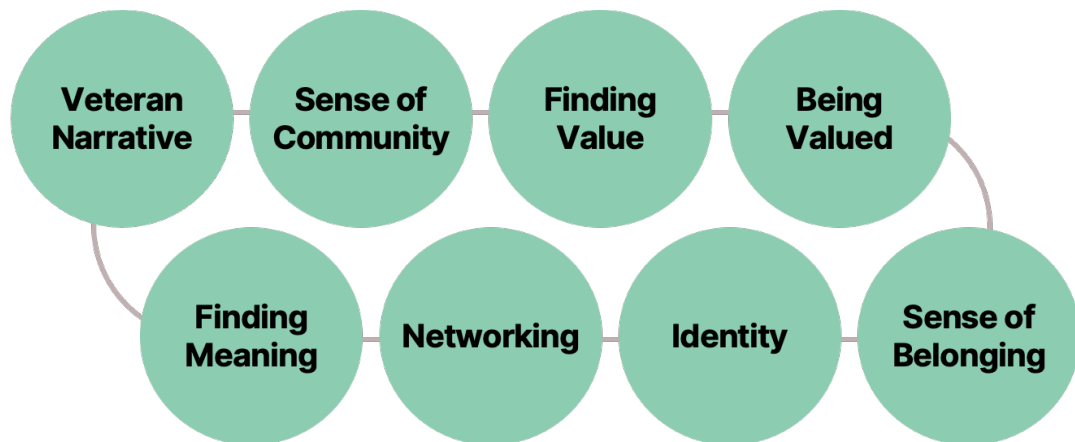


Figure 7. *The 8 Areas of Focus During the Military-to-Civilian Transition*

# 8 Areas of Focus

Aligned Qualitative Evidence

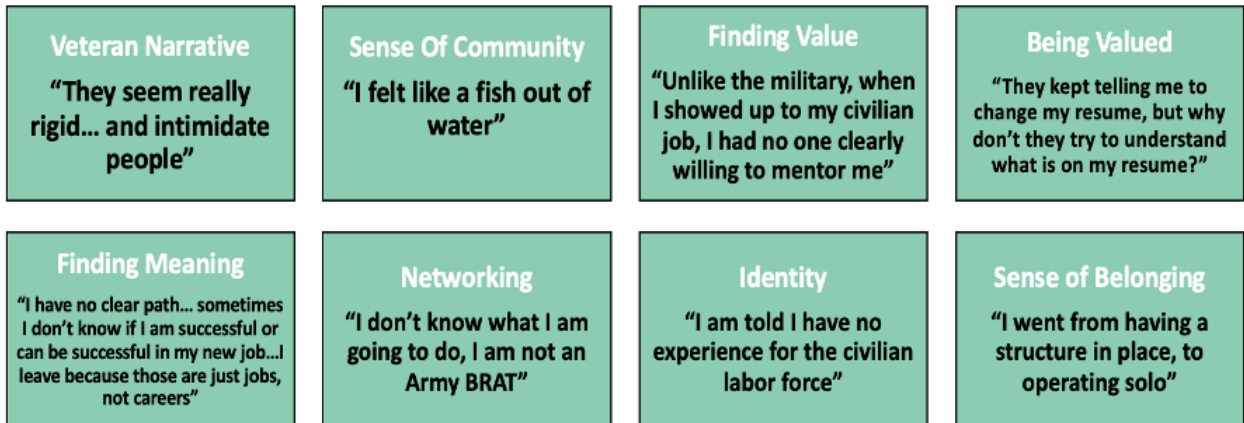


Figure 8. *The 8 Areas of Focus During the Military-to-Civilian Transition, Aligned Qualitative Evidence*

## Model Based on Theory and Findings

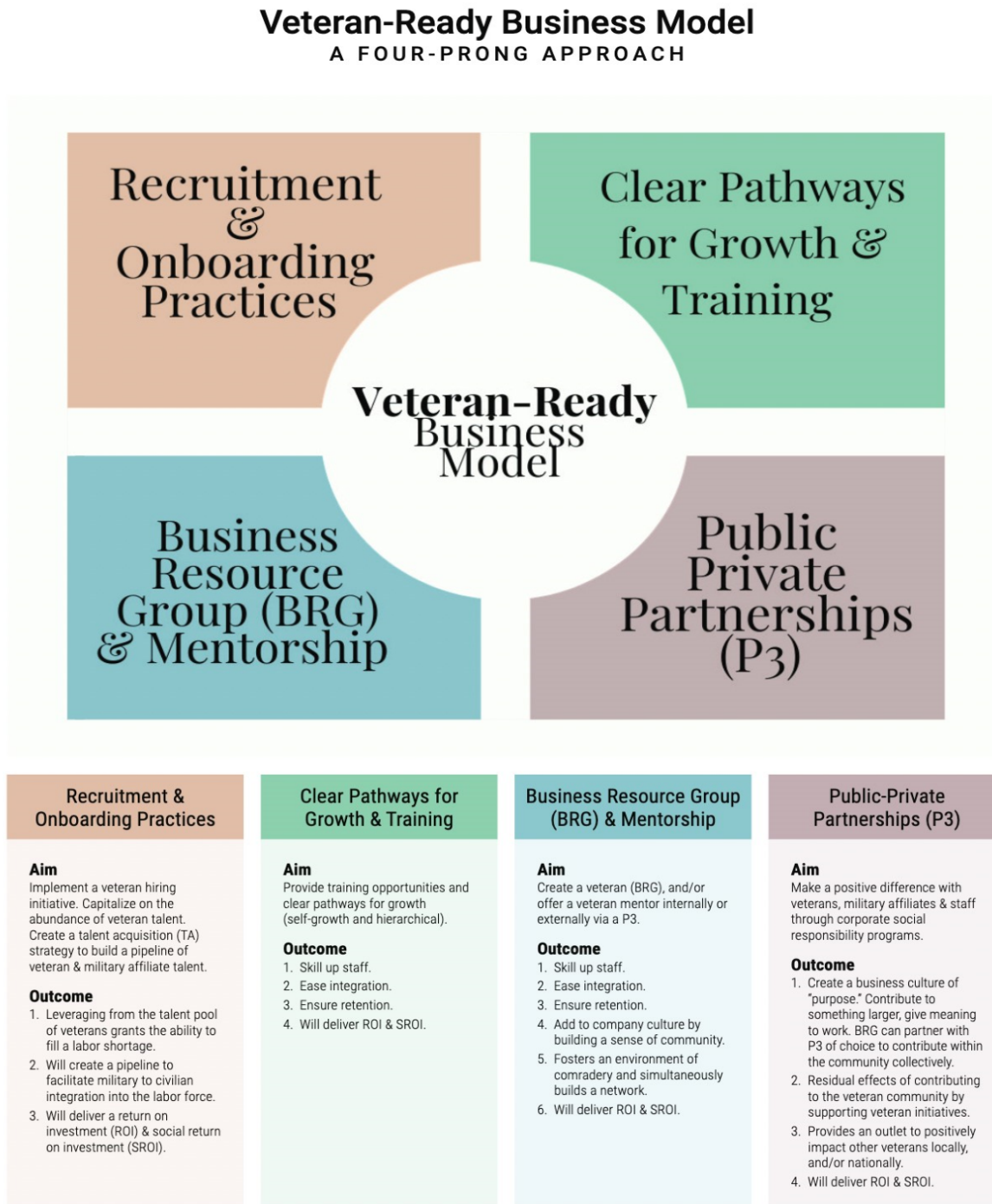


Figure 9a. “Veteran-Ready” Business Model: A Four-Prong Approach



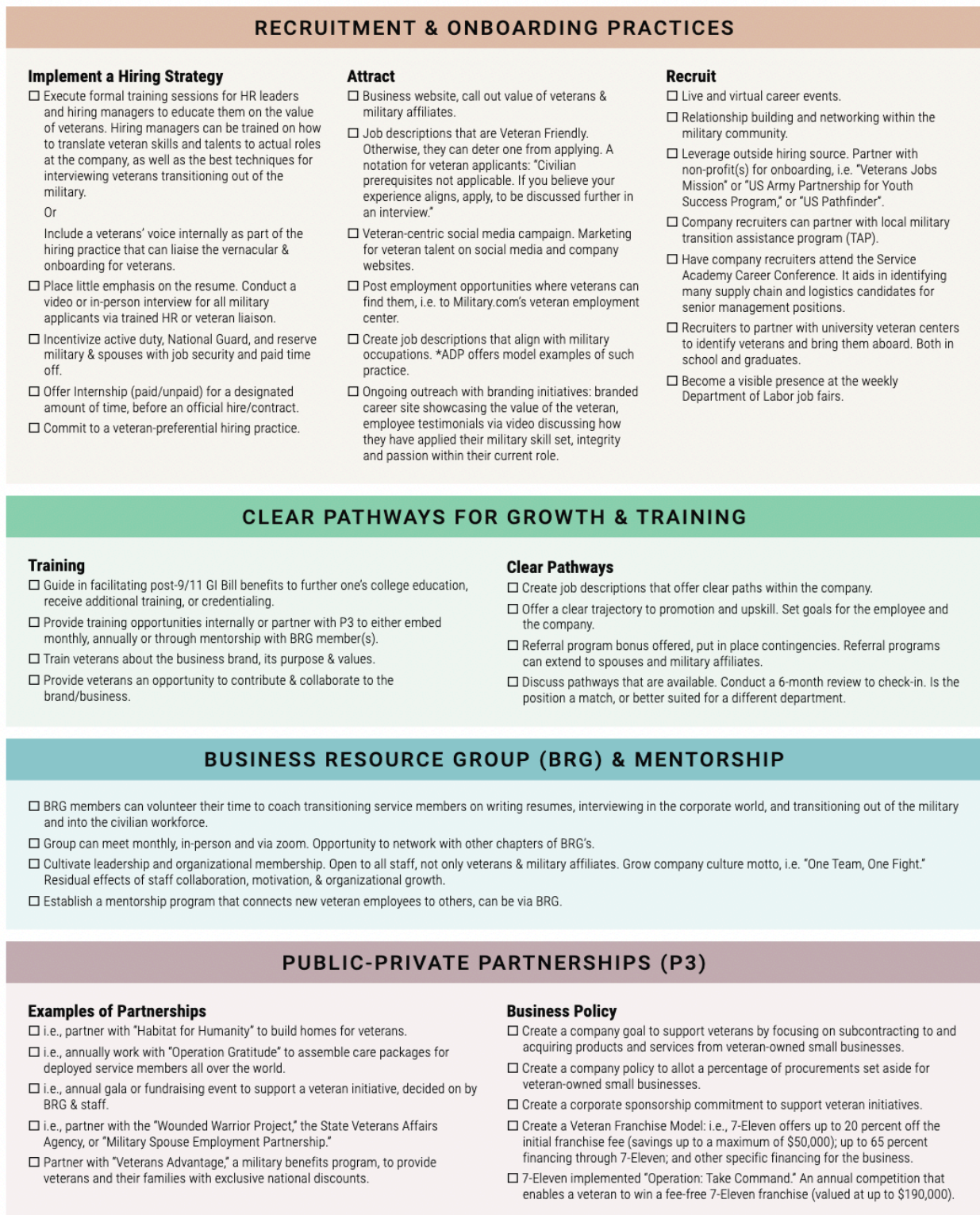


Figure 9b. "Veteran-Ready" Business Model: A Four-Prong Approach

## **Military Style Leadership: The Driving Force Behind Tennessee's Resilient Response to Covid-19--A Case Study**

To demonstrate how Veterans and military members operate efficiently to bring positive results, the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the critical role of military leadership in crisis management, particularly in the state of Tennessee. Under Governor Bill Lee, the state created the COVID-19 Unified Command Group (UCG), a clear application of military leadership skills to address complex and urgent public health issues (*Gov. Bill Lee Establishes COVID-19 Unified Command*, n.d.). The command was rapidly assembled under the direction of Stuart C. McWhorter, then commissioner of the Department of Finance and Administration. McWhorter agreed to take on the role, but wanted someone with military experience by his side, that is when U.S. Army Brigadier General (Ret.) Scott E. Brower was assigned as Chief of Staff. Brower worked to synchronize communication and manage efforts amongst the Dept. of Health, the Dept. of Military, and the Tennessee Emergency Management Agency (TEMA)-- all of which reported to McWhorter until he left, they then liaised to the Governor through Brandon Gibson. The UCG worked in conjunction with the Economic Recovery Group (ERG), led by Commissioner Mark Ezell. In total, seven departments worked tirelessly, to ensure the people of Tennessee were managed safely while working in tandem with economic recovery efforts (*Gov. Bill Lee Taps Stuart McWhorter for COVID-19 Response*, n.d.).

A retired U.S. Army Brigadier General whose decisive leadership unified people across multiple contexts to shape the state's response to the pandemic, Brower pulled together Veterans and active-duty military trusted to fight America's wars abroad to fight the pandemic on American soil. Together, with multiple civilian leadership figures, the Unified Command Group

coordinated resources and implemented strategic responses with a disciplined approach and open lines of communication across all levels of state leadership--all actions credited for slowing the virus's spread, saving lives, and stabilizing Tennessee's economy.

Beyond immediate pandemic containment, the Unified Command Group's influence contributed to economic confidence. Tennessee saw a significant increase in new business filings during the pandemic, indicating renewed optimism. In comparison to other states that lacked military-style leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic, Tennessee clearly displayed more effective control over the virus spread, economic stability, and lower unemployment rates. While many states struggled with escalating virus cases, economic stagnation, and high unemployment, Tennessee, guided by its military style leadership, managed to implement effective strategies that led to more positive health and economic outcomes. The following facts demonstrate how Tennessee not only thrived, but flourished, because of the Unified Command Group's leadership.

- Unprecedented Growth in New Business Filings: (*Historic Surge in New Business Filings Signals Renewed Confidence in Economy | Tennessee Secretary of State, n.d.*)
  - o In Q1 of 2021, new business filings grew by 55.1% compared to Q1 of 2020, marking the largest year-over-year gain in the 28-year history of data collection.
  - o A total of 19,652 entities filed in Q1 of 2021, setting a record for the highest quarterly total.
  - o This marked the third consecutive quarter where new business filings grew by over 30% year-over-year.
- Positive Impact on the State Economy:
  - o Growth in business filings typically leads to job growth, personal income increases, and enhanced state revenue.
  - o Initial filings for new businesses showed positive year-over-year growth for 37 consecutive quarters.
  - o The rise in online businesses during the pandemic is likely a contributing factor to Tennessee's sustained business growth through 2020.

- Geographic Distribution of Growth:
  - o Shelby County had the largest number of new filings, followed by Davidson, Knox, and Hamilton counties.
  - o These four counties accounted for 47.9% of new filings state-wide.
- Employment Situation:
  - o The state's unemployment rate stands at 5%, a significant improvement from the 15.8% high one year ago, and still below the national rate of 6.1%.
  - o The state's labor force participation rate improved to 60.7%.

Dr. Bill Fox, the director of the Boyd Center for Business and Economic Research, noted that the record-breaking initial filings for new businesses in Q1 of 2021 signal a rapid economic rebound from the pandemic. The aforesaid data demonstrates not just Tennessee's resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic, but also a strong case for the value of military leadership ethos. Overall, the demonstrated success of the Unified Command Group emphasizes that in crisis situations, the military's dedication and problem-solving skills contribute to decisive and effective outcomes, fostering unity and purpose during challenging times. This unified action allowed for the tertiary business growth and development Tennessee is experiencing through 2023, as the State proved stability and most importantly safe operations with limited closures--even during a pandemic, thus making it a very attractive State for investors both nationally and globally, far beyond other States. Most importantly, what this case study exemplifies is the transcendence of military skills, how they can be applied within any context and achieve successful outcomes.

## Conclusion

Consensus from the literature resonates concerning the difficulties our Veterans face during the transition process, especially transitioning into the civilian labor force given the difference in culture, vernacular, and overall shift to civilian life. Often there is little to no time to assimilate given the pressure of needing to meet fiscal demands and prepare for such a momentous milestone. There are a multitude of decisions that must be made, and unfortunately service members are granted limited resources in conducting the research needed for such life altering decisions which affect their new life, their new identity and even family. Veterans are left to navigate state residency options, employment opportunities, educational, health and disability benefits. To compound this process each state is unique in their offerings for Veterans. A heavy reliance falls onto the use of the web, navigating governmental and nonprofit websites to best inform their transition. Ironically the values that encompass military life centered on social support dematerialize in such a critical time. The collegial environment that once was, dissipates at the juncture of transition leaving this newfound team mission as an individualistic pursuit.

Aristotle's work in *Nicomachean Ethics* (NE) (Aristotle, 2011) poignantly brings to surface virtuous actions and thereby these actions having ties to "an end." He explores the notion that virtuous actions are for the sake of ends, beyond even themselves. When ruminating over this concept, one may ponder "ends" as being measured in a more immediate state, more of a cause and effect. Yet, it can be viewed rooted in a more intrinsic level where "ends" may impact in manners that are so long term, one may not be around to witness the fruit of their labor. It begs the question, which of these carries more weight? Are virtuous actions with long term intrinsic ends more virtuous than others? This weighs heavily morally as we take into consideration our

military. In the United States, those having served, and currently serving, did so on their own volition. A selfless oath to one's country, a literal sacrifice of their life, all in the name of preserving others' Godforsaken rights, our freedom. This end in mind is eternal, voluntary, and not short term, it is the epitome of selfless sacrifice. Then upon transition are left to navigate an unnavigable system. The person who sacrificed so much so that others can be free of injustice, experiences an injustice of being wrongfully labeled as inept, suicidal, and broken. They don't have access upon transition to the same opportunities they fought for, even though they honorably served and others who didn't serve, have better access.

The act of serving is even more impactful given the United States military is an all-volunteer base. A cohort of exceptional citizens, with a passion for service. Brave men and women who dutifully serve their country with an end, so that their fellow countrymen can have their freedoms preserved. It would only be fathomable that society would prioritize and have in place systems that ease the transition; systemic opportunities available to embrace our fellow service members and place them on the pedestal upon reintegration, where they belong.

Astoundingly, much of society doesn't know or have an awareness of this same injustice. Significant research reveals our perceptions of war have shifted, since wars are no longer fought on shore, the residual effect has cultivated a cognitive dissonance of factors involved in war. Therefore, military affiliated concerns are not viewed as societal problems but individualistic. "Civilians in the U.S. often forget that these are their wars as well as those of the people who volunteer to fight them" (Bragin, 2010). It is unsettling to imagine that someone who has given themselves to this country, in the same breadth, is discriminated against when they need the support the most. How can this be? Thus, placing into perspective Aristotle's view of virtuous

action, what greater ethical action can one ever undertake than putting their life on the line so that others, even those in generations to come, can live virtuously?

Jane Addams, a pioneer, and activist who has written many books and essays about her experience in advocating for democratic ideals believed in doing good *with* others and not *for* others. Addams life's work centered on holding society accountable in maintaining a shared responsibility in reframing how society views and approaches problems. Like Addams, Martin Luther King (MLK) Jr. advocated for unity in addressing social problems. Unity involves even those who felt "unaffected." MLK felt strongly that society at large was interwoven, and that one civilians' problem was technically everyone's problem. Both Addams and MLK Jr. believed the underpinnings of societal change were rooted in empathetic communication and communal action. Inaction in their eyes was the same as being complicit. Approaching societal challenges is a shared responsibility and a tool for facilitating change and requires interaction with those who hold different perspectives and life experiences than oneself. There is a strong sense of purpose once we realize the strength that we have (or can have) when we view societal problems through the lens of having a collective responsibility in achieving an outcome. More can be done when we work as a unit and make doing so a priority.

In conclusion, the military to civilian identity transition presents significant challenges and opportunities that demand collective attention, empathy, and action. Recognizing and valuing the sacrifices and experiences of Veterans is pivotal in cultivating a more inclusive and compassionate society, particularly within the context of Tennessee. Prioritizing initiatives that emphasize networking, belonging, and appreciation serves as a crucial framework for facilitating a successful transition.

The support of Veterans entails societal and moral obligations that surpass mere duty. By creating an environment that acknowledges the diverse identities of Veterans, we can properly recognize their skills, amplify their voices, and prioritize their sense of belonging. Fostering understanding, respect, and support effectively bridges the gap between military and civilian contexts, benefiting not only Tennessee but also the broader national landscape.

Upholding these societal and moral obligations is imperative, as they demonstrate a commitment to honoring the sacrifices of Veterans and providing the necessary support during their transitions. By fulfilling this responsibility, we can build a society that celebrates the unique journeys of Veterans, fosters their sense of belonging, and creates opportunities for their personal growth and success. In doing so, we lay the foundation for a stronger, more inclusive future for Veterans and the communities to which they contribute.



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## Appendix A

### Interview Protocol

Interview

Opening Statement: Research topic will have been explained and the opening statement will have been made.

questions:

Interviewee:

Time Date:

Interviewer(s):

Role within Veteran Space:

Interview link for digital recording:

1. I would like to start by learning more about each other. Can you introduce yourself and provide a little background on your work or experience?
2. Based on your background and experience, what do you see as some of the main issues facing Tennessee's ability to attract transitioning veterans and military affiliates?
3. Can you think of any contributing factors associated with these issues (such as out of state education benefits, out of state licensure, spousal out of state licensure)?
4. Are you aware of other states who are working to address these issues?
5. Knowing what you do about barriers veterans face upon transition into the labor force, can you suggest any kinds of strategies the state can develop and/or deliver resources to address these issues?
6. If Tennessee were to develop and/or deliver educational and business resources, what kinds of barriers come to mind about how people may find and access them?
7. "Where do you look for veteran resources?" rather than "Do you go to state websites for resources?"
8. Did you feel adequately prepared to transition from the military to civilian life (if you have already). If you have not transitioned, how prepared do you feel? Please explain.
9. How far in advance, before your exit from the military did you start your research for job opportunities?
10. What factors did you consider in choosing to stay in TN? What were competing factors other states offered?
11. What do you most value in your current position?

12. (If seeking) If all fiscal means were met, what do you most value in your current, or future employment.

13. How does the veteran non-profit space in TN work with veterans, during and after the veteran transition to secure employment?

14. Are you securing employment based on your qualifications?

15. What or whom were your most supportive resources during your quest to secure employment?

16. How do you feel your identity as a veteran is prioritized or addressed in the civilian business sector, and what factors contribute to your perception of this?

17. Do you feel as though the Tennessee employment space is navigable for veterans?

18. Can you offer any secondary sources you think would assist in the research project?

Date of IRB Approval: 03/28/2023

## **Focus Group Interview Questions**

### Sample Questions for an Issues-based Focus Group

1. I would like to start by learning more about each other. Can you introduce yourself and provide a little background experience with the veteran transition and/or labor participation factors?

2. Based on your background and experience, what do you see as some of the contributing factors associated with this particular issue in our community?

3. Are you aware of others who are working to address this issue/these issues, including potential non-profit partners?

4. Knowing what you do about factors affecting veteran labor participation, can you suggest any kinds of strategies for us to develop and/or deliver educational resources to address this issue? Please feel free to suggest bold opportunities for how we might work in new ways.\

5. If we were to develop and/or deliver these educational resources, what kinds of barriers come to mind about how people may find and access them?

### Sample Questions for Veteran or Business-based Focus Group

1. I would like to start by learning more about each other. Can you introduce yourself and provide a little background on your work or experience?
2. Based on your background and experience, what do you see as some of the main issues facing this businesses within the state of Tennessee's ability to attract transitioning veterans and military affiliates?
3. Can you think of any contributing factors associated with these issues (such as out of state education benefits, out of state licensure, spousal out of state licensure)?
4. Are you aware of other States who are working to address these issues?
5. Knowing what you do about barriers veterans face upon transition into the labor force, can you suggest any kinds of strategies for us to develop and/or deliver educational resources to address these issues? Please feel free to suggest bold opportunities for how we might work in new ways in the state of Tennessee.
6. If we were to develop and/or deliver these educational and business resources, what kinds of barriers come to mind about how people may find and access them?
7. Do you feel veteran identity is prioritized or addressed in the civilian business sector, and what factors contribute to your perception of this?

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## Appendix B

### Participant Validation Form

#### Form: Participant Validation

Follow up questions: Participant Validation Strategy (Ravitch and Carl, pp. 176-177)

Date:	Interviewer:	Interviewee:
	Follow up Question	Response
Q1	Does this transcript reflect and resonate with your perspective?	
Q2	Were your words, perspectives and ideas accurately captured in this study?	
Q3	Do you have any specific concerns related to our interpretation that need to be addressed?	
Reviewed BY:		
Date:		

Date of IRB Approval: 03/28/2023

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# Appendix C

## Unobtrusive Discourse Analysis Template

### Data Collection Sheet

Instructions:

1. Fill out the fields.
2. Do NOT ENTER any identifiable information about any human subject that will either identity or contextually identify a human subject.
3. Repeat for every new source

Research Topic: "Attract, Recruit, Retain: Creation of a Systemic Pipeline for Veteran Talent to Address Tennessee's Current and Emergent Labor Shortages"

Source Type:	[Insert the type of source you're using (e.g. government website, media post, etc.)]
Source URL:	[Insert the URL or other source type]
Date Accessed:	[Insert the date you accessed the source]
<b>Data Collection Fields:</b>	
1. Source Description: [Describe the source briefly, including any relevant contextual information of the publicly available document]	
2. Key Findings: [Summarize the most important or relevant information you found in the source, including specific details that support your research question]	
3. Limitations: [Note any limitations or potential biases of the source, such as incomplete data, a specific political or ideological perspective, or a lack of credibility]	
4. Insights or Conclusions: [Reflect on what the source tells you about your research topic, including any new insights or questions that arise from your analysis]	

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