



Melva Sovenir counsels Sgt. 1st Class Howard McMorris at the Army Career and Alumni Program center at Fort Benning, Ga., in December 2010. McMorris was retiring from the Army and was seeking transition guidance. (Photo by Adrienne Anderson)

ACAP Director: Transitioning Soldiers Need Their NCOs' Support

By David Vergun

Army News Service

Soldiers now have the military's best career transition program, which the Army began re-engineering about three years ago, said the program's director.

That re-engineering was the result of "a pretty detailed analysis and a lot of surveys and interviews and discussions with Soldiers," said Walter Herd, Army Career and Alumni Program, or ACAP, director. The program helps Soldiers with their transition from military to civilian life.

Herd said discussions led to three important take-away messages.

First, it was found that those Soldiers who had the most successful transitions were the ones who started the transition process early and spread that process out over time, touching bases with relevant experts along the way, he said.

"So the earlier you begin and the more you engage, the more successful you are," he said. "It's that simple."

Second, ACAP found that commanders need to be supportive of their Soldiers' transition process, become more involved and understand where their Soldiers are in the process.

"We found when commanders do that and know what their Soldiers are doing, Soldiers are more successful," he said.

It might seem common sense that leaders would support that, but it isn't always the case, he said.

The most common comment on surveys was "this is a great program, but my first sergeant won't let me go," Herd said.

Leaders are becoming more and more aware of that

but the message still needs to be reinforced, he emphasized.

Third, Soldiers need to meet career readiness standards and commanders need to track progress on Soldiers attaining those standards well before their transition date, he said.

Those standards include: Department of Veterans Affairs benefits counseling; Army pre-separation counseling; Department of Labor workshop attendance; a 12-month, post-transition budget plan; continuum of military service opportunity counseling — for active duty only; a military occupational specialty analysis of skill-sets applicable to civilian jobs; individual assessment tool to determine proficiencies; individual transition planning with a counselor; creation of a job application package, including completed resumes for targeted employment, reference lists, and two job applications or job offer letters; and follow-on activity with the Department of Labor, the VA and if applicable, the Small Business Administration.

ACAP's roots

Until about two years ago, ACAP was a voluntary and staff-coordinated effort. Commanders didn't have visibility over how their Soldiers were doing in getting ready for leaving the Army.

About that time, Congress passed the VOW to Hire Heroes Act of 2011, designed to address some of the challenges of veteran unemployment.

At the same time, the president directed the Office of the Secretary of Defense to add policy mandates to the VOW Act.

Significant resources have been allocated to increasing size and number of brick-and-mortar ACAP centers, now found on all major installations and most others.

The number of ACAP counselors has tripled over the last couple of years, totally about 700 counselors at about 75 locations on installations, including centers used by the National Guard and Reserve.

"Their sole task is to help Soldiers reach their career-readiness standards," Herd said.

Additional counselors are also at the Army's virtual ACAP center. Soldiers can log on to it at www.acap.army.mil or call toll-free 1-800-325-4715 to chat with a master's degree-level counselor 24/7.

Every month, about 2,000 Soldiers log into the virtual ACAP center to work on their individualized transition plans. More Soldiers are visiting the site every month. No other service has a similar virtual transition assistance website, Herd said.

Herd encourages Soldiers to both visit the ACAP center on post as well as use the virtual ACAP center online.

Future goals

Today, Soldiers still do most of their transition work during the 12 to 24 months before separation, he said.

"Over the next six or eight months, we're going to spread that planning across the entire Soldier lifecycle, beginning at Basic Training level and at key points in their careers."

For example, a Soldier doing 20 years, might do a resume and budget at the eight and 12 year time, he said.

That would let those career Soldiers know where they stand in relation to military-to-civilian job skill sets and would also better enable them to assist and counsel their own younger Soldiers, having gone through the process themselves, he said.

Another step the Army is taking is to codify the transition process in a campaign plan and in an Army regulation that should be published within about a year.

Herd concluded that while ACAP is important for Soldiers, it is equally important they do it for their families. Spouses are encouraged to attend the workshops available to their Soldiers, he said. ■

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