

Signature Employment Grant 2014: Veteran Staffing Network

Building off its experience running the Veteran Workforce Investment program (2010-2013), which provided veterans with training and career coaching, the Easter Seals of Greater Washington Baltimore region launched the Veterans Staffing Network (VSN) in 2014 with funding from Kessler Foundation and others¹. As a social enterprise, VSN has mission and business objectives. The goal is not simply to get veterans jobs in a cost-effective manner, but to support self-sufficiency, meaningful careers, and community integration. VSN's target population, according to the program's architect, is "anyone who wore a uniform, or stood next to someone wearing a uniform," which includes veterans, wounded warriors, reservists, and their spouses. The program has three primary elements: job coaching, business development (identifying job opportunities), and recruiting job seekers.

Returning home from military service after experiencing combat, especially with a disability, can be a complex, bewildering, and draining process. Many communities are not equipped to respond to veterans' unique needs. Easter Seals, however, had extensive experience providing services to veterans. Using an ecosystem approach, VSN was well-placed to offer a "soft landing" with employment support that addresses the barriers to employment, supporting veterans, their families, and the organizations that employ them. The program primarily serves the underemployed, or those who want to move beyond entry-level jobs into higher-level employment.

VSN employs a commercial staffing model with a strong business development approach to finding individuals who are job-ready and immediately placing them into jobs within the VSN employer network. For those needing employment assistance, the VSN uses a sophisticated mix of e-learning technology and personalized one-on-one job counseling. Employee supports focus on four areas: self-awareness; resume readiness; interview abilities; and networking strategies. Importantly, it helps veterans identify how their military skills translate into civilian jobs. VSN conducts in-depth intake and assessment. The program also provides individualized job search training and assistance such as résumé development, interviewing

assistance, and referrals to wraparound services via its e-learning system, Cornerstone. Career coaches maintain customized plans for each participant, monitoring their progress. They then match the participant with a job opportunity or participants find jobs outside of VSN's network. During the 2.5 years of Kessler Foundation's grant, VSN provided career coaching services to nearly 3,000 individuals and placed 700 into employment, approximately 24% of whom were veterans with disabilities.

VSN works with employers from industries across the labor market – many of whom have a specific commitment to hiring veterans (such as the American Legion). The program offers employers a full-service

Project at-a-glance

Grantee Organization:

Easter Seals Greater Washington,
Baltimore, Virginia Region
(Silver Spring, MD)

Grant Amount:

\$412,000

Geographic focus:

Primarily Washington, D.C,
Baltimore and Virginia with limited
national scope

Description:

A social enterprise staffing agency
dedicated to getting U.S. veterans,
reservists, wounded warriors and
spouses into the civilian workforce

Impact:

Efficient and effective employment
placement of veterans with
disabilities and their families
coupled with critical coaching
support

¹ Up until the end of Kessler's support in May 31, 2016, Capital One Human Capital Innovation Fund contributed approximately \$1.5 million and the Call of Duty Endowment contributed approximately \$280,000.

staffing agency, bridging employers and veterans, and providing the support infrastructure to succeed. Employer support includes a disability navigator to guide job accommodations, coaching for hiring managers, and workshops on traumatic brain injury (TBI) and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). VSN offers employers flexible placement options, including temporary-to-permanent, traditional-hire and contract hires.

Together, VSN's support for veterans and employers created a scalable framework, infrastructure, and standard operating procedures that could be expanded geographically. It maintains a self-sufficient business model due to its niche as a customized staffing agency for veterans and employers that are committed to hiring veterans. As its website notes, "By focusing squarely on the individual needs of employers and veterans, we provide the best personal match for each position and the support our nation's veterans need to successfully transition back to the civilian world."

Key elements of success

VSN developed strong employer relationships identifying those committed to hiring veterans

The VSN strengthened and expanded its employer engagement in a systematic and strategic way, resulting in abundant job postings from which to recruit veterans and their spouses. It nurtured relationships with veterans' agencies as well as private employers such as Marriott, but also became an official federal government contractor, helping other government contractors meet regulations for hiring veterans and individuals with disabilities. VSN identifies employers who prioritize hiring veterans and job seekers are, therefore, in a promising position to get a job placement through the VSN. At the same time, VSN helps employers see the long-term value in hiring veterans – disciplined, team-oriented, hard-working individuals.

Its work with Marriott exemplifies the symbiotic relationship VSN has with many employers. For VSN, Marriott seeks staff for many positions and promotes internally, providing not just jobs, but career paths. For Marriott "the VSN guarantees that their referrals have good soft skills and are therefore reliable employees." Marriott can quickly find job seekers, and they are able to avoid an upfront investment for those who might not work out by using the temporary-to-permanent placement option.

The strategic use of technology offers efficiencies for job coaching

With comprehensive wrap-around services, such as referrals to benefits programs, financial literacy and translations of skills to the civilian workforce, VSN offers participants customized support within a financially sustainable business model. Over the course of Kessler's grant, VSN's e-learning systems allowed the program to focus resources where they were most needed and to support a larger number of job seekers. Initial assessments indicated that the system holds promise for providing more targeted, efficient workforce development assistance for both job seekers and career coaches.

An example of the power of VSN's job coaching is Erin Nelson, an Air Force veteran, who became desperate to find a job after months of job searching that drained her financial and emotional resources. With experience in intelligence and surveillance, her job coach, Sin, helped to redirect her search to jobs that better matched her skills set. Sin constantly went beyond the role of career coach, offering the support and encouragement Erin needed to regain her confidence. As Erin noted, "She helped me prepare for all interviews, but it was more than that. When I was down after not hearing any responses from jobs for a while, she would talk me through it." Sin prepared her to translate her military skills to a civilian role within a police department and focused on building her confidence. "It was encouraging to have that motivation

and support” said Erin. Erin is now a Crime Analyst at the Fairfax County Police Department where she excels, applying her intelligence background to analyzing police reports looking for crime patterns.

VSN addresses concerns about hiring veterans and builds confidence of veterans with disabilities

As Erin’s story illustrates (and research confirms), confidence is a critical element to employment success. VSN educates both employers and veterans about the potential of people with disabilities and their families. Its website debunks misperceptions about wounded warriors and shares the many contributions and assets veterans can bring to an employer, such as integrity, respect for procedure and their strength and determination in addressing adversity. Understanding that a disability is not a barrier to employment helps ensure that veterans and employers can understand and work well with one another.

As a former member of the U.S. Army living with a disability, Kai Soni, had lost confidence in herself and couldn’t communicate her skills and expertise in job interviews, or why she was qualified. “No one believed in me,” Kai said.

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Kessler Foundation’s fundamental strategy is to link science and grantsmanship so that people with disabilities can lead more productive, independent, and fulfilling lives. Kessler Foundation Research Center conducts research that improves quality of life for persons with injuries of the spinal cord and brain, stroke, multiple sclerosis, and other chronic neurological and orthopedic conditions. Although individuals living with disabilities represent the largest minority group seeking employment in today’s marketplace, they are often not considered an integral component of corporate diversity programs. Through its strategic focus on employment, Kessler Foundation has invested more than \$42.5 million since 2005 in organizations that work to create job opportunities through development, placement employer education, and social enterprise. This funding has enabled people with disabilities to overcome the obstacles that often face them and meet the workforce needs of American business. Innovative grantmaking has introduced creative solutions to help eliminate some of the barriers that prevent people with disabilities from working.



Learn more about the Kessler Foundation at <http://www.kesslerfoundation.org>.

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