

Operation Transition: **YEAR ONE REPORT**



Center for Workforce Preparation
An Affiliate of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce
Fall 2003



Abstract

In June 2002, the U.S. Department of Labor Veterans' Employment and Training Service awarded the U.S. Chamber of Commerce's Center for Workforce Preparation (CWP) a grant to design a transitioning veterans' model for San Diego that could be replicated in other communities across the country. The model is designed as a useful tool for communities that have a high rate of unemployment among veterans and require services capable of supporting the workforce needs of the military community.

Using a three-part model consisting of assessment and research, education, and feedback, CWP, a nonprofit affiliate of the U.S. Chamber, began the initial work of designing the transitioning veterans' model. CWP assessed the range of resources and opportunities available to the military in San Diego; brought together community stakeholders to address key workforce challenges unique to military communities; and, with the establishment of working groups, began to develop recommendations and action plans for improving employment and training outcomes for transitioning military and their spouses.

As the project continues, significant progress is being made toward documenting what has been learned. CWP anticipates that the demonstration site needs another year for completion.



Background

In April 2002, CWP met with representatives from the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) to discuss potential partnership opportunities that complement VFW's efforts to assist military personnel returning to civilian life and to the workforce. VFW approached CWP because of its history and proven track record in workforce development, particularly its ability to reach small and medium-sized businesses through chambers of commerce. CWP is proficient in bringing together community stakeholders to improve access to local workforce resources for targeted populations such as veterans, people with disabilities, and former welfare recipients.

During the meeting, VFW raised a number of concerns regarding workforce development that impact transitioning military and their spouses:

- ★ Unfamiliarity with the publicly funded workforce development system even though more than 2 million veterans have registered with unemployment offices across the country.
- ★ Failure to use the range of services and benefits available to military personnel in their local communities.
- ★ High unemployment among veterans especially for subgroups such as people with disabilities, women, and minorities.
- ★ High unemployment (8%) among enlisted military spouses.

Based on initial and subsequent discussions with VFW, several issues were identified that cut across the entire project:

- ★ Raising the image of veterans as highly skilled workers.
- ★ Identifying local community resources to provide veterans and their spouses with employment and training opportunities.
- ★ Assessing the ability of existing training programs to meet the current labor market demands.
- ★ Enlisting the assistance of the business community to determine local workforce needs.

As a result, the concept for a pilot program, *Operation Transition: San Diego Transitioning Military Demonstration Project*, was submitted to the U.S. Department of Labor Veterans' Employment and Training Service for consideration and was approved in June 2002.

The location for launching the pilot would need to be heavily populated by veterans, considered a high-discharge area for active duty military ending their service, and have a high rate of unemployment among veterans. CWP worked with VFW to identify communities that met these criteria. San Diego was selected for the demonstration site as it met all these conditions:

- ★ The military is the city's largest employer.
- ★ San Diego has a high rate of unemployment among veterans.
- ★ Some 11,000 active-duty military exit from the armed services in this region annually.

Between July 2002 and February 2003, discussions with local chambers, service providers, and other veteran-related organizations reinforced the need for a replicable model. The model would align the resources of military, business, and training providers to create a seamless system of services and support for transitioning military and their spouses. The goal was to define and create local solutions that effectively bridge the gap among employers who need workers, the training providers of workforce development services, and the transitioning military and their spouses needing jobs and advancement opportunities.



Developing the Transitioning Veterans' Model

The CWP project director, in collaboration with the San Diego Regional Chamber of Commerce, conducted an assessment of the community to identify key stakeholders with an expertise in both military issues and workforce development. Introductory meetings were held with members of the mayor's office, senior level officers and transition specialists at the surrounding military bases, employer-led groups, the San Diego Regional Chamber of Commerce Military Affairs Advisory Council, and the local Workforce Investment Board (WIB) to begin delineating some of the key issues surrounding transitioning veterans.

To set the tone and help frame the first focus group, an e-mail survey was distributed to all participants before the meeting. Based on the survey results, participants were then asked a series of questions to help identify existing services in the region, the geographical areas served, the impact on the community, and the critical gaps in services for transitioning military. With the help of a facilitator, a template was designed to achieve the following objectives:

- ★ Build stronger relationships between key stakeholders and those organizations in the San Diego area focused on transitioning veterans and their spouses into the civilian workforce.
- ★ Help stakeholders understand the range of services and opportunities already present in the community.
- ★ Pinpoint key barriers and challenges that can limit assistance to transitioning veterans.
- ★ Identify strategies and potential opportunities to enable stakeholders and organizations to be more effective in their work with transitioning veterans.
- ★ Determine the next steps, roles, and responsibilities.

The first focus group was divided into three segments:
An overview of the project.

- ★ Why is there interest in transitioning military and their spouses?
- ★ Why was the San Diego community selected as the demonstration site?
- ★ Who are the partners?

A discussion on key barriers and opportunities for the business and military communities.

- ☆ What are the main barriers faced by the San Diego military and business communities?
- ☆ What are the potential opportunities?
- ☆ Who are the stakeholders in the community?

Breakout group discussions focused on developing a strategy that would serve as the foundation of a community action plan. The breakout groups were composed of individuals representing the military, business, education, and training-provider communities.

- ☆ What employment and education resources are available to veterans by the military and community-based organizations?
- ☆ How can the resources be improved to meet veterans' needs?
- ☆ What resources are available to employers?

As a result of the focus groups, participants came to a consensus regarding the key challenges and barriers around which the working groups would be established to develop action plans over the next several months. Participants selected which working groups they would join based on their personal interests.



A Community Approach: What We Learned From This Project

The San Diego demonstration project provided a wealth of information for establishing a community model that helps transitioning veterans and their spouses. To accomplish this, CWP implemented a three-part model strategy that has proven to be an effective tool in other CWP projects. This model, composed of assessment and research, education, and feedback, is designed to ensure that the project is locally driven and locally controlled.

The assessment and research segment of the model brought San Diego community leaders together to analyze the resources available to transitioning veterans and their spouses. Next, the leaders identified barriers that prevent these resources from being used and ranked them in order of importance. The community leaders selected communications, personal responsibility, and the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) as the top three areas needing further examination.

TAP, a transition program offered to all service members before leaving the military, normally entails three days of intensive workshops informing military personnel about their benefits, preparing them for life after the military, and offering information on obtaining employment in the civilian workplace. The group determined that the military did not use TAP to its full potential, concluding that transitioning service members underestimate the value of the program and do not take advantage of the resources offered through it.

Based on the ranking, working groups were established to address the areas that impede successful transition from the military to the civilian workforce. The following areas were selected:

- ★ **Communications**—Create effective communications and stronger partnerships between the military and civilian workforce development services that lead to a seamless service delivery system in San Diego.
- ★ **Personal Responsibility**—Identify ways that the military can improve how it helps transitioning veterans better prepare for life in the civilian workforce.
- ★ **TAP**—Develop recommendations for more efficient use of the TAP program to support transitioning military.

Each group was asked to delve deeper into the issues to determine three to five specific strategies to pursue on a long-term basis.



Project Progress: One Year Later

Significant progress has been made in documenting the knowledge gained using the three-part model. CWP has begun testing what it has learned and applying those lessons to the development of the transition model, strengthening the work of the local stakeholders, and establishing relationships between the San Diego partners.

Assessment and Research

Key stakeholder meetings were convened in San Diego with representatives from the San Diego Regional Chamber of Commerce, business, the military, the education community, the training providers, and the public workforce system. Although San Diego has resources to help transitioning veterans and their spouses, organizations are unaware of what others are doing and how they can better collaborate to provide needed services. Once the services were identified, the group determined the barriers and challenges that limit the ability to fully assist transitioning veterans and their spouses. The group identified three main barriers and established working groups to address each.

Education

Each working group met and identified three to five strategies to move its work forward. The TAP working group, however, decided to disband as the group members determined that the other two groups were better equipped to deal with issues surrounding TAP. This decision demonstrated a lack of understanding regarding the value and potential of the TAP process and warrants further consideration. TAP, if improved to better connect to the public workforce system and meet the needs of the population it was designed to help, could serve as a tremendous resource to service members preparing for jobs and for employers seeking qualified workers.

The communications group recognized that gaps exist among transitioning veterans, businesses, and the community resources available to them and their spouses. The group is investigating the feasibility of creating a local Web site that would become a clearinghouse for community resources available to transitioning veterans and their spouses. The group is determining who that audience should be. It is also determining whether it is possible to meet the needs of multiple groups (retiring veterans, veterans returning from war, spouses, and children of active duty personnel) on one Web site. The group also raised the issue of how the military views itself in a competitive environment for workers and will study the relationship between civilian workforce needs and those of the military to determine how both groups can work together more effectively.

The personal responsibility group is focusing on the preparation provided to military personnel during their service to help them transition into the civilian workforce. Because of cultural differences between military and civilian environments, it is critical that the two entities work together to ensure that all service members are prepared for a successful transition. The group is looking to see if a curriculum exists that addresses personal responsibility. It wants to develop promising practices and case studies for dissemination. Another goal is to create a process to educate businesses about the benefits of hiring military personnel and how they can tap into this pool of qualified employees.

Feedback

This portion of the three-part process remains to be completed. It is anticipated that the demonstration pilot will require another year of oversight and monitoring by CWP before the community can act on the working groups' recommendations.

The working groups continue to gather information on the recommendations that will be presented to the entire group. The next step is to develop action plans for each recommendation. The war in Iraq limited ongoing progress because it prevented a number of the initial participants in the project from attending meetings due to their military commitments.

Upon completion of the action plans, the executive council (see page 21) will then decide which local organizations can implement the changes or if recommendations need to be provided to local, state, or federal offices. Once the action plans are in place, the executive council will submit monthly progress reports to CWP. CWP will monitor the process and provide assistance as needed. The findings will be reported in a CWP publication, which will outline model development, implementation, follow-up, and replication for other military communities across the country.

There are several items that must be considered if this project is to be replicated in other communities.

Limitations That Impact Progress

The project work is labor-intensive. Part of the work in a pilot program involves testing different strategies and building upon the lessons learned. Key to the success of the work thus far has been in determining the best strategies for the San Diego community and the entity responsible for implementing them. Each part of the process is being documented to ensure that a replicable model is created.

Consideration must also be given to external factors, such as the deployment of key stakeholders and economic issues, impacting the business community. During the first few months of the project, the San Diego community was still experiencing the effects of 9/11. Because San Diego is heavily populated with small to medium-sized businesses that cater to the defense industry, the economy began to rebound. Employment rose, and the regional economy improved.

The war in Iraq, however, created a different set of challenges for the region. As in other military communities during wartime, there is a significant reduction in the city's labor force because of deployment as well as a downturn in consumer spending. Finding qualified workers to replace those who are deployed and maintaining profitability during such times become even greater issues for local businesses. To accommodate the city's workforce needs, the scope of the San Diego project was changed slightly to address issues impacting the community and to incorporate strategies to prepare the community for the influx of service members once the one-year moratorium is lifted on exiting the military. Documenting this experience will provide a wealth of information to other military communities facing similar circumstances.

Selection of a Lead Organization

A lead organization in the community must be identified early in the process. It is recognized that the local chamber of commerce plays an important role by bringing employers to the table. The chamber provides legitimacy to the business community and ensures that business is always part of the discussion. Nevertheless, the chamber is not necessarily the appropriate lead organization. The executive council (see below) should be given the authority to decide which organization should lead the implementation of the working groups' recommendations.

Appointment of an Executive Council

An executive council should be established to lead the implementation of the groups' recommendations and ensure long-term success. At a minimum, the executive council should be made up of representatives of the chamber of commerce, WIB, and the chairpersons of each working group (communications, personal responsibility, and TAP). Each working group should submit its recommendations to the executive council. It is the role of the executive council to develop an action plan for each recommendation and determine which organization in the community should implement the recommendations.

The executive council would be responsible for submitting monthly reports to CWP for six months following the development of the action plans. CWP would use the information from San Diego to continuously improve the model. In addition, CWP would disseminate the model and the identified promising practices to other communities so that the model receives national recognition.

Assessment of the Transition Assistance Program

A closer connection between the business community and TAP should be developed. Employers engaged in TAP can comment on the value and relevance of the information being imparted to military service members. Feedback from business can help fine tune the curriculum as it pertains to workforce development. As discovered in San Diego, there may not be consistency across the TAP process among military branches. An earlier finding of the transition model shows that regular and ongoing business engagement in reviewing TAP at the community level can help better serve military personnel as they transition from the military into the community. Then, the Department of Defense can use the information from the business community as part of an ongoing process to ensure quality control and consistency of TAP throughout the military.

Connection to the Public Workforce System

To provide the best possible assistance to military personnel and their spouses, a seamless transition between TAP and the publicly funded workforce development system should be created. After military personnel are discharged, they need to be informed of how they can access the services offered by the publicly funded workforce development system to help them obtain private sector employment and support services (e.g., child care, transportation, education and training, disability). To develop a seamless transition, the publicly funded workforce development system must be engaged in all community discussions to ensure that military personnel and their spouses receive the services they need.



Center for Workforce Preparation
U.S. Chamber of Commerce
1615 H Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20062-2000
Tel: 202-463-5525
Fax: 202-463-5308
www.uschamber.com/cwp

This publication is funded through a grant from the U.S. Department of Labor Veterans' Employment and Training Service to the Center for Workforce Preparation. Opinions expressed in this publication do not necessarily represent the policy or views of the U.S. Department of Labor.