



VIPERTRANSITIONS

Veteran Internships Providing Employment Readiness

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VIPER Transitions creates pathways for transitioning service members and military spouses into the workforce. The military presents a diversified pool of Americans looking for their next career. Those who serve our country come from every demographic of American society and answered our country's call to serve. It is up to us to ensure they have access to quality careers after their service. By including veterans in efforts to support a more robust workforce, we include people of every religion, ethnicity, economic, and social background. VIPER believes veterans represent a group of potential workers often left out of discussions of inclusion and advancement. It is our duty to ensure they are represented in these discussions. Below is why this discussion is necessary:

A Comprehensive Solution to Ending Veteran Suicide

THE EPIDEMIC

Veteran Suicide is a complicated issue. Every Veteran is unique and faces distinct challenges making the solution to ending Veteran suicide more complicated. At Veteran Internships Providing Employment Readiness (VIPER) we believe we can establish a comprehensive program with the capability of surmounting this challenge. Looking at some of the causes we as veterans have face ourselves, Post- Traumatic Stress/military trauma, career transition, unemployment, and/or underemployment we begin to find a common thread: a veteran's sense of self-worth. VIPER believes poor self-worth/identity is the main factor influencing veteran suicide. We focus on a comprehensive method of connecting existing programs, organizations, and resources needed to address this factor. We believe that our unique approach is suited to adequately address the needs of our veterans and our nation.

VETERAN IDENTITY

Believing the leading factor to Veteran suicide is tied to the Veteran's perceived self-worth or self-identity is not a new concept. People usually identify themselves according to the role they play in society. When Veterans are referred to as heroes, patriots, defenders of freedom, the backbone of the country, and other such praises it is hard to be anything else. When Veterans separate from the military there is a large space to fill and the struggle becomes very real. During this struggle it is more likely someone will turn to alcohol, drugs, compulsive shopping, or possibly gambling, just to feel alive again. It is during this struggle that other mental health issues can take over.

Military service may expose an individual to different traumatic experiences. These experiences, often referred to as Post-Traumatic Stress or PTS, happens to "people who have experienced or witnessed a traumatic event" [1.] PTS can play a significant role in Veteran self-identity. A successful military force must be able to perform in the worst conditions imaginable. To be effective in combat, training must take place to try and "harden" the mind and numb emotion. This training is necessary to accomplish

the military's mission. Veterans are continuously exposed to an environment that trains them to keep going no matter what. When Veterans suffer from PTS it is common for them to view it as a weakness and they begin to question who they are. This questioning can lead to a path of self-destruction even while still being able to "perform" their job duties. While this already complicated mental war rages in the minds of every Veteran, it becomes more compounded during the transition process.

Many military occupations do not translate directly to civilian careers. While there are many programs available to Veterans actively serving in the military that can help them achieve degrees and certifications, the mission always comes first. With most units being on active deployment cycles it is not as practical, or as easy, for those serving to utilize such programs. As Veterans look to the next phase of their lives after leaving the service, they are regularly told they are not "qualified" for the career they desire. During the hunt to find a gainful, fulfilling career, Veterans are missing the keys they need to achieve success. They are often told to go to this website, use this military skills translator, write a resume (but don't use military terms civilians won't understand), network, go to job fairs, and the list goes on. This is deception. As Veterans we did all these things expecting that the advice and counseling, we received would lead to mission success. As active duty members we relied on the accuracy and truth of information in situations as it could be the difference between life and death. And we had learned to trust in that information. The difference being that while transitioning out we do all these things and many of us will exit the service without a job in place. "One in four veterans say they had a civilian job lined up after they left the military" [2.] Meaning with an average of 200,000 Veterans transitioning out of the military each year, approximately 150,000 exit unemployed. The fear of being "unqualified," and incapable of achieving victory, is now manifested in unemployment, underemployment, and possibly homelessness.

THE CONNECTION GAP

There are many organizations addressing the issues facing America's Veterans. From the Department of Veterans Affairs to local volunteers, there are groups established to address different Veteran needs. Each organization hones its focus on the issues they have chosen to affect. One may focus on mental health and provide free mental health screenings, another on disability benefits and assisting Veterans in filing claims, another on housing assistance and finding a place for Veterans to live. All admirably doing what they can to help Veterans, and yet we still lose 16 to 22 Veterans a day to suicide.

With so many organizations offering to help Veterans, it can be hard to determine which organization to talk to. Veterans are aware of most of the larger organizations and with technology today, a quick online search makes finding the information easily attainable. The issue is not the organizations, the services they provide, or the marketing tools they use. The issue again lies in the perception of self.

Esprit De Corps and regimented training to believe you can accomplish anything are good things to have experienced and there are many important lessons to take with you throughout life. Learning to recognize where healthy pride and ambition crossover to become a destructive ego and an unteachable attitude is where Veterans struggle. Making the right connection before a Veteran is in crisis makes all the difference.

THE BRIDGE

We know that while Veterans are struggling to find their identity in the civilian world, many employers are struggling to find quality employees. According to our research as many as 7 out of 10 employers reported talent shortages in 2019 [3.] An aging workforce and the need for technical skills and training make finding the right applicant for employment difficult. Historically, Veterans have been told to go to college and get a good job. There are issues with this narrative.

College graduates with a bachelor's degree entering the workforce will earn around \$51,000 a year [4.] Not a horrible starting pay for someone in their early twenties with no debt. When you research military pay you will see modest pay rates. An E-4 (Enlisted level 4) earns around \$32,000 annually. Looking at the numbers, college may be a good option. The issue for Veterans is that they have grown accustomed to a standard of living much higher than that. It is poor practice to only consider income and not all the other factors affecting quality of life. Veterans enjoy free medical care for themselves and their families. They have access to free physical fitness centers, recreational centers, cost of living allowances, housing allowances and more. An E-4 with 4 years of service, a family of 4, stationed in Alaska, earns \$58,000 a year [5.]

Many Veterans go to college because they have families to provide for. Leaving a \$58,000 a year job to pursue a new career by going through college can lead to additional stress. The university structure is sometimes difficult for a Veteran to adapt to. Making less money, acquiring more debt, on top of the normal stressors added by attending college, become too much for most to handle. Veterans drop out of college over 80% of the time [6.] Veterans from 3 to 12 months post-transition from the service, are almost 3 times more likely to commit suicide than those on active duty [7.] Failure to succeed in school leads to more self-doubt.

In 2015, 54% of Veterans attending college were enrolled in associate degree or certificate programs [8.] The average salary for someone with an associate degree is \$41,496 [9.] This scenario leaves the Veteran with used Gi Bill benefits, more debt, and no clear-cut path to a career.

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics projects that the construction and extraction job market alone will grow 10% from 2018 to 2028 [10.] While the projected growth is good for those already skilled in a trade, there is a shortage of workers entering these types of fields. The current narrative that attending college is the best way for you to succeed needs to change. College needs to be looked at to advance your career, not get it started.

SKILLS NOT DEGREES

“There are qualities...that have a tendency to be completely overlooked when people are sifting through résumés or LinkedIn profiles. And yet, increasingly, we find that these are the kinds of people that make the biggest difference within our organization.

Increasingly I hear this mantra: *Skills, not degrees.*”

-LinkedIn CEO Jeff Weiner

VIPER answers the problems facing America's Veterans, employers, and the future economy. Creating a system focused on answering the needs of Veterans with the needs of industry we accomplish and successfully address core issues facing all involved. Focusing on giving Veterans tangible skills that lead directly to quality employment assists Veterans by: Identifying future career options, securing a career that allows Veterans to better manage stress levels associated with transition, bridging the information gap between Veterans and available resources by utilizing original programs, creating a community of support that creates a positive environment that Veterans thrive in.

VIPER peer mentors offer advice based on their own real-world experiences and how they have succeeded since the military. Each Veteran entering the program is able to explore the careers they express interest in. Veteran and mentor conversations are more in depth than just a typical job description. Our mentors are volunteers straight from the industry they work in. Working men and women who want to support Veterans as they transition to the next phase of their life. This gives the Veteran invaluable insight from the “boots on the ground.” This is actionable intel that the Veteran can

be reassured is accurate and will lead to success. Promises are not made, opportunities are presented. The Veteran is informed as to the importance of their commitment to succeed and are given clear direction to accomplish their next mission... In order to execute a mission successfully there must be a clear objective. Having a job is not an adequate objective for VIPER applicants. The applicant must identify the career they desire and give solid reasons as to their desire for this career. In order to ensure the Veteran's objective is clear, they must be able to openly discuss their concerns. A classroom full of peers can feel more like a trial than a forum for open, honest discussion.

OTHER BRIDGES

Fish to End 22 is a VIPER program with two main focuses: 1) To bring awareness to the public about Veteran suicide while fishing in high profile tournaments. 2) Taking Veterans on a fishing charters to discuss career options.

While fishing in tournaments the Fish to End 22 team hosts informational booths at the main locations of the event. This brings Veteran suicide to the attention of the public and Fish to End 22's second mission.

Veterans that participate in Fish to End 22 experience a day of high-quality fishing while engaging with mentors and organizations that work with VIPER. These "day trips" are fun, energetic and create a great environment for Veterans to ask questions about their futures and learn about the resources available to them.

Operation Combat Pike takes the Veterans on one to three day trips fishing for invasive Pike. These trips take them to a place where mentors and Veterans have the time, space, and privacy to have candid conversations regarding their future. While on this excursion Veterans are asked to use some of the skills they learned in the military. Once on site we ask them to assist in coordinating outings, organizing themselves into groups based on their interests, and maintaining the facilities used. This gives Veterans an opportunity to see themselves performing outside of their uniform reinforcing a positive self-identity.

While participating in Operation Combat Pike, the Veteran can fish while talking to mentors about opportunities. VIPER's mentors explain the details involved in succeeding in their career. They also reinforce using available resources when needed. We then tie the experiences from Operation Combat Pike to the attitude needed to succeed.

Veteran organizations working with VIPER attend these trips as mentors, advisors and champions for Veterans giving these organizations an opportunity to have an in-depth conversation with the Veterans regarding the resources they have to offer, resources that may be lifesaving.

During Fish to End 22 and Operation Combat Pike outings, we ensure the Veteran is connected to available resources while highlighting the attributes the Veteran already has. Bringing to light the quality traits they already have and showing them how they can adapt those traits in order to pursue a successful life as a civilian. We reinforce that the "will to win" or "never quit" attitude is the greatest asset every Veteran has at their disposal. However, proper attitude and desire will not equal success. Success comes when the Veteran's attitude and desire meets opportunity.

PAST PRESENT FUTURE

The American Dream is founded off the principal belief in the attainability of success. Veterans have fought for that dream since the country began. VIPER honors America's military heritage by utilizing historical artifacts to train the workforce of tomorrow. Operation Combat Pike uses vintage aircraft to

fly Veterans to their destinations. These aircraft represent more than unique transportation - these aircraft honor past Veterans. These working tributes place an importance on the current generation ensuring the success of the future generations of Veterans, just as the past Veterans ensured today. The connection of Veterans spanning generations is important in maintaining esprit de corps after military service. Connecting the current generation to their heritage reinforces the message that no one is alone.

Beyond the nostalgia of connecting multiple generations of Veterans, the utilized aircraft's service and maintenance is a unique training platform allowing Veterans going through one of the programs in the basics of aviation. The restoration and maintaining of these artifacts present an opportunity to train multiple skills. From grease and ball bearings, rivets in sheet metal, to electronic control systems, VIPER students are exposed to a unique learning environment. Artifacts that are not actively utilized by VIPER programs are sold or donated to museums to further ensure the Veterans heritage is honored.

TRANSITION REDEFINED

After engaging Veterans and assisting them in identifying their career path, VIPER redefines transition. Historically, internships have been open to Veterans in the hope that participating employers **MAY** hire them. This **IS NOT** good enough. All the companies who work with VIPER are required to sign an agreement with the VIPER program applicant that guarantees details of employment, including placement in the company. Details like number of hours to be worked in a regular work week, wages earned at their position, healthcare coverage, retirement plans, and required training needed to hold the position. Once the agreement is signed, the VIPER applicant attends training to gain the necessary credentials for the position, in accordance with the contract, which they are to attain prior to placement. This method of direct entry into a career, based on the needs of the Veteran/Military Spouse and the employer, is unique. This model allows the VIPER applicant and their future employer to both know what is expected of each other. The security found in this process promotes healthy self-identity and allows veterans and their families to plan for their futures.

MILITARY SERVICE IS A FAMILY AFFAIR

VIPER understands and appreciates the sacrifices made by our military families. To show our respect and gratitude for those sacrifices, all VIPER programs are open to military spouses. Our ability to connect them with supportive companies allows us to positively affect the issue of military spouse unemployment. Military spouses have an unemployment rate "nearly twice the rate for the overall US population between 18 and 65" [11.] Opening opportunities to military spouses supports a sense of security in the home of the military family. This added security helps alleviate the stress put on Veterans concerned about the wellbeing of their family. This makes for a more focused, more confident Service Member.

Approximately 56% of Active Duty service members, and 48% of Reserve and National Guard members are married [12.] Making sure the military family is taken care of is pivotal to mission success. The military has many programs in place to assist the military family, but high unemployment rates remain a problem. Bringing VIPER to military spouses will have a direct impact on household security. The spouses of service members will enter quality careers and earn training and certificates that allow them to be more easily employed. Large companies can transfer the employee, if the need arises, as the family moves to new duty station locations. For those entering apprenticeship programs, the ability to transfer their training and learned skills is made simple. When the family receives orders to move to a

new duty station, the apprentice can transfer their program participation to the training center nearest their new location. No career change, no retaking classes because the local university does not accept all the earned credit, no wondering “what do I do now?” Just smooth, successful, career growth.

SOLUTION TO THE EPIDEMIC

VIPER redefines transition and the successful integration of Veterans into society by focusing on ways to create an environment that allows Veterans to thrive. Acknowledging the strengths and weaknesses apparent in our system allows us to address issues. **22 Veteran lives lost a day to suicide** is too high a price to pay to preserve a failing system. Instead of demanding Veterans change who they are to fit the system, we need to change the system to better address the challenges they face. There is no ultimate solution for ending Veteran suicide. The most we can do is proactively address the factors leading to the crisis.

A clear path to guaranteed placement in a career with benefits, connecting veterans with available resources, supporting the military family, and a strong community network are key ways to address the factors that have created the Veteran suicide epidemic. It is time to come together to support a comprehensive program that addresses the issue at its source. VIPER focuses on the factors behind the problem and presents a solution. Together we can stop veteran suicide one employment opportunity at a time.

Not every Veteran who goes through our program is in crisis, but every person we bring in potentially prevents one.



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