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### Transition Needs of Young Veterans in Central Minnesota

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2020



# Transition Needs of Young Veterans in Central Minnesota

HOMEFRONT RESOURCE CENTER  
R. JEFFREY RINGER, PH.D.

FUNDED BY THE GANNETT FOUNDATION

## **Executive Summary**

This project was designed to identify the needs of young veterans who are transitioning from military to civilian life. The project was organized by HomeFront Resource Center of St. Cloud Minnesota with funding from the Gannett Foundation.

Twenty-four veterans participated in focus group interviews to discuss the needs they faced as they exited the military. They were asked to describe their transition, talk about needs related to career, employment, health, family, finances and the law, describe the resources they used and those they could have used, and suggest other programs that would have helped them with their journey.

Four themes emerged from the interviews. The first was a need for individualized service. They felt that their backgrounds and needs were so different that programs designed to help all veterans at once are not effective. Services need to be delivered to individuals or small groups of veterans with similar needs rather than to large groups with varying needs. The second was camaraderie. They felt a great need to interact with other veterans to help heal psychological wounds as well as feel understood. Third, they feel they received little help in learning how to interact with civilians. Fourth, there is a need for more mental health support.

Programs that would address their needs would bring veterans together with veterans, provide mentorship, train veterans more on how working with civilians is different from working in the military, provide peer support at colleges and universities, prepare them better for higher education, create safe spaces for veterans, and educate employers in how to work effectively with veterans. Any of these programs would be welcomed by and benefit younger veterans.

## **Transition Needs of Young Veterans in Central Minnesota**

HomeFront Resource Center is a nonprofit organization in St. Cloud Minnesota whose purpose is to strengthen community support and resources for service members, veterans, and their families. It aims to be the principal voice, community educator and connector for those who have served in the military and identify gaps in and remove barriers to such services.

HomeFront believes that the needs of younger veterans and those who have served in the military during the engagements in the Middle East are not being met and that those needs are different from the needs of those who served at different time periods such as the Korean War era, the Vietnam War era, and the cold war era. This project evolved out of that recognition. The purpose is to ask “what are the transition needs of young veterans in Central Minnesota?” Funding for the project came from a grant from the Gannett Foundation.

### **Procedure**

In order to identify the needs of young veterans we recruited volunteer veterans to participate in focus group interviews. Announcements were made to several email distribution lists and posts to relevant Facebook pages to recruit volunteers. The distribution lists consisted of students at St. Cloud State University and St. Cloud Technical and Community College. Facebook posts were made to the pages of HomeFront Resource Center, board members of HomeFront, the author, Battle Buddies, and several other military themed Facebook pages.

To participate in the project, veterans needed to be under 40 and served after 9/11. Participants came primarily from Stearns, Benton, and Sherburne counties with a few from counties in and closer to the Twin Cities area. Each participant was given a \$20 gift card for their participation.

A total of 24 veterans participated in the interviews and one answered the questions via survey. A total of 12 interviews were conducted. Three of those were interviews with just one veteran. Nine were group interviews with two or three veterans.

Nineteen of the participants were men and six were women. Four were people of color. On average, the participants spent 5.8 years in the service and separated between the years of 2002 and 2019 with most separating between 2010 and 2018. They served in the branches of the military below with some serving in more than one.

Branch of service	Number of interviewees
Army	8
Army National Guard	4
Army Reserves	2
Air Force	3
Air National Guard	1
Marines	4
Navy	2

The interviews took place on Zoom and lasted between 45 minutes and 2 hours plus. They began with introductions with each participant stating in which branch s/he served, whether or not s/he was deployed, when they separated, and the base from which they separated. Then we turned to these questions and topics:

1. What was your transition to civilian life like? What worked well? What was harder? What was challenging? If you are still serving, describe what your thoughts or plans are about transitioning?

2. What is your career goal? How has your progress been going toward that goal?  
Are you facing any challenges or barriers as you work toward that goal?
3. What, if any, concerns do you have about: education, employment, health, family, finances, legal?
4. Are the resources you need/needed available? If yes, which resources are you utilizing most frequently? (Such as VA, LSS, service clubs, FAC, CVSO, veteran websites, social service organizations, mental health, schools, etc.)
5. What else would you like to tell me about the needs that you and other veterans or service members might have?

## **Results**

This section presents a summary of the responses given by the interviewees to each of the five primary questions asked during the interview. I include direct quotes from participants as much as possible because their words are more powerful than mine. Additionally, it was clear that part of their motivation for participating was to do something to improve the world for other veterans. They wanted to help. Several thanked me for being their “voice.” The inclusion of their language is one way to honor that request.

Regarding style, quotes on separate lines were uttered by different people. If multiple quotes follow one another in the same paragraph they were uttered by the same person (unless otherwise noted) but at different times during the interview.

### **Question #1: The transition**

The first question of the interview asked the participants to describe their transition. What was your transition to civilian life like? What worked well? What was harder? What was

challenging? If you are still serving, describe what your thoughts or plans are about transitioning? Since many of the interviewees mentioned transition programs that the military offered, this section begins with a list of those programs.

### Transition Assistance Programs

Each of the main branches of the military services has its own program to assist veterans in their transition. For the Army it is referred to as the SFL-TAP or Soldier for Life Transition Assistance Program (TAP). For the Air Force it is Transition Assistance Program. The TAP for the Navy is now known as the GPS Goals Plan Success Program. For the Marines it is the Transition Readiness Program.

Most of the participants had been through one of these programs unless they had only served in either the Reserves or National Guard. According to the participants, the TAP programs provided help with resume writing, how to write in general and avoid jargon, job referrals, etc. Some found the training useful but many found it to be too general to be helpful. Several participants said it focused mostly on getting federal jobs which wasn't helpful for them at the time. One participant said it contained mostly information that could be found in a google search. Several participants described it as "typical military," death by power point, and one more hoop to go through and not beneficial. Since it was a requirement, some participated just to get it done.

One Marine said the transition assistance for the Marines had two routes--a college route and a job route. He said it contained a lot of useful information but there was too much of it and as a result most of it was lost. Several other participants mentioned the same thing. Another soldier said "the information doesn't make it further than the classroom for most people."

Another veteran recognized the challenge of providing this training and posed the question “how do you provide (a) service in a way that veterans will engage with it?”

Another soldier said she felt the assistance program was mostly focused on those who were fully retiring from active service. She was transitioning to the Army National Guard and so found little value in the TAP.

Another said it was cursory. “Once I told my superiors I had a plan, they said you are good to go.” Others said:

“I didn’t pay attention to the training. I wanted out.”

“Those who just want to get out can go through the motions and blow it off and get out.”

“In transition you are presented with so much information one can’t process it.”

#### Marketable skills

One soldier who was in the infantry said he had a hard time identifying marketable skills that he had. He sensed that those who were in other areas of the service such as construction, healthcare, logistics, or mechanical repair had an easier time identifying marketable skills and finding appropriate career paths. It was more difficult for those in the infantry whose skills were not as obvious. He wishes the training offered in the assistance programs was more small group focused so that someone could work specifically with those in the infantry.

#### National vs local

Another criticism of the assistance programs was that they were by nature fairly general and so didn’t provide them with the information they needed in the community to which they were locating. They took the training in a military base that was situated in a particular state but after the training each would move to a different state in the union. They’d arrive in that state

with almost no information about the services offered there. Several said they didn't even know there was a County Veterans Service Officer where they lived.

### Approach to the training

There was also significant variation in how service members approached their transition training. Some took it seriously and some treated it as a box they needed to check. Of those who took it seriously, some had planned in advance. Their transition was easier. One soldier said he planned for 18 months so he didn't need to use the services or training that were available. Another was married. He and his wife knew they wanted to buy a house after he separated so they saved as much money as they could before the separation and therefore had a fairly smooth transition. On the other hand, some just wanted to get out and as a result didn't pay much attention to the training. Sometimes the reason they just wanted out was to get away from the stress of combat. For several others their priorities had changed. One soldier just decided he was ready to move on. Another had started a family so her priorities were different. Age seemed to play a role as well. One 22 year old infantryman just wanted to get out and away from the stress of his job. He assumed everything would fall into place but it didn't.

### **What went well?**

#### Support from Veterans Resource Centers

Several participants said they received a lot of support from the Veterans Resource Centers at colleges and universities. The VRC at SCSU was mentioned several times as being helpful although one interviewee said he felt there was "not much outreaching" there and that the people there were not easy to talk to: "I walked in and walked out, I felt like I didn't belong."

#### Support from County Veterans Service Officer

Several participants mentioned that their CVSO was helpful. The CVSOs of Stearns and Sherburne counties were identified as providing good service. It was also noted, though, that these Officers are extremely busy, that it can be difficult to get an appointment, and the appointments can sometimes be brief. Several agreed that there should be more CVSOs available. But not everyone had great experiences with the CVSO. One interviewee indicated that once he submitted the suggested paperwork his CVSO never got back to him. Another said her CVSO only gave her 5 minutes even though she had spent hours collecting the necessary paperwork that was needed for the meeting.

#### Support from the Veterans Administration

Several participants mentioned they received good service from the VA. One specifically mentioned the VA in Boston. Another said the St. Cloud VAMC was helpful. He always got information but he said it was not always accurate.

#### Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Program

Another mentioned the Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Program which is for National Guard and Reserve members. It involves events pre, during, and post deployment. The reintegration component occurs 30, 60, and 90 days after deployment. She found it to be useful but felt more services were needed after the 90 days. The 30, 60, 90 approach might have been a way to manage the information overload problem. But she noted that because it is mandatory, people did it just to check off the box.

### **What didn't go as well?**

#### Obtaining housing

Several participants said that they couldn't provide proof of income and this made it hard to qualify for a mortgage or lease. One said he couldn't provide the required LES (Leave and

Earnings Statement) and this made qualifying for a mortgage difficult, the income he got from his GI Bill did not qualify as income for a mortgage even though it was intended for housing. Plus, he was leaving a full time job but going to school so he didn't have full time work. Fortunately, he and his wife had prepared including saving money so he wasn't completely stranded.

#### Transferring medical records

One participant said "There is no direct link between military medical records and the VA. Soldiers need to see that that information carries over." Another said that sometimes it can transfer.

#### Lack of Camaraderie

One soldier said that members of the Army National Guard who were mobilized struggled when they returned to the Guard because they had been in a full time combat for six months or a year and then they went through one week of demobilization before returning to their civilian job. There was a lack of the "camaraderie that comes with active duty service when you transition back from a deployment. When you are in combat you are with one group (continuously) but when you get back you are disbursed." This lack of camaraderie and community was mentioned by many participants.

"We feel a loss of community as a result of leaving the military" and they don't get it from the legacy groups such as VFW or the American Legion or the others. Many interviewees mentioned this same loss and need for camaraderie.

"It feels like there is a hole in you cause there is something missing. It is weird not to see those people daily or even monthly. They've become your family."

### How to interact with civilians

The one challenge that was mentioned the most by the interviewees was learning how to talk to civilians. Many of the veterans said they had a difficult time knowing how to interact with civilians. They had been trained in a very specific way to obey orders and pursue the mission but then had almost no training in how to act with civilians who had not been in the military.

As one Marine put it: “As a V5 Section Chief in the Marines I didn’t have conflicts cause I controlled them like ‘ok, stop, you’re gonna do this.’ If someone comes up and they’re like all whining (I’d say) listen to me, this is what is going to happen. But as a civilian you can’t tell people what to do. The hardest for me is realizing I can’t control all situations. This causes a lot anger in me a lot of times.”

Many interviewees said that in the military someone always ‘had your back’ but in the civilian world they felt no one ‘had their back.’

One Sailor went from high school and living with his parents to living in a submarine for months at a time. When you get out “you don’t know how to interact with people. We were separated from women for so long that it was hard to know how to interact with them.”

### Need for follow up

“Any time someone is out processing there is always a transition process but all you want to do is be done. We don’t care to listen. Follow up is needed, 6 months, 1 year, 5 years but you don’t.” Coming back from deployment—you are coming back from a different world.

### Coping with bureaucracy

Many of the interviewees noted that the military and the VA are very rule driven. There are specific rules and way of doing things. If one doesn’t follow the rules or do things in an exact

way, then one faces problems. But sometimes a rule can be broken inadvertently or by someone else or circumstances can arise that complicate situations resulting in a negative impact for the veteran. Here are several examples.

One interviewee was sent to collections for potential fraud but it turned out that the school she was attending hadn't filled out a particular form correctly. The collections agency was collecting on behalf of the VA who said they paid out money they shouldn't have. It turns out that the submitted paperwork didn't show successful completion of the courses she took in culinary school. The VA felt they had paid for classes the vet hadn't taken. This problem took 6 months to figure out and caused her significant stress.

Another veteran had enrolled at university and registered for classes but his discharge date was one week after school started. This made him ineligible for the GI Bill so his classes were dropped for lack of payment. He had to work with his professors to get back into his classes and work with the certifying official on campus to receive GI Bill benefits.

Another said that information about federal tuition assistance is located in one location. Information about the GI Bill is in another. The forms are different and everything is complicated. She felt it took 800 steps to accomplish anything.

Another noted that there are a lot of loopholes for benefits and programs. She went from the National Guard to active duty. The Guard wouldn't pay off her student loans as promised because they found out that she was going into active duty. They said active duty would take care of that. But when she was in active duty they said she had prior experience and so didn't qualify for the student loan repayment benefit. She found information online that said she was qualified but when she talked directly to those in charge they said no. It was frustrating for her.

### Legacy groups

The legacy veteran groups such as the VFW and American Legion were mentioned occasionally during the interviews but in general these veterans did not find them to be useful. “There is a generation gap and culture gap with the VFW and American legion which is kind of hard to cross.” “The legacy veterans groups are naive and saccharin.” “They keep saying that the young bucks aren’t taking over the reins of their organizations like they should. I have been to those meetings. They’re not giving them up either.” Several pointed out that their business model includes selling alcohol in their bars and that is a problem for too many of them.

### Other

One service member had a lot of unanswered questions so some of her family members who had also served helped her connect with various services. They helped her connect with the Disabled American Veterans (DAV) and helped her find housing.

Another wished there was more info on the GI Bill.

Another mentioned that members of the Guard do not get the same benefits as regular military. “When members of the Guard are on active duty they qualify for many services but when they transition back they are no longer on active duty so lose those services, for example VA services.”

## **Question #2: Career Goal**

Most of the interviewees were at points in their lives where their career choice had been made and they were either in their desired occupation or they were pursuing an education to achieve that occupation. Several, though, are struggling with disabilities which is making it challenging for them to be effective in their jobs. A few are still having difficulty finding the right career. Here is a list of some of the careers being sought.

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Physician's Assistant or Police Officer

Meteorologist

Radiologic Technician

College Counselor

Social Work

Mechanic

Business owner

## **Challenges and barriers**

### Finding a vision

A challenge that several interviewees faced was trying to decide what to do. They had gone from a completely structured environment to one in which they were on their own. "Oh my gosh, what do I do now?" Many mentioned that while serving in the military they had a clear mission. Everything they did was directed toward accomplishing that mission. One soldier wondered "How do I find my vision?" Another said: "I needed to find a career that gave me a mission, a sense of pride, duty. I went from having a purpose to doing shit. It took me a long time to figure it out." Another said "It was 3.5 years of trying to figure out what to do. I wish there was something better we could give people while they are still in that sets them up for figuring out what you want to be. We all need to have some sense of purpose."

"I want to give back to the community that made me who I am."

"I didn't know how to talk about my experience in the service to employers so I went to school."

Another said that he was proud of his service but didn't know how to talk about it publicly. "It took me awhile to find something to belong to outside of military service." He

eventually got a job working in the education abroad office at SCSU which he enjoyed because he had studied and served abroad and once he found that “I had more of a reason to complete that degree.”

Another found his vision in the LGBTQ movement. He had moved into a residence hall and met a gay man who had been bullied. He liked this young man and was angry that he had been bullied and this motivated him to support the LGBTQ rights movement. He became involved in that effort and this gave him a mission which was important for him to have.

#### Other

“Skills assessment first then mentoring.”

“First 30 to 90 days is critical. Fear of failure impacts ability to be successful.”

### **Question #3: Other Services**

The third question asked them if they had any concerns about education, employment, health, family, finances, or legal issues. Most of interviewees had some concerns about a few of these topics.

#### **Education**

One participant said it was difficult to get transcripts sent to schools. He mentioned the Joint Services Transcript. There needs to be better transferability between the JST and colleges and universities.

Another mentioned the Community College of the Air Force—“it would be nice to have access to the CCAF as a repository of credits.” “You lose it when you separate. It would be nice to have access to CCAF courses” after separation.

Another interviewee said that many schools say they are veteran friendly but they are not. Participants saw a big difference between the schools they attended. Those schools with

established resource centers provided the best assistance. Community colleges which are smaller often did not seem to have as many services for veterans as the universities.

## **Employment**

Most of the interviewees who participated were either established in jobs or were pursuing an education to get the career of their choice. One Marine, however was struggling with employment and felt he was not getting call backs either because he answer yes to the question about disability (PTSD) or because he is a person of color.

Another issue related to employment is working with civilians. Many interviewees noted that there are big differences between civilian life and military life. They were trained in very specific ways to respect commands and obey orders and pursue their mission. But when they went to work with civilians who were not in the military that mind set often did not work for them.

There are “not as many rules in civilian sector. People follow different rules in civilian life. I lost a job because I was still in a military frame of mind.” This soldier said she saw things as black and white but her supervisor felt she was not being a team player.

## **Health-Physical Health**

The interviewees spent a lot of time talking about their health. They face both physical as well as mental health issues. Here are some of the health issues they faced.

### Chemical and substance abuse

Many of the interviewees mentioned that they struggle with alcohol or substance abuse.

“I used alcohol to medicate as a result of PTSD.”

“We need help with chemical dependency and substance abuse.”

“Alcoholism kicked in after retirement . . . not having a purpose, belonging, connection.”

“It seems that at the VA they screen for alcohol but not the softer drugs like dope or meth or cocaine.” In service, “get caught with weed in a pee test you get kicked out, but alcohol was accepted. You weren’t a man unless you could drink a 12 pack of beer and get up the next morning for a 5 mile run.”

In addition to being helpful with addictions, the treatment programs brought veterans to other programs. One way that veterans learn about the existence of various programs that are available is when they are in treatment programs. One interviewee said “that’s often how they find out about the programs and that is when they take advantage of them.” This relates to the problem noted elsewhere that there are many many programs for veterans but they can be difficult to find. I heard several participants say something like ‘I didn’t know that program existed until I . . .’

### The Disability Rating

The disability rating given to service members when they separate is all important. It determines the level and types of support they will receive from the VA for the rest of their lives. It was a six month process to access one veteran’s health disability and too complicated. He said it should be less complicated. Although another participant in the same interview said that if one does the assessment before leaving active duty, it is already done and this saves time. Indeed, an interviewee in the last interview said he went to a VA Medical Center before separating and he had his rating within one month.

Two participants were struggling with their disability rating. One was a woman who received a rating of 10% for problems that began with her knee but spread to other parts of her body. This rating entitles her to \$144 per month in disability compensation. But that amount, she claims, does not cover her expenses related to medical appointments. She is an hourly wage

earner so she has to take off work to attend each medical visit. This results in a reduction in take home pay from work which in some months is more than the \$144 she receives in disability compensation. She feels her rating should be much higher and noted that she has interacted with male veterans on various Facebook pages who describe similar symptoms to hers but have received much higher ratings. She feels discriminated against because she is a woman. She said “If I had the right anatomy I would get help.” She also noted that the muscular skeletal rating system used by the military hasn’t been updated since 1945. She feels the rating system needs to be updated.

She pointed out that another issue related to the disability rating is the lack of trust. “If you don’t make your appointments you must not be that bad.” “If you make an appointment about a pain but you don’t make that appointment the pain isn’t recorded, it must not have happened.” In other words “If you don’t go in you are penalized for it” but sometimes she just can’t afford to make the trip.

Another example was a Marine who received a disability rating of 70% but feels the rating should be 100%. He has extreme pain in his back and struggles to get through the day at work where he is an automobile mechanic. His ailments are impacting his family too as he is unable to play with his children in a way he feels a father should and he is limited in intimacy and social activities with his wife. But if he applies for a higher rating than 70%, they would reassess him and there is a risk that the percentage could be lowered instead of raised. Because he is at 70% he receives a property tax discount and he is worried that he might lose that if a reassessment lowers his percentage. Since he is in near constant pain he would like to have surgery to fix the problem but the doctors at the VA have told him that he is too young for

surgery. But he asks “why not have it when I will recover quickly?” He feels that they “band aid you until you are retirement age then they fix you.” “The VA caters to older generations.”

### **Health-Mental Health**

The veteran above also feels that there are not enough mental health workers at the VA. Sometimes “they are too generalized to help with specific psychological issues.” “The VA is a broken system.” He said four of his buddies took their own lives because they couldn’t get help. It is time, he asserted, for the VA to streamline their systems and update everything. He pointed out that “there are 22 vets a day committing suicide.”

#### Coping with trauma

Some military service members were traumatized by their experiences in war and suffer psychologically afterwards. One marine wondered how the military can expect someone who has been broken down to be built up into a marine and spent six months to a year fighting can then go back to his family and regular life with just a few days training.

“They break you down to build you up to being a Marine. After that you have three more months of training, again to being broken down to build you up to being a Marine. First you have boot camp, then advanced training and then training for advanced combat. You are trained to be a hardened killer, trained to follow orders, etc. Now, if two weeks can undo all of that, you know, that is amazing but you know I really doubt that especially when you implement your training, and you come back, you know, to your camp and you are going through that again and again and again for months. Deployments last six months to a year and while you over there and within that six months to a year you are seeing and experiencing and doing traumatic stuff. You understand what I am saying? And after you come back from your deployment they have a debrief, you know I’m saying, it is a day or two maybe. And that’s it. You are still left to your

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own devices, you're still left to your dreams, you're still left by your own self in your barracks room and if you are mad you go back to your family and if you don't get your mind right you're gonna kick the hell out of your family because you are going through some stuff and that happens. The military and war is a mentally depreciating thing, emotionally as well. But mentally it depreciates . . . your intellect. For some it does. You know cause you are doing things that are inhumane and seeing things that are inhumane day in and day out. Uh, it is traumatizing, to say the least it is traumatizing.”

Another veteran who had been deployed five times said that “Two weeks after every deployment is when the nightmares would normally kick in.”

#### Asking for help

Many of the interviewees said it was difficult for veterans to ask for help. The culture of the military doesn't support that. One interviewee told this story. “After visiting sick hall over a torn cartilage they gave me a medical profile (which I showed to my first officer who said) this isn't accurate. I was like what do you mean? He's like they forgot to write pussy on here. Get back in line.”

Another said “military members are stubborn and will never go ask for something. We are taught to be tough. Asking for help shows weakness.”

Another said “in the military you always had to be mission ready and if you are going through mental issues you have to man the fuck up and push through it, you know, only weak people fall for mental illness.” Another said “I soldiered up and moved on. ‘You do the mission.’”

“Not only is there danger in admitting to health issues when you are in the service, there is the culture of manning up and getting through things, not to mention being a mid-western

Minnesotan which we already have, so there are things I should have gotten care of at twentysomething that I could just suffer through at the time but now at thirtysomething are “oh great, that is a permanent limp!”

One interviewee told the story of a friend of his who worked with drones and was in effect killing people. He sought help for PTSD but he was told he didn't have PTSD but had “moral panic” instead. The friend received no further help.

### Vet to Vet

Many times I heard these veterans say that the best way for them to heal is to talk to other veterans. “VA Health Professionals don't understand. We take better care of ourselves than any outside agency does. We pulled each other out of the dankness.”

“Real solutions happen when a group of guys and we can talk about these issues, that is when real solutions happen and healing is done. I never felt better than after sitting with a group of veterans and just bullshitting for three hours talking about nonsense talking about experiences that I had . . . than with any other person I have talked with. I've never felt this rewarded or as fulfilled and just mentally like comfortable after something like that happening.”

One particular story is revealing about the role of veterans in other veterans' lives. “I got kicked out of bars. They called the cops on me. Most of the time they never arrested me. They pulled me aside, they would let me sit in their car to kind of sober up, people thought I was being arrested but they would basically give me a long talk and explain to me ‘you are going down a path that we don't want to see you go down. We hate arresting veterans, we would rather talk to you and get you out of that mindset that you have to constantly use substances to focus.’” Many of the interviewees seem to long for this type of a relationship.

### Accountability

One problem identified by several interviewees was the issue of accountability for illness. Assessments are done at the time of separation to see if a service member is suffering from physical or mental illness. If so then it is probably service related and the military has responsibility for caring for the service member after that. If the service member reports such an illness after separation it might be deemed unrelated to service and might make it difficult for the service member to get assistance for it from the military or VA.

“When I came home in 2010 they gave me a PTSD questionnaire. I felt fine then. Four years later I started having, yeah, I have issues with night terrors, I relive a lot of those moments, it really is traumatizing and I can’t focus on a lot of those things I normally would be able to focus on. Their response to me was ‘well, you filled out that questionnaire after you came back and said you were fine . . . so it is obviously not service related.’ Oh, so that is how you view it, I am obviously not going to get any help from you on this.” “There are people whose job it is to prove your problems are not military related.”

“The VA is a kind of a land mine, it is a bit of a mine field. It can be useful and it is good to get things on record but it is also, it is incredibly stressful and poses its own dangers.” “The VA is a factory that is trying to churn us out which is why it is a minefield. Say the exact wrong thing whether it’s correct or not, if it is misinterpreted you are getting the wrong care whether you like it or not the form was filled out.”

### Too quick to medicate

Several of the interviewees had complaints about the medical treatments they were prescribed by the VA. One said his mental health checkup “was a real quick interview, they said you have depression, and they threw a bottle of Paxil at him and never checked up” on him

again. He didn't like the side effects of the drug. "I lost control of my mood, lost autonomy I didn't particularly care for it" so he stopped taking the drug.

"If you have an episode, you are put in 72 hour lockdown and isolated from the people you need." When his wife died, a friend sat with him in his truck for four hours and that is what he needed. He felt the isolation of lockdown was the opposite of what he needed.

### **Family**

One veteran felt there was a need for these two types of programs during the transition process:

Parenting training: "How do you deal with kids?"

Training about divorce: "Half you guys are going to get divorced."

### **Finances**

"What do you do with your money?" "Reps for Harley Davidson are hanging around the base for those guys who have the desire to spend all their money." But "how do you provide that service (financial planning) in a way that veterans will engage in it. Young veterans won't have attention span to sit through a four hour training or even a one hour training. How do you piece it out in bite size chunks that they can digest and not have a lot of commitment to?"

### **Legal**

There were two suggestions about legal topics. How do you set up good wills or trusts? And how do you deal with DUI's?

## **Question #4: Resources Used**

For the fourth question, I asked if the resources they need/needed were available and which ones they used. I followed up with some examples of the kinds of services provided by

social service agencies. Here is a list of the resources they used. The resources that they needed but didn't have access to are presented in the answers to question five below.

- GI Bill
- DAV Disabled American Veterans
- “I am a member of the Randal VFW but I don't do much with them (I) stick to my platoon” but he also used the GI Bill, VRC at St. Cloud, St. Cloud VA, VA certifying official at SCSU (Kathryn Goenner).
- “I support Black Rifle Coffee (a vet owned business)”
- My congressional reps have provided assistance.
- “Some organizations like the Legion and VFW became too big. Which one do I go to? I'm not going to go to any. The issue is there are so many programs—how do yo find them?”
- Military One Source
- Family Assistance Center (Arden Hills)
- My Next Move
- Vocational Rehabilitation
- CVSO in Stearns County (Robbyn helped a lot)
- CVSO in Sherburn County (Mike helped a lot)
- Electronic VA services
- St. Cloud Stand Down
- Warrior to Citizen
- Facebook pages
- Drunken Bros

- Veterans of Kunar Province (where one soldier was deployed)
- US Army What The Fuck Moments
- The Posse Veterans Program. A program to reduce veteran failure rate at colleges and universities.
- Pain Free Veterans
- Hometown Heroes Outdoors
- Eagles Healing Nest
- EOD Warrior Foundation
- Mental health first aid class sponsored by National Alliance on Mental Illness
- Certified Peer Specialist training

### **Question #5: Anything Else**

The last question asked the veterans if they had anything else they wanted to say about the needs of veterans or service members related to transitioning from service to civilian life.

Here is a list of the suggestions they gave.

- A way to match veterans with other veterans looking for housing
- A way to match housing with the amount of money the GI Bill provides.
- Having a compendium of all the services and programs available would be good.
- Green Zone Training (safe space for veterans)
- “There should be a way for veterans to meet other vets from the same state or region before exiting service so that when you get out you could call them.”
- There should be a women’s health clinic at the VA Medical Center in St. Cloud but apparently we are not big enough to support one.

- “Which organization should I go to for which services? Does it matter which one I go to?” The CVSO’s help us navigate. There could be more of them. We need help knowing where to turn.
- “The transition process needs to be a more personal process even if with Zoom or Skype.”
- “When you are in basic training the squadron you are going into assigns you a sponsor and that person helped (mid-level NCO). Here is how we get your housing set up, here is how we get your chow hall pass set up, here is the finance building— (we) need a more local personal transition program.” “I didn’t know where to start.” “Having a person that you checked in with periodically as you are going through the process would be helpful.”
- Meet ups—these allow for networking that is sincere but not the purpose of the group.
- On the topic of meet ups one vet in the same interview said, “As long as they are having a good time because at that moment they are not thinking about killing themselves.”
- “We need a mentor—do this, don’t do this.”
- A mental health first aid class sponsored by National Alliance on Mental Illness.

## **Discussion**

Over the course of these 12 interviews, four themes emerged—the need for individualized services, the need to spend time with other veterans, the difficulty of speaking with civilians, and more mental health support. Each of these themes will be described below and suggestions will be made regarding programs that might reflect these needs.

### ***Transition Needs of Young Veterans***

### Individualized service

As is obvious from the information provided above, there is great variety among these former service members. Not only were they in different branches of the military, but they served at different times and in different places, some were deployed overseas and some were not, some were injured and some were not, some separated smoothly and some struggled, some are experiencing mental health challenges and some are not. It is clear that their needs vary greatly as well. Thus, it would be difficult to organize one training session (such as the transition assistance program) or a program that would meet all of their needs. Such a session or program would be relevant to some in the room but others would tune out. Many of the interviewees suggested that services be provided individually so that the specific needs of the individual veteran could be addressed. The word mentoring was used by many of them. Rather than attend a session for a large group of veterans who would probably have different needs, they would prefer to be mentored by one individual who could get to know their needs and work specifically with them.

### Camaraderie

Another theme that emerged from these interviews is the need for veterans to spend time with other veterans who had similar experiences. As one said: “Just talking to someone who’s been through the same thing helps. Other people don’t know how to talk about these issues. Just there to talk about the everyday shit, just doing that can show that it is kind of over and there is something else that we are moving on to.” Another confirmed that “talking with other veterans is what I need.” Even when they visit with a health professional they prefer that that professional be a veteran. More healing for them occurs when they are talking with other veterans than when they are talking to health professionals who are not veterans.

### ***Transition Needs of Young Veterans***

### How to talk to civilians

Nearly all of the interviewees mentioned that it was difficult to talk with civilians when they separated. They had been trained for months and months to communicate and interact and indeed how to “be” in a particular way but that way didn’t work with civilians. This applied to both their personal worlds and their work worlds. The interviewees described struggles they had with their families and problems experienced at work. One woman lost a job because she hadn’t adapted to the civilian ways of doing things. A young man said that the hardest thing for him was to realize that he couldn’t control situations as he could in the military (as a section chief) and this causes him to be angry. More training about how the civilian world is different from the military world would be helpful.

### More Mental Health Support

The one specific thing that was mentioned more often than others was the need for more mental health support. Many of the participants are experiencing PTSD and many of them have friends who are experiencing it. Many said they know at least one friend who has committed suicide because of PTSD, are convinced their friend did not get enough support, and that that lack of support was a reason for the suicide. Several said they do regular check-ins with friends to make sure they do not commit suicide. This theme goes hand in hand with the camaraderie theme. The word “healing” was used several times in connection with their time spent talking with other veterans.

### Recommendations

In addition to the suggestions listed in the previous section, several other recommendations were discussed and developed during the interviews. These ideas reflect and incorporate many of the themes mentioned above.

## ***Transition Needs of Young Veterans***

1. A training program for the workplace focusing on how to supervise or work with former service members and veterans. Employers make assumptions about veterans that are not necessarily accurate. A training program such as this would help them understand their veteran employees more and improve the working environment for veterans.
2. More mentoring programs to connect older veterans with younger veterans. Veterans who have already separated and established themselves in the civilian world would be able to coach veterans in a way that non-veterans could not. They know where the younger veteran is “coming from.” One of the veterans interviewed received Certified Peer Specialist training which is a professional training recognized by the state of Minnesota. This training program could be used to develop a formalized group of peer mentors in central Minnesota. Informal programs could be developed as well such as the meet ups mentioned previously.
3. A one week class at universities before school starts to review writing skills and prepare veterans for school. It could be seen as a follow-up training to that which was done in the Marines (the TAP programs). All students are able to attend an orientation session at most universities before the academic year starts. But several interviewees mentioned it would have been better if their orientation was designed specifically for veterans. A class such as this would help the veterans transition into the academic world as well as be a “check-in or follow-up” to the transition training provided by the military.

4. A program at college or universities that pairs senior veteran students with freshmen veteran students. This is one way that the mentoring that was requested could be operationalized.
5. A class or program for non-veteran students about how to interact with veterans (don't ask "Did you kill anyone?"). Such a program could be presented by veterans and help improve the relationship they have with non-veteran students.
6. Bring the Green Zone program to local colleges and universities. This program is similar to safe space programs developed by the lgbtq community. That training is for faculty and staff who want to provide a safe place for lgbtq students to talk about their issues and lives without being judged. The training is a two hour or half-day workshop in which issues facing the community are discussed. After the workshop, attendees are provided with a "Safe Space" sign that they can place on their doors to indicate their offices are safe for lgbtq students. The Green Zone is similar in that it gives employees an understanding of the military and separation experiences, potential problems veterans may face, and resources they can recommend to veteran students. This program could also evolve into the workplace training mentioned earlier in this list.

**About the author**

R. Jeffrey Ringer, Ph.D., is Professor and Chair of the Communication Studies Department at St. Cloud State University. He was recruited for this project for his ability to facilitate groups and conduct research not for a military background. He has never served in the military and never had to register with the selective service (having turned 18 during the five years when such registration was not required). Other than a few classroom discussions with veteran students, he had little knowledge about the military experience prior to conducting this project. He is grateful for having had this opportunity to learn about that experience and was honored to provide a voice for these interviewees.