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**By**

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**2015**

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**Female veterans face complex transition, high unemployment**

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**Female veterans face complex transition, high unemployment**

By

**Kritika Pramod Kulshrestha, B.E.**

**Report**

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School

of the University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

**Master of Arts**

The University of Texas at Austin

May 2015

# **Female veterans face complex transition, high unemployment**

by

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2015

SUPERVISOR: Russell G. Todd

Julie Puzan left Falls City, Texas, to join the Air Force in September 2003 as soon as she completed high school. Over the next six years, she was deployed to Guam twice as a weapons loader. In 2009 she left the service. That's when things got tough. When she mustered out, she knew she needed help getting back in civilian life. She just didn't know where to get it. Eventually she navigated the maze of assistance programs for vets and began putting her life together. Help was out there, but it was hard to find.

She also realized that a flood of female vets was coming home to assistance that had been designed for men. Lots of programs dealt with problems like combat-related post-traumatic stress disorder, but few were out there to treat the aftermath of sexual assaults and other challenges faced by females. Puzan is among 2.3 million female veterans in or entering the American work force after America's recent series of wars. The economy hasn't been good at absorbing these veterans. The V.A. and other veterans organizations are beginning to reach out to female vets, but find themselves behind the curve given the fast growth of the population they serve. As long as that's true, female vets will have to look hard to find the help they need in a system designed for males.

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## **Female veterans face complex transition, high unemployment**

Julie Puzan left Falls City, Texas, to join the Air Force in September 2003 as soon as she completed high school.

Over the next six years, she was deployed to Guam twice as a weapons loader. In 2009 she left the service. That's when things got tough.

Puzan, stationed at Whitman Air Force Base in Missouri when she mustered out, knew she needed help getting back in civilian life. She just didn't know where to get it.

From adapting to civilian life to looking for a job and a house, Puzan also dealt with the discomfort of attending college as a much older student.

"I was six years older than everyone else, and I had no idea I could go to the V.A.," 30-year-old Puzan said of the Veterans Administration. "Because I was never in combat, I thought I wasn't eligible for V.A. benefits. I didn't have any connections. I lost my identity and my confidence."

Eventually she navigated the maze of assistance programs for vets and began putting her life together. She finished her bachelor's degree in social work from the University of Central Missouri in 2011 and moved to Austin soon after. She now lives in Austin with her newborn and her husband – also a veteran – whom she met when they were both in the military.

Puzan found veterans programs ranging from national efforts by government agencies to nonprofits contracted to run local re-integration programs. Help was out there, but it was hard to find.

She also realized that a flood of female vets was coming home to assistance that had been designed for men. Lots of programs dealt with problems like combat-related post traumatic stress disorder, but few were out there to treat the aftermath of sexual assaults and other challenges faced by females.

Dawn McDaniel, a 41-year-old U.S. Army veteran, originally from Denver, Colorado took another route through the maze. She left the Army in 2000 after four years as a personnel specialist. Unlike Puzan, she had the resources to earn two master's degrees and join the corporate world.

She worked at United Technologies Corp. in Farmington, Connecticut and the state of Connecticut, but grew frustrated by both. Employers, she decided, didn't know how to leverage the experience of women vets.

"I wanted more leadership opportunities, and the companies that I worked at didn't want to help foster that within me," she said. "After 12 years of trying to grow and find the right job, I realized that the only way for me to grow in my career was to change companies every three years. Companies didn't know how to leverage me."

In 2011 she struck out on her own and founded Bravo Delta Consulting LLC. Now she teaches companies how to translate the experience of vets into corporate leadership.

Puzan and McDaniel are among 2.3 million female veterans in or entering the American work force after America's recent series of wars. Women vets are now 10 percent of all vets, up from 8 percent in 2010. Women vets are expected to be 16 percent of the vet population by 2040.

The economy hasn't been good at absorbing these veterans. In 2013, 9.6 percent of female vets who served in the military after 9/11 were unemployed, compared with 8.8 percent for men.

The V.A. and other veterans organizations are beginning to reach out to female vets, but find themselves behind the curve given the fast growth of the population they serve. As long as that's true, female vets will have to look hard to find the help they need in a system designed for males.

"I have determined that the odds of unemployment for female veterans have increased by 38 percent on top of the 50 percent increase from the main effect of being a veteran," said military sociologist and military spouse Meredith Kleykamp in a telephone interview. "There is something worse about being both – a woman and a veteran."

While some barriers to employment and readjustment exist for all veterans, women experience additional challenges. Women in the military return home to a system essentially built for male veterans as they struggle to find stable employment, according to Deputy National Legislative Director at Disabled American Veterans, Joy Ilem.

"Since the men are predominant in numbers these veteran support programs have been developed with male veterans in mind," Ilem said in a telephone interview.

Women service members face gender and sexual harassment, and sexual assault at astonishingly high rates, Kleykamp wrote in her 2013 social research study. Though the source of post-traumatic stress disorder among male soldiers is combat, the source of PTSD among women who serve is Military Sexual Trauma, Kleykamp said.

There is also a gap between how women veterans are accessing these services and how organizations are trying to reach them. Organizations find it difficult to make their



programs and services known to these women because they tend to not self-identify as veterans, according to a 2014 study released by the Disabled American Veterans foundation.

“There is help out there but the challenge for an increasing number of veteran-serving nonprofits is that it is difficult for a transitioning service member or veteran to find the good players,” McDaniel said. “It’s difficult for veterans to find the right match for them. I’m trying to work with nonprofits to see how I can address this problem.”

McDaniel grew up in a family where military service was always considered an honor – both her parents are Vietnam veterans. She served four years active duty in South Korea as a personnel specialist preparing soldiers for their careers and promotions. After leaving the Army in 2000, she completed a Master of Public Administration degree from Murray State University in 2001 and a Master of Business Administration degree in global business from Walden University in 2006.

She worked as a project manager at Connecticut-based United Technologies Corp. for almost four years and left the company in July 2007 to work as a public information officer for the State of Connecticut Insurance Department.

Now as founder of Connecticut-based Bravo Delta Consulting, McDaniel helps companies with their veteran recruitment efforts by conducting resume workshops and seminars for human resources professionals.

She has worked with more than 25 organizations including Aetna Inc., Prudential Financial Inc. and Colorado State University. She is working with Northwestern Mutual Life Insurance Co. to provide a military cultural-competency training program in their 300 field offices across the country.

“I encourage hiring managers to understand that veterans are leaders,” she said. “A supervisor needs to understand how a veteran thinks, to utilize them in the best way. In the military, it is clear to a service member what he or she needs to do next, to advance in his or her career. Civilian supervisors who can provide that same structure will get more out of their veteran employees as long as the employees are able to deliver.”

Companies largely do not track retention by gender and there is little data on the participation and utilization rates of veteran-serving nonprofits and of the military’s Transition Assistance Program, according to a 2014 RAND Corp. study. RAND is a global policy think tank established to inform public policy within the U.S. Armed Forces through research and analysis.

In January 2013, the Defense Department redesigned the Transition Assistance Program to include three different tracks depending on what career path, service members chose to pursue: a college-bound track, a working track for veterans seeking jobs, and an entrepreneurs track for veterans keen on becoming business owners.

The Transition Assistance Program is a mandatory five-day workshop organized by the Defense Department in collaboration with the V.A., the Labor Department and the U.S. Small Business Administration with additional days of optional training.

In a recent review of this program by the U.S. Government Accountability Office, comprehensive data on participation rates and information on the effectiveness of the training was not readily available, the Disabled American Veterans study on women veterans said.

What is lacking, according to the DAV study, is data on participation, satisfaction, and effectiveness of the Transition Assistance Program that needs to be collected and analyzed by gender and race. Additionally, assessments to determine needs of women

veterans and incorporate specific breakout sessions during the Labor Department's three-day employment workshop are also not in place at present.

"The availability of services and programs in support of transitioning and reintegrating military families does not ensure their participation and acceptance," the Defense Department said in a news release October 2014. "Community-based organizations and government agencies face continuous challenges in identifying, attracting and effectively engaging veterans."

In 2007, the Maryland-based Business and Professional Women's Foundation conducted a pilot study "The Women Veterans in Transition Research Project," to assess the career transition experiences of women veterans.

This foundation was the first organization to conduct a social research study about transitioning female service members, according to the foundation's former CEO Deborah Frett who said that this study inspired other research endeavors in the female veteran employment space. Founded in 2005, this women's foundation was among the first organizations to focus on employed women and their needs.

Because there is no national database of women veterans that private researchers can access, the foundation had to put the word out among state women veteran coordinators to get a large number of women veterans to participate in the survey. Close to 1629 female veterans completed the survey in 2007. Almost half of the respondents were under the age of 40 and the average age of women veterans at the time of leaving the military was 32.7 years.

According to Kleykamp's 2013 social study, veterans of today's volunteer force are more likely now than in the past to be women, and this generation is much more likely to be married and have children than their peers of earlier generations. Thus, the effects of a difficult transition to civilian life have consequences not only for themselves but also for their spouses, children and communities.

A 2007 Business and Professional Women's Foundation study showed that more than 50 percent of the women veterans surveyed were married at the time of separation from the military and more than half had dependents at the time of separation.

This 2007 survey showed that no matter what their status, women veterans delay their entry into the transition process. For unmarried women veterans with dependents, the survey recommended that strong efforts should be made, and existing efforts increased, to reach these women and to emphasize the importance of starting their job search prior to leaving the service.

The 2007 study showed that current transition processes work best for women veterans with college degrees, and who tend to be older when they separate from the service. These processes appear to work less well for those without college degrees, for those that have had a relatively short military career, and for those who are younger when they leave the service.

Organizations that helped the foundation find women veterans to take the survey included recruiting firms RecruitMilitary, Corporate Gray and Bradley-Morris Inc., and service organizations such as the National Association of State Women Veterans Coordinators. Corporate Gray is an online job site that allows military personnel to find civilian jobs by registering for job fairs, submitting their resumes to employers, and attending online events. Bradley-Morris specializes in military headhunting services.

In January 2012 the Business and Professional Women's Foundation developed a workforce development and mentorship program titled "Joining Forces for Women Veterans and Military Spouses Mentoring Plus" for women veterans. The program was later expanded to include military spouses.

"Organizations have been good with increasing diversity among their employees but somehow they've forgotten about the gender issues involving veterans," Frett said in a

telephone interview. “If you only hire at job fairs you are not going to find the women. You need to brand yourself as a woman veteran-friendly employer.”

Since 2012 more than 1500 women veterans and military spouses have been helped through mentorship and employment.

“The foundation now needs funding to expand the program to other cities and increase the number of events it hosts per year,” Frett said. “Otherwise the pilot program will be discontinued.”

Jacqueline Maffucci is responsible for the annual member survey at the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America foundation. According to her, the organization has not been able to research a larger group of female veterans for several reasons one of which is the organization’s method of administering the survey – there is no way to confirm if a veteran has accessed the survey.

According to Research Director Maffucci, only 50,000 out of the 177,910 members confirmed membership with the organization by completing their paperwork. They received the survey link in February 2014. Of these 2,089 finished the survey during the first half of 2014. Female veterans made up 10 percent of these. Of the survey’s respondents, which included male and female veterans, 28 percent indicated employment as the primary challenge during transition from military to civilian life.

“There’s going to be a population bias because these are active members,” Maffucci said in a telephone interview. “But what our members are saying are along the lines of what the general population is experiencing.” Maffucci said they plan to include additional questions on their survey to focus more on the needs of female veterans and their issues.

“The research community needs to partner better to ask the right questions,” she said. “People often become averse to research studies if they involve the same questions

repeatedly.”

In her 2013 study, Kleykamp does not recommend any solutions for addressing the veteran unemployment rates. “Researchers are always cautious when recommending solutions,” she said. “Despite so many policies and programs out there, the problem hasn’t been solved.”

Raised in a poor family in Palmdale, California, Stephanie Felten knew she wouldn’t be able to afford going to community college. 35-year-old Felten joined the Navy at 17 in 1997 to have opportunities.

With two deployments in East Timor, Felten was also deployed to Japan and spent almost seven months of each year at sea. After six years of living on ships, Felten moved to Illinois in 2003 and worked as an instructor at the Naval Station Great Lakes until December 2005. She now lives with her son and her husband in Round Rock, Texas.

Working a 40-hour week at Austin-based software maker Motive Inc., as a quality assurance engineer is a far cry from operating boats in East Timor and participating in humanitarian missions in combat zones.

“It was a big culture shock after five years at sea,” she said in a Skype interview. “I was not prepared to live in the U.S. My husband was adjusting to life outside the military and I left the Navy with a newborn. We were moving to another state – Illinois – and I was buying a house for the first time. I wasn’t prepared.”

With GI Bill benefits allowing \$9,000 per year for tuition costs, Felten said she had to make a decision to attend college paying \$23,000 per year in tuition. The first in her family to be college-educated, Felten obtained a bachelor’s degree in human resources management in 2008 from North Central College in Illinois.

The post 9/11 GI Bill is an education benefit program for individuals who served on active duty after Sept. 10, 2001. For approved programs, the post 9/11 GI Bill provides

up to 36 months of education benefits, generally payable for 15 years following the service member's release from active duty. It can cover in-state tuition and fees at public degree granting schools but may not cover all private degree granting institutions and out-of-state tuition.

Felten applied for jobs on the federal government's job portal USAJobs.gov without any luck. In hindsight she feels she could have benefited from receiving mentorship from women veterans, who had experienced success with their transitions to civilian life.

She began working part-time in Illinois as the state coordinator for a children's health advocacy group creating campaigns and building partnerships across government agencies and nonprofits. In 2010 she went back to college to get a Master of Public Health degree in public health education and promotion from Illinois-based Benedictine University. When her husband – also a veteran – moved to Austin for work, Felten began working as a substitute teacher in the Round Rock Independent School District.

In September 2014, Felten joined the veterans training program "Veterans4Quality" conducted by Bridge360, an Austin-based software quality assurance firm. Under this program, veterans receive two months of free coursework and three months of internship with local companies such as Whole Foods Market Inc. and Round Rock-based Dell Inc.

Now with a good work-life balance, Felten is able to maintain her volunteer obligations at her son's school and is able to stay involved in his life. She hopes to continue working in quality assurance at Motive. However, the going has not always been easy.

"I have PTSD and that is a huge factor for me, in thinking I can make it to work every day," Felten said. "There's a generalized sense of anxiety and having a child makes it worse. When my son was younger I was concerned about balancing work, family, and my life when I have PTSD. Now that he is older, I have some time away from him when he is away at school."

Though the military afforded Felten the opportunity to go to college, normalcy was what

she sought when she left the Navy.

“Sometimes you are just tired of people,” she said. “It is a relief to not have any of those close relationships that you develop in the military.”

Felten has always felt uncomfortable identifying herself as a veteran because of people’s misplaced national pride.

“I’m not a hero. I didn’t want the attention,” she said. “When people say, ‘You are a hero. Thanks for serving,’ I find that discomfoting. I joined the Navy because it was an opportunity for me, and not because I was super-patriotic. I didn’t do anything special. I was successful and worked hard but I didn’t put my life on the line.”

Felten’s issue with self-identification serves as a significant barrier to employment. According to a September 2014 study titled “Women Veterans: The Long Journey Home” released by the Disabled American Veterans foundation, a national veterans advocacy group, women tend to not self-identify as veterans. The reasons for doing so are many and unique to the transitioning woman service member.

“It’s tricky finding those women that do not refer to themselves as veterans,” said Nancy Glowacki at the Labor Department in a telephone interview. “We recommend that all service providers including the V.A. change their interview questions during the initial intake process. Instead of asking the woman, ‘Are you a veteran?’ ask her if she has ever served in the military. We find that that provides a much better outcome of women identifying themselves. Sometimes changing a simple question can really make a big difference.”

Evan Guzman, head of military programs and veteran affairs at Verizon, said in a telephone interview that veteran employees are encouraged to self-identify once they are hired at the company.



“When you are a woman in the military, people tend to think a certain way about you,” he said.

After leaving the Army in June 2005, Kayla Williams took up her first civilian government contractor job as an Arabic linguist with McNeil Technologies Inc. in January 2006. She applied through IntelligenceCareers Inc., a website for defense industry jobs.

In August 2007 she left her job at McNeil Technologies to work with RAND as a project associate. At RAND, 38-year-old Williams conducts research and analysis, and manages teams of researchers.

She has written two memoirs about being a young woman in the Army serving in Iraq and about her relationship with her husband who suffered from severe PTSD after returning from Iraq.

Though her uncles had served in the military, the Ohio native never imagined the Army to be a fit for her at 23 with her rebellious attitude and anti-authoritarian streak.

“I was involved in the rock scene in high school and dyed my hair purple,” Williams said in a Skype interview. “But I was looking for money because I had grown up poor and on food stamps. I also felt this need to give back to the community and get outside of my comfort zone.”

An English literature major from Columbus, Ohio, Williams enlisted and joined the Army in 2000 as an Arabic linguist, after basic combat training and language training at the Defense Language Institute in Monterrey, California. She wanted to learn a new language and serve in the military and was randomly assigned to learn Arabic for 63 weeks.

During the initial invasion in March 2003, there was a huge need for Arabic speakers and Williams was deployed to Iraq immediately.

“Getting to translate between the local population and the U.S. forces was rewarding,” she said. “I could see the immediate difference I was making. As a woman I was able to interact with the Iraqi women, that would have been a lot harder for the male soldiers to do especially since it was a different culture with restrictions.”

Trained as a voice intercept operator, Williams did not believe in the war when 9/11 happened. “It seemed that the reasons we were being given for the war in Iraq were disingenuous,” she said.

The stresses of the combat zone surfaced in Williams’ personal and professional relationships.

“I experienced sexual harassment,” Williams said. “It was a serious violation of trust on the one hand and on the other hand, I know that the same soldier who had sexually harassed me would have risked his life for me. I did not formally report the incident because I didn’t know the extent to which it might have been a result of the extreme stresses of the environment.” Williams’ colleagues also talked her out of reporting the incident.

For Williams, living in a war zone revolved around combating roadside bombs and explosive devices and spending hours at a stretch on the side of a mountain with close to 30 male soldiers. But she also found love. She met Staff Sergeant Brian McGough – now her husband – in 2003. In October that year when they were becoming close, McGough was severely injured when an IED went off by the side of the road. Shrapnel from the explosion embedded itself in his skull and the incident left McGough with physical and cognitive problems as well as PTSD.

Williams had planned to serve a few years in the Army and then leave. But when the time came to make the decision, she said her Army unit had been reorganized leaving her and others without someone to counsel them to stay on. Without anyone offering incentives to stay on active duty, Williams decided to leave the military to help her husband recover.

“I was watching him slip through the cracks and the services and support that should have been in place to help him, just didn’t exist,” Williams said in the Skype interview. “We reached a point in our relationship where if I didn’t get out of the military and help him recover, he might have not made it. I was afraid he would either die or become homeless.”

The transition from military to civilian life was not an easy one.

“I had a hard time adjusting to America again,” Williams said. “To go through this powerful experience and to come home to people who were oblivious of a war and of the troops serving made me feel invisible as a woman veteran. It was tough from being in the military to being a civilian, and from being a sergeant to being a military spouse and caregiver. I felt insecure in my new role.”

Williams stayed by her husband’s side while he received treatment at the Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Bethesda, Maryland.

Now with two children aged 3 and 5, Williams’ day begins at 6 a.m. with the children being shepherded to day care and school followed by eight hours of work at RAND.

“Last year we spent \$26,000 on day care and they do not go to a fancy day care,” she said in the Skype interview. “If I didn’t have a high-paying job, we wouldn’t be able to afford it. If I were unemployed I wouldn’t be able to pay to keep my kids in day care while I

looked for or worked at a job. Child care can be one of the biggest barriers that prevents women veterans from finding employment.”

Time is at a premium for 47-year-old Heidi Martin as she spends a regular week answering phone calls and 300 emails a day. Martin helps veterans obtain federal jobs at the V.A. through the federal job site USAJobs.gov and through veteran hiring authorities such as the Veterans Recruitment Appointment and Veterans Employment Opportunities Act of 1998. Martin joined the V.A. in Austin as regional veteran employment coordinator in January 2011 after serving 22 years in the Army.

Martin married when she was in the Army and divorced her husband two years later when her son was six months old. She raised her son single-handedly, and doing so helped her better relate to the needs of female veterans who are single parents and who tend to wear multiple hats: mother, caregiver, and working woman.

In the Army, Martin worked 18-hour days; managed medical supplies, food and water; and supervised 3500 soldiers in 15 Army units. She took her son along to every duty station except Iraq and raised him like a soldier instead of like a son.

“I became a workaholic,” she said in a telephone interview. “I was the first in the office, and always the last to leave. As a female soldier I had to prove that I was twice as good as the male soldiers. I was very adamant to make sure I was worthy of my position.”

A combat veteran who served one tour in Balad, Iraq between 2008 and 2009 and as the highest-ranking female in her task force, she said that she refused a subsequent deployment to Afghanistan and decided to retire because of the strains of serving in Iraq.

“Nobody really understands the true effects of war,” she said. “You can see it on television and you can play video games but until you are there physically – leaving your

family and not knowing whether you are coming home again – you can never understand the impact.”

Martin said she was able to get a job quickly after retirement from the Army, but the transition to civilian life was hard. She applied to jobs in human resources at companies including American Airlines Inc., Mercedes-Benz of Georgetown and Cedar Park Regional Medical Center.

“The definition of a veteran is ever-changing,” Martin said. “A veteran of the Vietnam era is not the same as the one leaving the military today. We are more educated. We know who we are and we don’t need the stigmas.”

A disabled veteran, Martin chose not to visit the V.A. for her medical care.

“I don’t go to the V.A. medical center because I don’t think they get me,” she said. “When I go to the V.A., they ask me, ‘Are you a veteran?’ I did not want to become a statistic and I did not want to be someone who needed federal or state assistance.”

Martin has been taking treatment for PTSD from a civilian doctor since 2009 because the wait times at the Austin V.A. were too long.

“I feel as though I’m getting better but as soon as I think I’m better I take some steps back,” Martin said. “My treatment is going to take longer because I’ve chosen not to take medicines. I felt they were hindering my progress. I don’t know if I’ll ever be cured but I know what triggers my symptoms.”

Martin spends more time with her son and her three-year-old grandchild. She will finish her Bachelor of Science degree in business management from Columbia College this year and will begin her master’s degree in operations management soon after.

Most of the female veterans, Martin works with, are single parents and using the V.A. medical services is a problem when there is no childcare available.

“Women veterans tend to not use the V.A. medical center because there is no child care program where they can leave their kids and thus they end up using their benefits at a lower rate than men,” she said.

In July 2011, the U.S. Congress established a pilot free child care program as part of the Caregivers and Veterans Omnibus Health Services Act of 2010 in three V.A. locations in the country: Buffalo V.A. medical center, Long Island and Tacoma, Wash. Legislative support extended the program through 2015 in September last year after funding ran out, Buffalo Business First reported.

“It’s very hard contacting a female veteran,” Martin said. “She doesn’t have enough time to constantly network and seek help because she is always getting work done.”

Women veterans also often complain that they feel left out by veterans organizations like The American Legion and the VFW.

Dawn McDaniel discontinued her membership with the VFW and The American Legion because when she called her local VFW in Connecticut in 2012, the representative asked her if she wanted to join the VFW Ladies Auxiliary, which serves the female relatives of those who have served. She also felt the VFW’s She Serves initiative insulting because the organization’s email communications used language that wasn’t inclusive of her as a woman vet.

The VFW’s She Serves initiative began in 2008 but was rebranded in 2013 to remove the gender bias, said Rick Butler, deputy director of membership at the VFW, in a telephone interview.

“We didn’t want to isolate female veterans from male veterans, so we just took the label off that program,” Butler said. According to the VFW, the number of women veterans at the VFW increased from 3,977 to 12,763 between 2008 and 2013 as a result of the She Serves campaign.

“The VFW membership is for eligible male and female veterans who have served overseas in wars, and we would not ask an eligible female veteran to join the Ladies Auxiliary,” said Robert Crider, director of membership at the VFW, in a telephone interview.

In another instance, Stephanie Felten said she stopped going to VFW events because there were more men present than women, and she encountered homophobic and racist behavior.

“It was not a comfortable place for me,” Felten said. “I did not share their values.”

Now older and wiser, Kayla Williams thinks differently about not remaining a dues-paying member at these veterans organizations.

“I’m trying to think more strategically about my family, my identity and my goals as a veteran advocate,” she said. “I think it was a big mistake for many of us to not be actively involved when we faced resistance from these organizations. Instead of saying, ‘There are many of us and we are going to prove that we belong here’ and walking away, we should probably have been more involved with these organizations. I would like to do that but I don’t have time right now.”

The VFW does not track the number of women veterans among its 1.2 million members but Crider said that between 15 percent and 18 percent of the VFW's members are female.

Even the Legion does not track its 2.4 million veteran member population by gender and race and instead, uses numbers from the V.A., said Administrative Assistant for Internal Affairs at the Legion Michelle Emery.

“We don't differentiate between men and women,” Emery said in a telephone interview. “We never ask women veterans to join the Legion Auxiliary. Only, if you are a woman veteran and the military spouse of a veteran, you can hold dual membership in the Auxiliary and the Legion.”

U.S. Navy veteran Mea Williams had a comparatively smoother transition with a quick turnaround when it came to applying to jobs in the civilian sector after serving in the Navy between 1999 and 2006. Childcare also was never an issue for the 35-year-old because she was director for close to six years at Kindercare Learning Center, which is a for-profit early childhood learning center and day care center; her own children could accompany her when she went to work.

Williams now lives in Houston with her two sons aged 11 and 8, and her husband who is currently serving in the Air Force reserves.

She finished her MBA in September 2014 and now works as program director at Fort Worth-based Grace After Fire, which works for transitioning women veterans.

Serving as a 21-year-old on one of the first ships – the U.S.S. Bataan – to respond to 9/11 to working as a Navy journalist in Norfolk, Virginia, Williams always had a zest for doing more.



“It was a good switch because it took me out of my comfort zone,” she said in a telephone interview. “I was the girl who never talked but my experiences changed that about me. I was a country girl from a small town with very little opportunity and joining the Navy gave me the money to pay for school and travel, and allowed me to do things I never thought were possible.”

Andrea Marr, a 31-year-old U.S. Navy veteran and entrepreneur, not only runs her Costa Mesa-based energy-efficiency consulting startup Wedge Consulting LLC but also takes out time to volunteer with California-based nonprofit Women Veterans Connect Inc. as a mentor. This nonprofit makes it easier for veterans returning home to find organizations that could help them with employment and a smoother transition.

Marr decided to join the Navy when she was 17. Spending four years at the Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland and five years on active duty, Marr knew it was time to leave the military in September 2010. But adjusting to life outside the military was harder than she had expected it to be.

“We were ill-prepared for the outside world and the rejection was hard on my ego,” she said in a Skype interview. “When you are in the military, you are continuously told how much money you are going to make on the outside and that people will want to hire you right away, but when you get out, the job market is not that great and nobody knows what you have been doing for the last five years.”

Marr had begun her Master of Engineering Management degree from Virginia-based Old Dominion University while she was still in the Navy. She completed the program in 2011.

In June 2011, Marr landed herself a job working on energy efficiency projects at Seattle-based McKinstry Co. after months of applying. For Marr, the biggest obstacle in her job hunt was setting realistic expectations for the types of jobs she should consider.

“I didn’t understand the job titles, and the jobs that I was applying for were either way too low for me or way too high for me,” she said.

Interested in pursuing a career in the renewable energy industry, Marr left McKinstry in September 2014 to start her own consulting company Wedge Consulting with \$5000 despite having no entrepreneurship experience or business training.

Her small startup is already profitable and she is working on two projects that pay close to \$55 an hour. She said she expects annual revenue of \$60,000 in a year’s time.

“The military improved my chances of finding employment in the civilian world,” she said. “But it took me a long time to package everything correctly and find organizations who would appreciate that experience.”

There certainly isn’t a lack of training programs, veteran employment initiatives or reintegration services in the country. Along with the nonprofit and private sector, federal and state agencies have veteran employment training and job search initiatives in place as well. In fact, there are currently 41,966 registered nonprofits across the nation providing some kind of service to veterans and their families, according to the National Center for Charitable Statistics, which is a clearinghouse of data on the U.S. nonprofit sector.

Then, why is it so hard for veterans to find the right programs and organizations that could help them with their transition?

“When you are transitioning out from a place, where for everything there is a checklist to a place where there’s no one to give you a checklist, the challenge then is getting to the

right place at the right time,” said 40-year-old U.S. Air Force veteran and entrepreneur Jennifer Kready in an interview. “You really don’t know where to go first: Do I network? Do I look at online job sites? How do I network?”

The Veterans’ Employment and Training Service is an agency within the Labor Department that was established in 1981 to improve veteran employment rates and services for military personnel when they leave the military. A transitioning service member learns about this agency’s activities during the military’s mandatory Transition Assistance Program.

During the Transition Assistance Program, the Labor Department offers a three-day workshop on preparing for civilian employment. Service members are directed to the American Job Centers, which serve as the link between the job seekers – including civilians – who are registered with these centers and the companies who are looking for employees. Military veterans too can search for jobs at these job centers. Currently, there are close to 2500 such centers across the country, said the Labor Department’s Deputy Assistant Secretary for Policy Teresa Gerton in a telephone interview.

In a telephone interview, the Labor Department’s National Veterans Employment Manager, Randall Smith said the Department mainly helps veterans through the Jobs for Veterans State Grants Program where the grant money goes to the state workforce agencies, which use that money to hire veterans to help other veterans find jobs. The majority of this grant’s funds go towards hiring Disabled Veterans’ Outreach Program Specialists who are stationed in state employment service offices, the American Job Centers, medical centers, or the V.A.’s veterans' outreach centers and military installations.

“Any citizen can walk into an American Job Center and if you are a disabled veteran you can go straight to a Disabled Veterans’ Outreach Program Specialist,” Smith said. “In

some centers they may not be present but there will be someone in the job center to educate veterans about state programs and services.”

These job specialists help veterans fill out their job applications to jobs listed on USAjobs.gov and on us.jobs – a website for non-federal jobs.

“Us.jobs is one place we tell veterans and transitioning service members to look for jobs,” Smith said. “We can’t tell them to go to Monster.com because then we will have to tell them to go to LinkedIn and then teach them on how to go to every possible job site.”

The Labor Department’s grant is also used to hire Local Veterans’ Employment Representatives who network with employers and other nonprofits, conduct job workshops and seminars, and attend job fairs.

In 2011, the Obama administration announced the Gold Card initiative for unemployed veterans who served in the Armed Forces after Sept. 10, 2001. Under this initiative, a veteran is entitled to case management services for employment preparation. These services are free to the veterans and are administered at the American Job Centers, Smith said.

Smith works with larger companies at the national level as the Labor Department’s national veterans’ employment manager to inform companies about the best practices for hiring veterans. He also secures commitments from companies about their hiring goals.

“We try to get companies to list their job openings within the individual state job banks,” he said. “Some systems are good and some systems are not so good. There may be some states where the job specialist doesn’t show up to work. We also cannot fund everybody in every city and in every state.”

The Labor Department along with the V.A. and the Defense Department launched an online job tool, the Veterans Employment Center in April 2014 to serve as a one-stop shop for all veteran employment needs. This tool includes a database of profiles and resumes of transitioning service members, veterans and spouses seeking employment. Additionally, veterans and transitioning military personnel can search for jobs and use resume-building tools and military skills translators. The tool lists all the jobs from us.jobs and USAJobs.gov.

For every job posted on USAJobs.gov, there are 3000 veteran applicants per position so it is difficult to get in and it is a struggle to get selected. A disabled veteran or a service member, who has left the Armed Forces within the last three years, can opt for this application method because it is less competitive. Sometimes if a hiring manager chooses not to post a job on the federal job site then they'll either call or email Regional Veteran Employment Coordinator Heidi Martin at the V.A., for a list of suitable veteran candidates. Martin then sends the names of the best candidates based on their qualifications.

Among the newer government initiatives helping veterans with employment is the Defense Department's SkillBridge that allows transitioning military personnel to participate in internship programs and civilian training, beginning up to six months before their service obligation is complete.

"We are very decentralized and that's how the Defense Department is set up so the different branches of the military are given the freedom to implement this authority in the way they choose to," said Jonathan Weiss, an analyst in the Defense Department in a telephone interview. "We don't do follow-up surveys with service members who get employed."

About 20 companies have signed on as partners with SkillBridge and about 850 service members, including women, have gone through the training. Military installations that have already implemented this authority include Fort Hood, Texas and Camp Pendleton, California. The most impact is so far being made in the welding, automotive, pipefitting, real estate and information technology industries, according to Weiss.

Among the companies providing information technology training to active-duty transitioning service members is Microsoft Corp. that launched its Microsoft Software & Systems Academy, a 16-week training program in 2013 at a military installation in Washington followed by programs in Camp Pendleton and Fort Hood in 2014, the company said in a news release on its website.

Microsoft is a member of the 100,000 Jobs Mission, a coalition of companies, varying by size and representing almost every U.S. industry that made it their mission to promote veteran employment.

Nancy Glowacki is trying to increase awareness among women veterans of the existing services and programs that they can make use of. According to her, what is needed to improve female veteran employment is the elimination of stigmas about PTSD and Military Sexual Trauma and doing a much better job of outreach and increasing awareness about existing veteran training programs.

“There are a lot of different definitions of what a veteran is, whether it’s by federal agencies or nonprofits and usually those definitions boil down to what the criteria for that program might be. That can be quite confusing for veterans,” Glowacki said. “A woman veteran once told me that she used to identify herself as a veteran until she applied for a program’s service and they told her she was not one because she had not been in combat. I had to explain to her that that was their definition of who a veteran is.”

Julie Puzan, the women veterans' employment coordinator at the Texas Veterans Commission, helps other female veterans find their place in the civilian workforce and in their communities by assisting them in their job search. She has created a curriculum for the women-focused transition seminars she plans to conduct on military bases across Texas.

Her seminar will be held this year at Fort Bliss in El Paso followed by Shepherd Air Force Base in Wichita Falls, Texas and Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio.

The full-day seminars directed at women service members will involve readjustment concerns, job applications, what employers look for and how to prepare for job interviews. Puzan hopes to conduct at least two seminars a month at each military base in Texas.

In 2014, Puzan started an online job club by contacting 75 female veterans but she received responses only from nine women.

“Their biggest barriers was time, so for them the job club would work better in the evening and for me, I have a child care barrier because my husband works nights and weekends and so I can't host it in the evening,” Puzan said. “Moreover the term ‘job club’ has a stigma attached. I don't know why but when I conducted the virtual sessions, one woman veteran and seven male veterans participated.”

What she's now decided to do is create a LeanIn.org group and Facebook page where she can share information on jobs and trainings with the men and women hoping this might lead to a better response rate from the women.

Puzan is pushing ahead with organizing hiring events for women veterans.

“When you hire a woman veteran, you are hiring a veteran and you are hiring an employee in the diversity category,” Puzan said. “Companies say they want to hire women veterans because of their skills and their qualities.”

A nonprofit that specifically helps women veterans is Fort Worth-based Grace After Fire, which organizes peer-to-peer group workshops on topics ranging from self-confidence to time management, and notifies unemployed female veterans about job openings in partner companies including Home Depot and Chase Bank. Sometimes these women are also referred to other veterans organizations that may help them with finding a job.

The nonprofit operates in San Antonio, Dallas/Fort Worth, Arlington, Houston and Austin with three locations under development in South Carolina, Florida and Washington. Twice a year, women veterans are able to participate with their families in a Women Veterans Retreat. The largest retreat took place in fall 2014 in San Antonio with 125 participating women veterans and their families.

“If women veterans are unemployed, then they are not interested in coming and sitting in a peer-to-peer group or in coming to a retreat,” said Mea Williams, program director at Grace After Fire, in a telephone interview. “They need a job and once we help them fulfill that basic need then they are more likely to come to our workshops.”

The organization created its own social networking platform called Grace’s Garden, which allows women veterans to interact with other female veterans online. It has also partnered with Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston’s The Lotus Project to counsel women vets on their careers and lives.

The Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America foundation too often partners with other veterans organizations and nonprofits including the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.



Founded in 2004 by an Iraq veteran, the organization with 175,000 veterans as its members is the largest nonprofit today serving veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. It is set to launch its employment and transition assistance program called Jobs PRISM this year. Boot camps are scheduled to take place in Los Angeles and New York City followed by larger pilot programs in the fall.

Jobs PRISM will help veterans figure out where they are in their job search, what skills they need to have and what their resumes should look like. These one-on-one sessions will include training with employers that may include Google, LinkedIn and Uber Technologies Inc.

The Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America foundation is also working on developing its social networking platform called MyIAVA for its members.

“We have a number of strong women leaders among our members,” said Program Director Kate Horner in a telephone interview. “We want to physically engage women veterans more this year and next.”

Social media seems to be the key for veterans organizations and nonprofits experiencing success with their veteran employment assistance and entrepreneurship training initiatives.

“Before the advent of social media such as Twitter, it was difficult to get the word out about veteran support programs,” said U.S. Air Force veteran and CEO of California-based Women Veterans Connect Inc., Jo Ann Martinez in a telephone interview.

When Martinez – now a mother in her 30s – returned home a year after 9/11, she came home to women who mentored her and helped her get back on her feet. And Women

Veterans Connect was born out of the need for something that did not exist in California in a pre-social media era.

“I realized that other women veterans who were coming back weren’t receiving mentorship or assistance,” Martinez said. “I looked around for ways to connect with other women veterans but it was harder to make those connections.”

One of the barriers to readjustment and seeking employment is the plethora of veterans organizations. Women Veterans Connect has taken a step toward making it a less overwhelming experience for veterans returning home.

The nonprofit has different focus areas. One is to identify champion organizations that are effectively serving veterans. Organizations can opt in to watching a pre-recorded webinar on women veterans. Upon completion these organizations are added to the Resource page on the Women Veterans Connect website. Once organizations are added to the Resource list, their events are available for viewing on the website’s community calendar. The second is host peer-mentoring workshops in collaboration with San Francisco-based nonprofit Swords to Plowshares. Women veterans struggling with readjustment, receive mentoring from women veterans who have successfully transitioned to the civilian workforce.

“Every time a veteran reaches out for help, it takes a lot out of him or her and if anything around the customer-service portion of the organization fails, you may never see that veteran again,” Martinez said. “We are focused on creating a platform that is driven by women veterans and on creating a list of champion organizations in California that are more inclusive of women veterans.”

For the first time Women Veterans Connect hosted a women veterans’ hackathon at the Facebook Inc. headquarters in California in August 2014. The event, attended by 45

female veterans, was held in partnership with the Small Business Administration and V-WISE. This year, Martinez said, they hope to make child care available to the participating women.

“It does not always have to be women veteran-centric since the goal is reintegration,” Martinez said. “The rapid growth in the female veteran population is something that organizations have not been prepared for. We want to work together as opposed to dominating the space. If we can get other organizations to include us in their activities then that leads to better reintegration.”

V-WISE, founded in 2010, at Syracuse University’s The Institute for Veterans and Military Families is aimed at women veterans and military spouses who are interested in starting businesses. For many women veterans, it’s their first stab at entrepreneurship, said U.S. Army veteran and Program Manager at V-WISE, Meghan Florkowski in a telephone interview.

V-WISE’s three-day training conference has seen over 1300 women graduate since May 2011. With 200 participants per conference, V-WISE conferences have been conducted in different cities across the U.S. including San Antonio, Baltimore, Orlando, San Diego, Chicago, Seattle, Denver, Palm Beach and New York City.

Prior to attending the conference, the women are made to register in one of two tracks: the start up track for businesses less than three years old or the growth track for women who want to grow their businesses to the next level.

During the conference, women can pitch their business ideas and participate in breakout sessions that cover topics ranging from economics and law to marketing, human resources and social media. Post the conference, participants can contact the V-WISE guest speakers and mentors for additional mentorship. Six months after they graduate the program, these women are also expected to fill out surveys.

Of all V-WISE graduates 61 percent have started their own businesses and 95 percent of those were still in operation, according to surveys filled out between 2012 and April 2014. Top industries for graduates were retail, health services, professional services and education.

“We do follow-up surveys to evaluate how their businesses are doing,” said V-WISE Research Director Rosalinda Maury in a telephone interview. “If they haven’t started a business, then we ask them about the reasons for that and most often there have been financial barriers.”

Corporate efforts to tackle veteran unemployment include establishing the 100,000 Jobs Mission, a coalition of companies that today has more than 175 companies.

According to the RAND research study “Veteran Employment: Lessons from the 100,000 Jobs Mission” few companies track the relative performance of their veteran employees because they want them to be treated the same as their nonveteran employees. Moreover, they tend to not collect metrics about veteran performance and veteran retention.

Sears Holdings Corp. for example, does not track veteran retention. With almost 250,000 employees, it is not possible to track retention that closely, according to Program Manager of Veteran Talent Acquisition at Sears and U.S. Army veteran George Hamilton.

In 2014, Hamilton said in a telephone interview, the company hired 1000 veterans. Almost 12 percent of the company’s employees are veterans though he said he did not know the number of employees who were women veterans. Sears plans to hire 1500 veterans this year but that goal is dependent on how many of its stores will close or stay open.

Because of its own financial troubles, Sears has temporarily suspended its Troops to Technology program targeting veterans with information technology backgrounds. The company is 18-24 months away from launching the program, Hamilton said.

Information technology-trained candidates have been difficult to recruit because military personnel are not trained in the technologies that civilian employers typically look for in a candidate's profile. Hamilton said Sears also does not make any concentrated effort to reach women veterans.

"We don't drill down into the diversity angle of veteran hiring," he said. "I've met many women veterans at job fairs and they are just as competitive as their male counterparts. We do see a lot of diversity in our candidates."

Instead of dedicated recruiters, Sears sources its veteran candidates in large numbers from partner organizations including the Service Academy Career Conference Series, which is a job fair for military academy graduates; Military Mojo, a company that hosts job fairs for veterans; RallyPoint, an online military network; and the Military Spouse Employment Program, a recruitment and employment platform for military spouses.

Veterans need to spend more time making themselves marketable, Hamilton said.

"A significant portion of the veteran population feels that the civilian sector owes them something," Hamilton said. "I deal with this problem in about 40 percent of the veteran candidates I interact with. Just because you served in the military doesn't mean there are people eager to hire you."

From his experience, Hamilton said, it has been difficult to keep veteran employees engaged after the first 18-24 months. He said hiring managers have to make sure that

their employees are not falling into a rut. Veterans seem to succeed as technicians, auto center managers and inventory analysts, and in human resources, according to him.

Army veteran and Austin-based transportation app RideScout CEO Joseph Kopser said that the problem of veteran unemployment is more than just not tracking veteran retention. He said companies are not tracking veteran status properly.

“If you have been out of the military for 10,15 or 20 years, you should not be receiving the same treatment as the 24-year-old who is just getting out of the service,” Kopser said in a telephone interview. “Companies are getting tax credit for hiring a veteran but if you are hiring a veteran who has been in the civilian workforce for 15 or 20 years, in my opinion, you should not be getting credit for it. Instead, the first company that ever hired that veteran 15 years ago should receive the tax credit.”

Under the 2011 VOW to Hire Heroes Act, businesses that hire eligible unemployed veterans are provided the Work Opportunity Tax Credit, a federal tax credit available to employers who hire and retain veterans, and individuals from other target groups with significant barriers to employment. Employers claim about \$1 billion in tax credits each year under this program. There is no limit on the number of individuals an employer can hire, to qualify to claim the tax credit, according to the Labor Department’s Employment and Training Administration, an agency responsible for the effective functioning of the U.S. labor market.

Kopser plans to hire five veterans this year though 10 percent of RideScout’s employees are veterans. Women veterans have been tough to recruit for the company. Kopser said 29 percent of his veteran employees are women vets.

“We are still small so everybody will notice if you are not carrying your weight,” Kopser said. “We get to handpick our candidates. What I love about working with veterans is that we don’t crib about the small stuff. We simply find the solution.”

Director of Talent Acquisition and University Relations at Kraft Foods Group Inc., Timothy Mote, has seen success with veteran hiring at the company since 2012 when Kraft Foods Inc. split into two publicly traded companies: grocery business Kraft Foods Group and snacks-based business Mondelez International Inc. Kraft wanted to hire veterans in its manufacturing, marketing, supply chain and finance divisions.

“We are getting someone who has work ethics, leadership skills, the ability to work cross-functionally and in teams,” Mote said in a telephone interview. “We’ve seen veterans thrive and they have fit in well with the company.”

To create a talent pool of veterans and hire more veterans in its 40 manufacturing plants across the U.S., Mote said the company created a military talent website in 2012.

The company was able to double the number of veteran hires to 6 percent in 2014 from under 3 percent in 2012. A dedicated recruiter at Kraft attends more than 20 military recruiting events a year, works with the local transition assistance staff offices near the company’s manufacturing plants, and also visits the Great Lakes Naval Base in Illinois for finding potential employees.

In November 2014, the company started their own Kraft Veteran Employee Resource Group to create a support network for their veteran employees.

Additionally, to find women veterans, Mote said the company works with the Military Spouse Employment Program and with other military search firms such as Cameron-Brooks.

A member of the 100,000 Jobs Mission, Mote said the company’s veteran hiring goal for this year is 10 percent – with a new strategy to improve diversity within the veteran

population and make the company culture more inclusive and friendly. Mote said the veteran employee resource group would help the company with veteran retention.

“We aren’t the first organization a veteran would think of joining,” he said.

In the early stages of tracking veteran retention, Mote said employers like Kraft should train veterans in the exact skill set needed by the company. Moreover, he said the government needs to do a better job of assisting service members in their transition out of the military with more training programs.

“Veterans may not have the exact skills hiring managers are looking for but they have the leadership and the ability to learn on the fly,” he said. “The military should educate them about employers they probably wouldn’t think of as being veteran-friendly, and should initiate apprenticeship and internship programs.”

One company that uses women veterans to bring in more women veterans into its fold is Verizon, one of the founding partners of the 100,000 Jobs Mission.

“Every time we create a marketing video, we always use a woman veteran and a male veteran to create more awareness,” said Head of Military Programs & Veteran Affairs Evan Guzman in a telephone interview. “If companies can showcase the environment of trust within the company culture then that can help women vets to self-identify.”

The company recently partnered with media outlet AlleyWire to tell the story of Verizon employee Cassandra Cook, a Marine Corp. veteran, through a 7-minute video.

About 11,500 veterans are employed with Verizon globally and about 1,100 female veterans have self-identified, Guzman said, making the veteran population 7.5 percent of the company’s workforce. The company plans to be over 10 percent by 2017.



Guzman said that the average veteran retention rate is 10 percent higher than most companies with 90 percent of the veteran workforce still working with the company.

For veterans leaving the company, Guzman said that they only conduct basic exit surveys and pay attention to the number of veterans they retain without tracking retention by gender.

To help with recruitment the company has partnered with nonprofits such as American Corporate Partners and Project Transition USA, which is a nonprofit helping transitioning veterans.

Verizon also uses LinkedIn to connect with job seekers. Guzman said they are also working to turn their online recruiting platform [VeteranRecruiting.com](http://VeteranRecruiting.com) into a 24-hour cycle of recruitment.

Rose John emigrated from the Philippines in 2004 and joined the Army in 2006 because she did not have a job and because her aunt encouraged her to sign up. By May 2007, the 39-year-old was deployed to Camp Taji, Iraq for five months and for another one year later on as part of Operation Iraqi Freedom. Leaving her son behind in Fort Hood, Texas was a terrible experience.

“You want to have your child with you all the time, and you always miss your family,” she said in a telephone interview. “But I knew I had to do it because I had a mission. I had to bear with the separation.”

As a quiet person, John felt that she did not fit in easily or mingle well with the other soldiers.

“Our culture, attitude and upbringing was very different,” she said. “I socialized differently and focused only on my work, so some people called my behavior anti-social. I did not make any friends in the beginning of my Army career.”

Living in Iraq was a scary experience but one that she eventually became accustomed to.

“When travelling by bus at night one didn’t know what to expect,” she said. “You never see people at night but during the second tour I knew that we had enough security to protect us.”

With no friends, with the separation from her family taking its toll on her and with another tour in Afghanistan coming up, John decided it was time to leave the Army in 2010.

“The Iraq mission was enough for me and I wanted to go back home to my family,” she said. “I wanted to avoid a deployment to Afghanistan.”

John tried visiting a V.A. psychologist in the beginning after she developed PTSD and chronic back pain. But she soon stopped making appointments.

“Nothing can change the experience of having been in Iraq,” she said. “I had accomplished my mission as a deployed soldier.”

John now lives in Austin with her husband and son. Till 2012, she was a part of the Army’s Individual Ready Reserve but because of her disability she was allowed to leave the Army early.

Though she obtained a master's degree in 2012 in computer information systems from Tarleton State University, John said she did not get a job until January 2013 after leaving the Army in 2010.

"I did a lot of interviews but did not receive any callbacks maybe because I am Asian and my accent is different," she said. "I didn't have enough experience in the field apart from the master's degree and I got \$10-an-hour job offers from manufacturing companies. But that is not sufficient to run a family."

John not only grappled with a husband who did not want her to leave the Army because the job paid well, with PTSD and with unemployment but also with the threat of her husband divorcing her.

"We had frequent arguments and our relationship was deteriorating," John said. "When we leave we are told, 'You are going to be okay when you leave, you will get a job,' but that's not true. My savings helped us survive those three years. My husband started to rely on me because my income in the Army was good but he didn't understand what I was going through."

She said she could have gone back to teaching with her bachelor's degree in education but was interested in positions that required computer skills or administrative skills.

In January 2013, John began working with Flextronics International Ltd. as a Functional Test Operator.

"I did not know where I was going in my career and I wasn't getting a job so I decided to go to Austin Community College and get some experience in accounting," she said.

She began an internship in accounting at The Westin Austin at The Domain in January 2014. In August that year, John returned to Austin Community College to continue her accounting course. She now works as an analyst at Apple Inc. and is simultaneously working towards her associate's degree in accounting at Austin Community College.

“In some ways my life is better now than when I was in the Army,” she said. “I have a lot more freedom now.”

Recommendations made in the 2014 RAND Corp. study included asking companies to consider using the V.A.'s Veteran Employment Center tool to gain information about veterans looking for employment and submitting their company's profile to connect with service members early on in the transition process.

According to Army veteran and Senior Director of Military Programs at Walmart Gary Profit, veteran retention at the retail giant is not tracked. Since Walmart does not benchmark very well with any other retail company, Profit said they haven't been able to segment the data well enough to know whether veteran employees stay for a longer time than their nonveteran counterparts. For many people, he said, Walmart becomes a landing spot and to count these people would skew the data.

“Some candidates have a mature understanding of their career while for some it is about finding support when they get out,” Profit said in a telephone interview. “We have people who are going to be with us for 30 years and people who are going to be with us for six months. At the end of that if you think better about Walmart, that's fine with us.”

As part of its 2013 Veterans Welcome Home commitment, Walmart had set a target for hiring 100,000 veterans by 2018 and since then, the company has hired 75,000 veterans with more than 6000 of them receiving promotions. About 1 in 5 veterans at Walmart is a woman.

“Women veterans are a particular challenge because they don’t always self-identify,” Profit said. “Everybody wants to paint veterans with this one stroke but they are unique like the rest of us.”

For outreach, Walmart uses its military careers website that is connected to an applicant tracking system, an online system that helps the company track the number of recruits. He said the company has hired 75,000 veterans with close to 10 percent of the workforce being military veterans.

“We decided we would not create another class of citizens,” he said. “We would offer a certain level of preference but the veterans would have to compete on the same level.”

To bridge the gap between the military community and the civilian population, the company launched an online community website in 2013 where employees can connect with one another and help each other. Walmart is also in the process of creating a veteran employee resource group. The percentage of veteran employees is the highest in logistics and transportation.

“I’d like to see a more robust public-private partnership across government, nonprofit and the private sector,” Profit said. “I don’t think we are working together efficiently and effectively enough. We’ve made a lot of progress over the past six years but we have a long way to go.”

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