



Putting our Wounded Warriors back to work

by Kevin Burgin

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For many wounded, ill, and injured service members and disabled veterans, physical and mental healing is only the beginning of the long journey to full recovery. In addition to facing a set of new challenges and adjusting to a “new normal,” many transitioning service members and veterans also struggle to find meaningful civilian employment.

As you walk around the Southwestern Division’s district offices today you will meet new team members participating in current Department of Defense and Veterans Administration initiatives.

For the past few decades the VA has had the Vocational Rehabilitation Program helping veterans with service connected disabilities reintegrate into the civilian work force.

The Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment’s program and Early Intervention and Outreach program assist eligible service members and veterans with employment and education opportunities. Participants work with a vocational rehabilitation counselor to determine eligibility and entitlement to VR&E services. Once entitlement is established, the counselor and the service member or veteran work together to decide which employment track is most suitable based on the participant’s individual needs. The program’s goal is to assist eligible service members and veterans in obtaining and maintaining suitable em-

ployment that will not aggravate their disabilities. This program does not replace or conflict with medical treatment or military requirements.

The DoD has also developed several new programs to reintegrate servicemembers into the workforce. Two of those initiatives are Operation Warfighter and the Army Wounded Warrior programs. These programs help transitioning Soldiers before they are totally out of the military care.

Operation Warfighter is a DoD non-paid internship program that places wounded, ill, and injured service members in supportive work settings that positively impact the recuperation process. This provides an opportunity to augment employment readiness from federal agencies as participants return to duty or separate from the military.

The initial OWF pilot program started at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in 2006 with select participating federal agencies. It was such a success in the capitol region that the DoD encouraged all Warrior Transition Units to develop a local program with all the federal agencies in their area.

The Southwestern Division has participated in the OWF program since 2009 and has helped more than 60 veterans reintegrate successfully into the civilian workforce.

Benefits to USACE:

Ability to demonstrate support for the military service and sacrifices of wounded, injured and ill service members

Access to the talent, dedication, and considerable military and non-military skills of participants

A vehicle for the permanent recruitment of transitioning service members in support of the Executive Order on the Employment of Veterans in the Federal Government (NOV 2009)

Spread awareness on the utilization of special appointing authorities available to veterans

Better familiarize federal components with the transferable skill sets and employability of transitioning wounded, injured and ill Service members

Provides our civilians exposure to working with more military members

Drives home “Why we are here”

Rural and urban locations can benefit from various programs available to use active duty, National Guard and Reserve status service members

Benefits to Wounded Warriors & Disabled Veterans:

Gain specialized experience, mentorship from federal employees, preparation for civilian career transition

Promotes healing by getting wounded service members out of hospital environment and places them in supportive work

SWD provides transitional recreational opportunities for hunting, fishing, etc. to promote faster healing

The U.S. Army Wounded Warrior Program is the official Army program serving severely wounded, ill and injured Soldiers, veterans, and their families, wherever they are located, for as long as it takes. AW2 supports the most severely wounded Soldiers since 9/11 who have, or are expected to receive, an Army disability rating of 30 percent or greater in one or more specific categories or a combined rating of 50 percent or greater for conditions that are the result of combat or are combat related.

AW2 is one element of the Army's focus on caring for wounded Soldiers, veterans, and their families. AW2 Soldiers, veterans, and families are assigned an advocate and may be assigned to a Warrior Transition Unit to focus on healing. The advocate supports the WTU triad of



Lt. Gen. Thomas P. Bostick, Chief of Engineers, speaks with a recovering wounded warrior during a visit to the Fort Hood Warrior Transition Unit. (Photo by Fort Worth District)

care team consisting of a primary care physician, nurse case manager, and a military squad leader. The program assists more than 10,000 severely wounded Soldiers, veterans, and their families. There are more than 170 advocates located throughout the country where there are large concentrations of AW2 Soldiers at VA Polytrauma Centers, VA facilities, Military Treatment Facilities, and most military installations.

The AW2 program is confused at times with the Wounded Warrior Project non-profit agency. The AW2 is an official DoD program with a command structure connected with the Warrior Transition Command Headquarters in Washington, D.C. and has no ties to the non-profit agency.

Supporting our Wounded Soldiers and their families has become a top priority for the USACE Chief of Engineers, Lt. Gen. Thomas P. Bostick. During a recent visit to the SWD District offices, Bostick remarked how impressed he was with the support SWD is providing to these Soldiers and their families. Bostick noted that the AW2 and Operation Warfighter are truly making an impact in Soldiers quality of life and allows them to transition out of the service with their heads up knowing their families will be alright as they have to change their careers before they planned on it. As Bostick noted, “It’s the right thing to do.”