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U.S. CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

Statement of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce

ON: Veterans' Employment and Training Programs

TO: House Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services,
Education, and Related Agencies

DATE: Wednesday, March 21, 2012

The Chamber's mission is to advance human progress through an economic,
political and social system based on individual freedom,
incentive, initiative, opportunity and responsibility.

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce is the world's largest business federation, representing the interests of more than 3 million businesses of all sizes, sectors, and regions, as well as state and local chambers and industry associations.

More than 96 percent of the Chamber's members are small businesses with 100 or fewer employees, 70 percent of which have 10 or fewer employees. Yet, virtually all of the nation's largest companies are also active members. We are particularly cognizant of the problems of smaller businesses, as well as issues facing the business community at large.

Besides representing a cross-section of the American business community in terms of number of employees, the Chamber represents a wide management spectrum by type of business and location. Each major classification of American business -- manufacturing, retailing, services, construction, wholesaling, and finance -- is represented. Also, the Chamber has substantial membership in all 50 states.

The Chamber's international reach is substantial as well. It believes that global interdependence provides an opportunity, not a threat. In addition to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce's 115 American Chambers of Commerce abroad, an increasing number of members are engaged in the export and import of both goods and services and have ongoing investment activities. The Chamber favors strengthened international competitiveness and opposes artificial U.S. and foreign barriers to international business.

Positions on national issues are developed by a cross-section of Chamber members serving on committees, subcommittees, and task forces. More than 1,000 business people participate in this process.

**Oral Testimony of Kevin M. Schmiegel
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Executive Director, Hiring Our Heroes
U.S. Chamber of Commerce
March 21, 2012
Before the House Appropriations Committee
Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services,
Education, and Related Agencies**

Chairman Rehberg, Ranking Member DeLauro, and Members of the Committee, my name is Kevin Schmiegel, and I am the founder and executive director of the Hiring Our Heroes program at the United States Chamber of Commerce.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear as a witness before the Committee and speak to you about veteran and military spouse employment, and what the U.S. Chamber is doing to help our nation's heroes find meaningful employment in the private sector.

As you know, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce is the world's largest business federation representing the interests of three million businesses and organizations of every size, sector, and region.

The reason the Chamber is interested in our nation's veterans and military spouses is simple. Many of our members, which include thousands of small, medium, and large businesses, want to hire veterans. Even with high unemployment, we have a huge skills gap in America that is hindering our recovery and undermining our global competitiveness.

Several weeks ago in his State of the Union address, President Obama pointed to two million jobs in America that aren't being filled because we lack a trained workforce. Veterans can help to fill that gap, because they have unique leadership experience and advanced technical expertise; they are excellent problem-solvers and they are extremely reliable.

The Department of Defense spends hundreds of thousands of dollars training service members, and it is a lost investment if we don't re-purpose those skills to the private sector. In the President's words, we have trained these folks to nation-build abroad...now we need nation-building here at home. The Chamber's veterans programs will continue to raise awareness across the business community of this great pool of potential workers who can help fill our nation's skills gap.

As a veteran myself, it is an honor and a privilege to be here today. In 2009, I retired from the United States Marine Corps as a lieutenant colonel after 20 years of active duty service. My own transition from the military to the civilian workforce was full of good fortune.

I was lucky to have a mentor like former National Security Advisor, General Jim Jones, who took a very special interest in my search for a second career. I was lucky to be at the right place at the right time. And I was lucky to be hired by an organization like the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, whose President and CEO Tom Donohue understands and appreciates the value of hiring a veteran. Not every veteran is that lucky.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics' report on the "Employment Situation of Veterans in 2010" shows that on average there were over one million unemployed veterans in America during 2010. While recent monthly reports from BLS show positive signs, alarming trends for post-9/11 veterans between the ages of 18 to 24 and members of the National Guard and Reserve continue.

Data for these cohorts are even more concerning given an additional one million service members will be leaving active duty over the next five years and tens of thousands of guard and reservists will be demobilized and returning to the workforce.

With the drawdown of our armed forces and significantly higher rates of unemployment for younger Iraq and Afghanistan veterans and returning guard and reservists on the horizon, the Chamber is ramping up its efforts to enhance private sector job opportunities for veterans and military spouses.

The U.S. Chamber's *Hiring our Heroes* Program

In March of 2011, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce launched our *Hiring our Heroes* program, a nationwide campaign to help veterans and military spouses find meaningful employment. The Chamber started the program in partnership with the White House's *Joining Forces* initiative, Department of Labor Veterans Employment and Training Service and the Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve to improve public-private sector coordination in local communities, where veterans and their families are returning every day.

With our federation of business leaders, state and local chambers, and industry associations spanning nearly every state and city, the Chamber has been at the heart of a nationwide campaign to connect veterans and military spouses with employers.

Working with our extensive network of state and local chambers, DOL VETS, ESGR, the Military Spouse Employer Partnership, veterans' services organizations, and businesses of all sizes representing all sectors, we have led the largest public-private sector, coordinated campaign focused on matching veteran talent with career opportunities in hundreds of local communities.

In addition to our efforts to create a movement across the country, Hiring Our Heroes has also forged strategic partnerships in three other areas to deal with specific populations of veterans and their unique challenges. They include: a transition assistance program for wounded warriors; focused initiatives to help post 9-11 veterans, to include student veterans, find jobs; and mentoring and employment programs for women veterans and military spouses.

In our first year, we pledged to host hiring fairs in 100 cities, and I am proud to report that we have already exceeded that goal conducting 114 hiring fairs in 45 states and the District of Columbia. Since its inception, Hiring Our Heroes has connected more than 100,000 veterans and military spouses with 5,000 different employers, and more than 8,500 of them have gotten jobs. And we're just getting started.

Hiring Our Heroes will significantly expand its efforts in year two. In addition to scaling our program to conduct hiring fairs in 400 communities, we will refine our existing programs so that a higher percentage of veterans and military spouses find jobs at our events.

Working with the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and several private sector and non-profit partners, we will establish transition workshops for veterans and military spouses to improve resumes, connect them with mentors in the business community, and a host of other services to ensure that if they don't find a job, they at least leave our hiring fairs better prepared for their next interview.

Recognizing the unique challenges that military spouses face in their search for meaningful careers, the Chamber has also launched a stand-alone program for military spouses. And we hired the very best to run our program. As the co-founder and Chairperson for Blue Star Families and a military spouse herself, Laura Dempsey was the perfect choice to lead this effort.

In just four months she formed the Military Spouse Business Alliance bringing together nine of the largest military family non-profits under one umbrella; she launched an e-mentor platform comprised of senior executives from dozens of Fortune 500 companies; and she organized the largest ever hiring fair for military spouses at the Washington DC's convention center on January 13. On the heels of

those successes, she will lead our efforts to host 20 hiring fairs for spouses on or near military installations across America.

Laura epitomizes the talent, strength, and resilience of the military spouse community. As a mother of two small children, married to Army LtCol Jason Dempsey, who is about to deploy to Afghanistan for his third overseas tour, Laura has moved her family nine times in 13 years and has passed the bar exam four times in Washington State, New York, Georgia and the District of Columbia.

Working with our private sector Veterans Employment Advisory Council, comprised of more than 20 of America's biggest employers and representing 25 million jobs, Hiring Our Heroes will enlist the support of the small business community in a sustained grassroots campaign. With the Chamber's access to 3 million small businesses and our strong relationships with the public sector, veteran services organizations and a host of nonprofits to reach out to the 3.7 million veteran-owned small businesses in America, thousands more veterans and military spouses will find meaningful careers in the private sector.

Hiring veterans and military spouses is a national security imperative for our country. High unemployment for our youngest veterans, members of the guard and reserve, and military spouses is both a recruiting issue, as well as a retention issue for our all volunteer force.

Our first president, George Washington, once said, "The willingness with which our young people are likely to serve shall be directly proportional to how they perceive veterans were treated and appreciated by their nation."

How can we expect young men and women to raise their right hands and serve in the armed forces, if they face higher unemployment than their peers after serving our nation? Similarly, why should military spouses encourage their husbands and wives to make the military a career and endure long separations and frequent relocations, if they cannot achieve their own career aspirations?

Hiring Our Heroes is not about charity. Companies that hire veterans and military spouses gain a competitive advantage. Our nation should view the imminent drawdown as an opportunity, and there is a precedent. After WWII we saw millions of veterans re-enter the workforce, and the massive infusion of talent that helped the manufacturing sector to grow and America's economy as a whole to thrive. As we come out of this recession we need to look to sectors that are growing like energy, healthcare, and infrastructure and hire transitioning post 9/11 veterans to help those industries expand and our economy to prosper.

Over the past year, many leaders in the public sector have called on the business community to do more. I believe we are at the point now where we need the government's assistance in several key areas to help the private sector to do just that. We must look for innovative ways to assist transitioning service members before they become veterans. This includes helping them launch a small business, providing vocational education and apprenticeships, improving and expediting certification and licensing, and enhancing the availability of internships and mentoring programs.

I recommend that the public and private sectors come together as we have in more than 100 cities to focus on three specific areas that will help service members and military spouses find meaningful careers after serving our nation. They include: removing barriers that impede veterans from receiving credit and applying what they learned in the military to rapidly find jobs in the private sector; revamping the transition assistance program; and providing private sector employers with more access to transitioning service members before they leave the military. Together, these actions would help military families make more informed decisions about their transitions.

Finally and most importantly, I would suggest that all government programs—existing and new—should be measured against clear objectives and established metrics, so we can focus on what is working and stop funding programs that are not producing results.

Principles for Success

Hiring Our Heroes was founded on two fundamental principles that we believe are critically important to the success of our nationwide and sustained grassroots campaign.

First, local communities must be the cornerstone of any national program to reduce veterans' unemployment. The reason is simple: when veterans and their families transition from the military, an overriding consideration for them is to get back to a local community where they can be close to family and friends. By targeting resources where we know veterans are... and want to be... we can be that much more effective.

Second, we must coordinate the efforts and resources of the public and private sectors. While there are hundreds of veterans hiring programs, it is clear they are not working well enough. In many cases, they are duplicative, they compete with one another, and they cause unnecessary confusion for veterans and their families. We believe that the U.S. and local chambers of commerce are uniquely positioned to better coordinate public and private sector efforts in hundreds of cities across America.

We believe there is an incredible opportunity to build on the momentum that has brought veterans' issues to the forefront of America's psyche and take advantage of what the former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mullen referred to as a "sea of goodwill."

As Martin Luther King Jr. once said, "The time is always right to do what is right." It is clear that now is the time to positively affect veterans unemployment and to do it right.

Working collaboratively with the public and nonprofit sectors and our own network of 1600 local chambers of commerce and 600 trade associations, we will continue to do our part to demonstrate to our nation's veterans and military spouses that their service is not only appreciated but valued—namely by helping them find meaningful careers in the private sector.

Conclusion

Chairman Rehberg, Ranking Member DeLauro, and distinguished members of the Committee, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce is committed to helping better coordinate public and private sector efforts to find meaningful employment for veterans and their spouses in local communities where they are returning every day. Our success will be measured by the impact our programs have on helping our veterans and military spouses find and keep good jobs in the private sector.

I appreciate the opportunity to testify before you today and look forward to answering your questions.