

Local governments caring for returning veterans and their families

AN ICMA FACT SHEET



Along with servicing aging veterans from previous wars, at the end of the day local governments have the most at stake in ensuring the success of reintegrating today's veterans and caring for their families. It is absolutely critical that local governments understand the military family and veterans' issues of today.

Who are today's returning veterans?

- Military service men and women are more likely to be married and have children than their civilian counterparts.
- More than 70% come from middle- and upper-middle income families.
- They are more highly educated than the general public with more than 95% having at least a high school degree.
- 84.3% are male.

What are the major issues that local governments need to understand?

Veterans face a range of challenges, from housing and education to physical and mental health issues. These are compounded by the fact that today's veterans are returning home to a weak and challenging labor market.

- Unemployment is the greatest challenge facing post-9/11 veterans. In January 2011, unemployment was 30.2 % for 18 to 24 year old veterans. Unfortunately unemployment has an exponential impact as everything pivots on employment—health, housing, education, family well-being, and the transition to civilian life.
- Understanding how to find and obtain medical and psychological care is the number one obstacle to recovery. Only 41.2% of post-9/11 veterans have minimal knowledge of the VA health care system. Few returning veterans know how to apply for VA health and disability benefits.

BEST PRACTICES from cities and counties that are doing it right:

Colorado Springs, CO and surrounding municipalities developed new models of collaboration and service-providing infrastructure in creating the Pikes Peak Area **Network of Care for Service Members, Veterans & Their Families**. Veterans and their families can find programs or facilities related to housing, employment, reintegration, education or behavioral health.

Bexar County, TX built on existing programs and created a formal partnership with an existing non-profit, Veteran Assistance Services. Now Bexar County has a dedicated **Veteran Care Specialist** providing assistance in accessing, understanding, and filing for VA benefits, locating specialized non-traditional resources for veterans and their families, as well as support services for PTSD and Traumatic Brain Injury.

Eugene, OR organized municipal and community stakeholders to explore ways for the community to address the challenges that veterans face in transitioning to civilian life which led to the **Veterans' Housing Project**. The VHP provides up to two years of affordable housing to veterans and their families to assist in reintegrating into the civilian world. To keep costs down, low cost and often distressed properties are acquired and rehabilitated. Having veterans live in and care for these homes improves the neighborhood and local economy.

- Finding affordable housing. Like many in America, veterans and their families face a range of issues, including foreclosure, burdensome housing costs, underwater mortgages, and homelessness. Veterans under the age of 30 are four times as likely to be homeless than their civilian counterparts, with young women and minority veterans at an even greater risk.
- Struggling to successfully complete post-secondary education. While the GI Bill program is perhaps the greatest benefit veterans receive for their service, dropout rates among veterans are high.

What can local governments do?

While the quantity of returning veterans will vary by community, many of their needs will be the same. Local governments will be faced with assisting veterans find new employment and career paths, find and obtain the correct medical care and mental health treatments within their communities, find affordable family housing, and move forward with post-secondary education.

Local governments must take advantage of available leading practices and lessons learned and select an approach that works best for their community, because the worst thing local leaders can do to support veterans and military families is nothing.

Lessons learned

- 1. Assess your environment prior to developing your strategy.** Navigate the veterans' service environment to understand what benefits and programs are available and how to help veterans access them.
- 2. Get organized and create community buy-in.** Local government leaders are able to bring the

business community, nonprofits, local military officials, and government agencies together to develop a unified plan for engaging veterans and their families. After successfully convening all the players, roles can be established, services and programs can be indexed, and shared resources can be committed.

- 3. Use your community's existing resources.** All communities have municipal social services and non-profit organizations assisting community members. Locate local veteran service organizations such as the **VFW**, the **American Legion**, and the **Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America**—which can provide the crucial initial contact and referral component.
- 4. People want to help**—but they need organization and direction which local government can provide, creating an inclusive community-driven effort to address specific veterans' and military family issues.
- 5. Plan for the future.** Changes in leadership can impact the progress of efforts to address the issues. Local governments must prepare for the inevitable changing of the guard to ensure continuity.

What is ICMA doing?

ICMA has been highlighting best practices of cities and counties who have developed exemplary programs assisting veterans and their families and offers a nationwide network of city and county managers in order to best communicate and replicate these programs. ICMA hosts a **military veterans group** online for any local government official or veteran seeking information or connections. As well, ICMA is partnering with national state and local government organizations to ensure that local governments have the tools needed to reintegrate and care for veterans and their families.

More Resources:

- The United States Department of Labor has created the **Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program**.
- The **National Coalition for Homeless Veterans** and the U.S. Department of Labor-Veterans' Employment and Training Service released a **publication detailing best practices for reintegrating homeless veterans**.
- The **National Coalition for Homeless Veterans** also provides grants, training services, and offers direction to agencies that will educate and prepare homeless veterans for future employment.
- To further understand the needs of post 9/11 veterans read the ICMA *PM* article, "**The Role of Local Government in Veterans and Military Family Issues.**"
- **Breaking Into Local Government: A Guidebook for Career Changers**, an ICMA publication, can be provided to veterans who are interested in pursuing a career in local government.
- Local government jobs can be posted on the **ICMA Job Board**, which will soon feed into to the **Employment Center on eBenefits, a job bank exclusively for veterans and a service of the VA.**