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To: Governor Tony Evers  
Senate Chief Clerk Jeffrey Renk  
Assembly Chief Clerk Patrick Fuller  
Department of Children and Families  
Department of Veterans Affairs

From: Department of Workforce Development

## **Hire Heroes: Wisconsin Transitional Jobs Program for Veterans 2019 Annual Report**

### **Program Background**

2017 Wisconsin Act 195, which was signed into law April 4, 2018, established the Hire Heroes Program to provide transitional jobs to veterans. The Department of Workforce Development (DWD), the Department of Veterans Affairs (WDVA), and the Department of Children and Families (DCF) are charged with administering the program.

Under the law, DWD may allocate up to \$400,000 each fiscal year to subsidize eligible veterans' wages paid by local businesses that hire and train veterans in job skills needed for long-term sustainable employment. To the greatest extent possible, the Hire Heroes program is to address the most urgent needs of Wisconsin's unemployed veterans and minimize administrative costs by using the structure of DCF's existing transitional jobs site agreements and other participant tracking tools. DCF and its transitional jobs providers assist DWD's staff in connecting veterans to current transitional jobs employers. Eligible participants may participate in the Hire Heroes program for up to 1,040 work hours and DWD will reimburse a participating employer for costs including a wage subsidy (up to the Federal Minimum Wage), federal social security and Medicare taxes, state and federal unemployment insurance contributions or taxes and worker's compensation insurance premiums, if any.

To be eligible to participate in the Hire Heroes program, an individual must satisfy all the following criteria:

1. At least 18 years of age.
2. A veteran, as defined under s. 45.01 (12), who is verified by WDVA.
3. Submit an application to the program no later than 7 years after the date of discharge from military service.
4. Ineligible to participate in the Wisconsin Works program.
5. Unemployed for at least 4 weeks.
6. Satisfy all of the requirements related to substance abuse screening, testing, and treatment.

### **Program Implementation**

DWD, WDVA, and DCF trained staff and began accepting veterans into the program on April 1, 2019 and publicly announced the official launch of the program on April 15, 2019. The agencies

collaborated extensively to ensure that all goals and expectations were met and that the program would be successful once launched. The Hire Heroes team, consisting of staff from all three agencies, met regularly to ensure successful implementation of the program, create a timeline, monitor progress, develop effective training, evaluate and measure success, develop and refine recruiting strategies, and generate other ideas for increasing program enrollment.

The team developed and implemented a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), outlining the authority and scope of the program and clearly delineated each agency's responsibilities. Further collaboration resulted in the development of a 2019 Amendment to a previously-existing Data Sharing Agreement between DWD and WDVA for the Work Opportunity Tax Credit, updated to fit the needs of Hire Heroes, which helped facilitate eligibility verification for Hire Heroes via an online process. As recommended in the 2018 Annual Report, the team also hired a Hire Heroes Program Coordinator, who has worked closely with staff at all three agencies to verify eligibility, enroll interested veterans into the program, and generate ideas to increase enrollment.

The team set up the infrastructure for the program by defining a customer flow and referral process, so that a standard process for intake, referral, enrollment, and eligibility verification is in place, regardless of which agency an interested veteran first contacts. To ensure the effectiveness and success of the process, the team created training materials, including a staff training module delivered to all Disabled Veterans Outreach Program Specialists (DVOPs) within DWD on March 22, 2019, and created program resources and staff memos that they provided to affected staff at all three agencies. In the weeks that followed, the Hire Heroes program was also rolled out to all of DWD's Job Center of Wisconsin (JCW) staff on weekly calls throughout the state. This training remains available for use and helps ensure that all staff are aware of their responsibilities and understand their role in the process.

DWD and DCF staff also worked together to create worksite agreements for Hire Heroes by utilizing existing transitional jobs site agreements and participant tracking tools used by DCF for the Transform Milwaukee Jobs and Transitional Jobs programs. Further collaboration resulted in the creation of a W-2 screening tool and drug screening tool, both of which are necessary to confirm eligibility for the program.

DCF staff has helped publicize the program with the Wisconsin Employment and Training Association (WETA), and the Hire Heroes Program Coordinator spoke about the program at the WETA Annual Conference. DCF staff also shared information regarding the program with all Wisconsin Works (W-2) agencies, providing instruction on how to refer a W-2-ineligible veteran to the Hire Heroes Program. WDVA staff in the Veterans Benefits Resource Center (VBRC) were instructed to refer veterans interested in employment to Hire Heroes after an initial phone screening to confirm the veteran meets eligibility requirements, including the veteran status (WI § 45.01(12)) and seven-year discharge requirements. DWD and WDVA have further collaborated with a reciprocal relationship of connecting Veterans who are part of WDVA's Veterans Outreach and Recovery Program (VORP).

After the launch of Hire Heroes in April, all three agencies have continued to be in close communication, identified key areas for improvement and increased enrollment, and assisted each other with recruitment and eligibility verification. The Hire Heroes team plans to continue to meet in 2020 with the goal of making the program as effective as possible.

## **Outreach**

All three agencies have worked together to market the program through existing outreach activities, partnerships, collaborations, and existing communication channels, as Act 195 did not appropriate any funding. The Hire Heroes Project Coordinator, DWD's Office of Veteran Employment Services

staff, WDVA's Veterans Benefit Resource Center and VORP, and DCF's already established partnerships with Transitional Jobs partners throughout the state have assisted in outreach activities. DWD utilized its JobCenterofWisconsin.com registrants to reach out to all potentially eligible veterans directly through email. Below is a list of many of the organizations, programs, and contacts who have been provided information about the Hire Heroes Program through outreach activity:

- Homeless Veterans' Reintegration Program grantees: Center for Veterans Issues (CVI), Vocational Rehabilitation Specialists, Inc.
- Supportive Services for Veteran Families grantee's – CVI, Indianhead Community Action Agency, and Community Action Coalition for South Central Wisconsin
- Wisconsin's County Veteran Service Officers and Tribal Veteran Service Officers
- University of Wisconsin System Veteran Services Office/Coordinator
- Wisconsin Technical College Veteran Services Office/Coordinator
- Veteran Health Administration (VHA)'s Community Employment Coordinator's – Madison, Tomah and Milwaukee
- VHA – Housing and Urban Development Veteran Affairs Supportive Housing and Grant and Per Diem Program – Madison and Tomah
- VHA Therapeutic Supported Employment Services programs – Madison and Tomah (connecting with Milwaukee program in progress)
- VHA – Veteran Justice Outreach – Madison, Tomah and Milwaukee
- Veterans Benefit Administration Regional Office – Milwaukee
- WDVA – Veterans Outreach and Recovery Program – Statewide
- Vet Center – Madison
- Homeless Shelters - Statewide
- Disability IN Wisconsin
- Catholic Multi-Cultural Center – Madison
- Transitional Jobs Collaborative – Milwaukee (Monthly Meetings)
- American Legion's and VFW's Statewide
- Community Based Organizations – Dryhooch, Porchlight, NAMI Wisconsin, Forward Community Investments, Veterans Opportunity to Work, etc.
- Job Fairs statewide, UW Health walk-in Wednesday, Red Cross, Salvation Army
- Wisconsin Air National Guard Benefit Expo

### **Outcomes and Opportunities**

Since the Hire Heroes Program launched on April 1, 2019, 10 veterans applied for the program. Three applicants were found not to be eligible; three were hired into unsubsidized employment; three are pending eligibility; and one is currently working in the program. The veteran currently in the program is employed and the program subsidizes \$7.25 of his \$21.00 hourly rate.

Several factors have impacted the outcomes in 2019. The state's unemployment rate has been historically low and it is even lower for veterans. Many employers are willing to directly hire and train eligible veterans without utilizing the Hire Heroes program. The relatively low number of un- or underemployed veterans in the current labor market make it difficult to find and reach eligible participants. Staff have noted that eligibility requirements disqualify many veterans who expressed an interest in the program.

The Legislature may wish to consider modifying eligibility requirements and appropriating funds to support outreach efforts in order to achieve its goal of addressing the most urgent needs of Wisconsin's unemployed veterans. The greatest barrier to eligibility is the requirement that a veteran must apply for the program no later than seven years after the date of discharge from

military service. Most veterans who have expressed interest in the program and are seeking transitional job assistance have separated from the military well over seven years ago. Many veterans recently separating from service will attend school or utilize other resources for transitioning from the military to civilian employment so have the skills and resources needed to gain additional skills without this program. On the other hand, veterans in need of the most help in the current economy separated from service over seven year ago. We recommend eliminating Wis. Stat. § 106.38(4)(a)2m.

The support of state general purpose revenue will also ensure greater outreach and stability of the program. Currently, the Hire Heroes Coordinator position is funded through the Jobs for Veterans State Grant (JVSG), which has restrictions on veterans served, and the subsidies of up to \$400,000 per year are currently funded through the Department of Labor's (DOL) Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). WIOA funding has steadily declined over the past few years. No other federal funding sources within DWD can be used to support this program.

Beyond legislative support and changes, all agencies administering the program continue to connect, discuss improvements, and refer potentially eligible veterans to the program to ensure the state is addressing the most urgent needs of Wisconsin's unemployed veterans. In the upcoming year, the program will look to target its outreach to veterans who have long gaps in their work history and to include currently and formerly incarcerated veterans. Veterans who have been incarcerated are often among those most in need of employment assistance and Hire Heroes could be an opportunity to help get these veterans back into the workforce.

Thank you for your consideration of this report and for your continued support of our nation's heroes.