

Career Program Helps Cut Soldier Unemployment Payments to 13-Year Low

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Henry Mare works on an electronics test station at the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Nashville District Hydropower Branch's Electronics Service Section at Old Hickory Dam in Hendersonville, Tennessee. Mare recently transitioned out of the U.S. Army at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, and has been working as an intern. The Corps recently selected him for a position as an electronics technician. The Army closed out Fiscal Year 2016 with the lowest amount of Unemployment Compensation for Ex-Service members in 13 years, according to the Department of Labor. (Photo courtesy of Army Human Resources Command)

As it turns out, former Soldier Jonathan Quinones has a “knack” for real estate — and he might have never known had he not participated in the Career Skills Program.

“Real estate has been a lucrative field so far,” said Quinones, who is now working for the St. Robert Realtor who facilitated an internship for the Career Skills Program.

The program, which officially started in March 2015, provides Soldiers the opportunity to participate in career internships while finishing up their military careers.

A pilot of the program started in 2014 at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Washington.

It “was so successful, it has spread to installations around the country,” said Chevina Phillips, Education Services specialist at Truman Education Center at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri.

“Today there are more than 76 programs,” Phillips said. “The number of programs will increase because there are many being developed.”

Officials are committed to providing more opportunities for transitioning Soldiers to leave the service career-ready through programs such as this one and others fostered by the Soldier For Life — Transition Assistance Program.

The Army closed out Fiscal Year 2016 with the lowest amount of Unemployment Compensation for Ex-Service members (UCX) in 13 years at \$172.8 million, according to the Department of Labor. Fiscal Year 2016 is the first time UCX has dipped below the \$200 million mark since 2003, when it closed out at \$152 million. The decrease in unemployment compensation is encouraging to transitioning Soldiers and Army Veterans looking to find employment, pursue education, or access other civilian opportunities.

Army UCX expenditures peaked in 2011 at \$515 million and have been decreasing since that time due to a combination of economic factors and Army efforts to better prepare Soldiers for the civilian sector. Integrating Soldiers back into the civilian world successfully depends on a number of

determinants, including civilian industry knowledge of valuable veteran skill sets, dispelling myths about veterans, as well as local economic conditions, according to the Army's Human Resources Command. Soldiers and Army veterans must also be motivated and prepared to educate themselves on matching their career goals, skills, and location desires with the civilian sector.

"We are excited to see that more Army Veterans are finding careers after they transition off of active duty service and fewer are having to file for unemployment compensation," said retired Col. Walter Herd, Director of the SFL-TAP, which is based at Fort Knox, Kentucky.

In the past few years, the Army has placed substantial efforts in assisting Soldiers with developing civilian career skills during their transition through a remodeled Army transition program. SFL-TAP is required to be completed by all Soldiers with at least 180 days of continuous active duty service.

The program teaches Soldiers career skills such as resume writing, financial planning, benefits education, job application preparation, military skills translation, and more, which has resulted in Soldiers becoming more prepared for civilian life.

"SFL-TAP works to provide opportunities to Soldiers who are looking to pursue an education, entrepreneurship, or a career," Herd said. "We provide Soldiers a wide variety of resources, counseling, classes, and skills programs to better prepare and connect them to the civilian sector."

The Army has partnered with the Department of Labor, Department of Veterans Affairs, Small Business Administration, and various Veteran Service Organizations to offer courses to transitioning Soldiers. The Army also works with major employers across the country to educate companies on the value of hiring veterans and to connect Soldiers to civilian opportunities.

Phillips said Fort Leonard Wood's program began through the SFL-TAP and is now administered through the education center.

"This is a wonderful opportunity for all transitioning service members to participate in," Phillips said. "(It) is very beneficial to the service member not just because of the employment opportunity, but it allows service members to explore career areas they are interested in where they normally wouldn't have access."

David Holbrook, owner of the St. Robert realty company that provided Quinones' internship, said the program has provided him with two quality employees.

"I think it's a great program," Holbrook said. "When I retired from the military, it's something that wasn't available for me. It prepares (service members) for life after the military. It's like going back to college while still on active duty. It's worked out great for me" as an employer.

Internship providers work with the education center to provide interns with a course of study and benchmarks to meet while taking part in the program. Soldiers who do the internships in real estate, and successfully complete the program, leave the Army as licensed real estate agents.

Fort Leonard Wood has six approved programs: two real estate programs, programs with the Army Corps of Engineers, the National Geospatial Technical Operations Center, a local investment group and Bunker Labs, Phillips said.

"We are constantly looking for new programs to start and are currently working on four others," she added.

Timothy Willingham retired from the Army as a sergeant first class. He finished out his career as an intern with the U.S. Geological Survey in Rolla, Missouri.

"I initially was supposed to do a month in different sections of USGS. It turned out I only ended up working in one section because they needed help — the elevation unit," Willingham said.

After his internship, Willingham went to work for USGS doing quality control.

The Career Skills Program "is a great benefit, and Soldiers should take advantage if they can," Willingham said.

Quinones said the design of the program helped accelerate the learning curve for becoming a real estate agent.

He said it gave him a path of instruction to follow.

"This program eased my anxiety of not having enough money when I retired from the Army," he said.

Jeffery Isom became the installation administrator for the Career Skills Program in October. Isom, a retired Soldier, said he has a passion for the program and seeing the impact it can have on the lives of transitioning Soldiers — especially those planning on remaining in Missouri.

"I believe this program affords the transitioning service members the opportunity to gain civilian experience that will increase their chances of obtaining suitable employment," Isom said.

In the coming months, he hopes to see the program marketed on a larger scale while partnering with more area organizations to create internships, apprenticeships and job-shadowing opportunities.

"This will benefit both the transitioning service members and their families and also the remaining active-duty service members who are deserving of the best equipment and training available," he said. "All transitioning service members are entitled to outstanding transition services."