

Women Veterans in Transition

A Research Project of Business and Professional Women's Foundation



Understanding the Complexity of Women Veterans' Career Transitions

1. Overview

The transition from the military into the civilian workforce for women veterans may be a longer and more complex process than previously thought by those working with women veterans. Women veterans responding to Business and Professional Women's (BPW) Foundation survey *Women Veterans in Transition* tell a compelling story about their triumphs and challenges as they transition.

“One day you were in the military, the next you were home in a whole different world.”

Women Veteran in Transition Survey Respondent

Separation from the military and entry into the civilian workforce is often viewed as a time-limited event by those providing transition supports. While the official physical separation occurs within a limited time frame, results from a recent survey of women veterans indicates that the psychological transition can take place over an extended period of time even for those who have successfully secured post-military employment. Standardized transition activities may not be taking into account the full breadth and range of the needs of women veterans. Similarly, employers seeking to engage women veterans in the workplace may not know everything necessary to take full advantage of this growing source of intellectual capital.

An initial look at the results of a 2007 survey of women veterans, undertaken by BPW Foundation as part of a pilot study on the career transition experiences of women veterans, indicates that the transition from the military into the civilian workforce is a multi-dimensional process for women veterans, and decision makers may need to look at a number of factors in order to craft programs and services that more fully support women veterans moving into the civilian workforce. This reality has implications not only for the types of resources needed by women veterans as they transition but also the timing and duration of those resources.

2. Research Rationale

Background

As an organization dedicated to empowering all workingwomen to achieve their full potential and to partnering with employers to build successful workplaces, BPW Foundation actively seeks out information about under-recognized or under-utilized groups of workingwomen. Its goals include helping to create a more accurate picture of the role of women in the workforce, and through its research projects and educational programs, to inform the development of programs and resources that help workingwomen make successful career transitions.

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For information on how your organization can support the Women Veterans in Transition Research Project, contact 202-293-1100 or foundation@bpwfoundation.org

By focusing on the career transition experiences of women veterans, BPW Foundation is accomplishing multiple goals. First, it is bringing to light the experiences of an important and largely under-recognized and under-utilized segment of the workforce. Secondly, research on the experiences of women as they leave the military and enter the civilian workforce allows BPW Foundation to study a discrete example of a career transition that may help illuminate the experiences of many other types of workingwomen undergoing transitions within their careers. Thirdly, results of the survey can have a direct impact on programming that supports women veterans. BPW Foundation partner organizations, such as Business and Professional Women/USA which operates the Women Joining Forces Program for women veterans, can now use information provided by the research to focus their own career-oriented programming for women veterans.

Questions to Be Addressed

Women veterans are a growing segment of the U.S. labor force. In 1980, there were 1.1 million women veterans; as of 2007, their numbers had increased to 1.7 million. Increasing public dialogue around the specific issues facing women veterans helps ensure that services and supports are in place as they transition from the

“Transitioning from the military was bittersweet. I was ready to part from the military, but I was also afraid because our household was losing a paycheck. All in all, I am very happy with my decision, and I can only hope for the best.”

Women Veteran in Transition Survey Respondent

military into the civilian workforce and enables employers and community leaders to fully engage a growing, often highly-skilled segment of society. While women veterans are a growing segment of the civilian labor force, much remains unknown about them. Little information specific to the transition experiences of women veterans is available in the public realm. Very little is known about how women veterans deal with the transition from the military into the civilian world, how they fare after they have returned to the civilian world, the resources they find useful as they transition, the effectiveness of programs meant to support them, how their separation experiences may differ or be similar to male veterans and how they feel about leaving

the military and reentering the civilian world. Through the *Women Veterans in Transition* pilot research project, BPW Foundation is taking a first step in addressing these questions.

The results of this pilot study will help inform not only efforts to support women veterans but will, it is hoped, lead to a better general understanding of what resources and supports are useful within career transitions experienced by many different types of workers, not just women veterans. Additionally, a number of the issues important to women veterans as they transition, such as work-life balance, are important to many different types of workers. It is believed that by highlighting programs and policies that can support women veterans in the workplace these same programs will be of benefit to a larger pool of workers.

In seeking to develop a picture of what career transition experiences are like for women veterans, survey questions were designed to elicit information that could help those working with women veterans understand:

- How public and private organizations can promote and support the resources most useful to women veterans in the transition process;
- When the transition process actually begins for women veterans, when it ends and when resources and supports are desired by women veterans to support them during the process;

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WWSOII: Women Veterans in Transition

- What constitutes a successful career transition (i.e. securing any job, securing the job wanted, feeling adjusted) and what actions can organizations take to increase the chances that women veterans will experience one;
- What employers can do to attract, retain and fully engage women veterans in the workplace;
- What veteran activities and characteristics appear to influence the success and duration of a career transition and which of these programs and services can help women veterans develop?

The *Women Veterans in Transition* research project offers a picture of the experiences of a group of women veterans from across all branches of service as they transition from the military into the civilian workforce. The results of this pilot study allows a conversation to begin with policy makers, employers and nonprofits and government agencies in order to explore what can be done to design and encourage programs and services that will be more useful to women veterans and their employers throughout the entire transition process.¹

Additionally, almost two-thirds of the more than 1,600 survey respondents agreed to participate in further research with BPW Foundation, which provides an unprecedented opportunity to follow the changing experiences of a group of women veterans over time.

Building a Sample

Currently, there is not a nationally representative database of women veterans that private researchers such as BPW Foundation can access. Large public databases containing veteran/military personnel information such as those housed at the Department of Defense (DoD) or Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) can only be utilized by organizations authorized to conduct research under the sponsorship of those agencies.² For legally-mandated privacy reasons and because government resources cannot be used for private efforts, access to these databases is strictly limited.

Therefore, women veterans were invited to participate in the *Workingwomen Speak Out II: (WWSOII): Women Veterans in Transition* online survey via e-mail invitations, newsletter announcements, web

postings and flyer handouts through veteran recruiting services (RecruitMilitary, Corporate Gray, Bradley-Morris, Inc.) and service organizations (BPW/USA-Women Joining Forces, Women In Military Service For America Memorial, AMVETS, National Association of State Women Veterans Coordinators, New Mexico Department of Veterans Services) providing access to a spectrum of women veterans across age ranges, conflicts and services. Women veterans answered the invitation with 2,177 attempting the survey and 1,629 completing it.

The sample of women veterans accessed by this research project is composed of women veterans actively involved in today's labor force as well as women veterans retired from both the military and civilian workforces and other women veterans that are currently job hunting as comparisons. For more information on the demographics of the sample and the methodology used in building the sample, please see the Appendices.

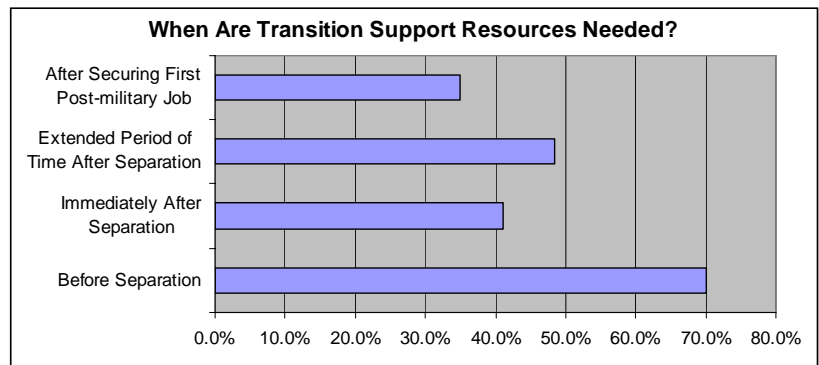


Figure A: Women veterans provided a timeline for when supports were needed to help them fully transition from the military to the civilian workforce. See Appendix D for more information.

¹ See Appendix B: Methodology.

² Department of Defense. "Surveys of DoD Personnel" covering DoDI 1100.13 WHS/ESCD cannot license a survey without DMDC's recommendation of approval. The process to approve a survey includes information provided by a "sponsoring" agency. Retrieved October 2007 from <http://www.dtic.mil/whs/directives/corres/pdf/110013p.pdf>