

NVTI Podcast Series
DOL VETS Leadership

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[Upbeat intro music plays]

NARRATOR: Welcome to the National Veterans' Training Institute Podcast Series, where we discuss employment challenges and other pressing issues affecting today's veterans.

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GREG: Welcome!

In this NVTI Podcast we'll be talking to the Department of Labor's Deputy Assistant Secretary of Veterans Employment and Training Service. Mr. James D. Rodriguez. We will be discussing the future of Veterans Employment and Training Service or VETS, uh, and in particular the Jobs for Veterans State Grants Program – JVSG; and the Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program – HVRP. Mr. Rodriguez, welcome Sir!

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Well, thank you. It's my pleasure to be here.

GREG: So nice to have you here. I'm honored to introduce Mr. Rodriguez:

While the Assistant Secretary of VETS position remains vacant, Mr. Rodriguez is responsible for the operations of VETS while appointed as the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Policy.

Mr. Rodriguez previously served as a senior executive with Deloitte LLP to support the Government and Public Sector practice within the Business Operations offering.

Prior to his recent appointment, Mr. Rodriguez served as the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense, Office of Warrior Care Policy, from 2014 through 2017. In this role, Mr. Rodriguez served as the principal advisor on the coordination of recovery, rehabilitation, and reintegration for wounded, ill, and injured service members across the military departments.

Mr. Rodriguez also served as a Director of Government Relations and for Veteran and Wounded Warrior programs at BAE Systems. In that capacity, he acted as the Corporate Liaison for the White House Joining Forces initiative, to senior military leaders, government officials, and nonprofit organizations, increasing the footprint of our nation's Veterans and wounded, ill, injured service members across all employment spectrums.

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Mr. Rodriguez served twenty-one years in the United States Marine Corps in numerous leadership and management positions. He deployed to over 11 countries around the world and served in Operations Desert Shield/Desert Storm, Operation Eastern Exit-Somalia, and Operation Enduring Freedom. During his final assignment at Balboa Naval Hospital, he was the Senior Enlisted Leader/Advisor to the Officer in Charge of the Wounded Warrior Battalion, where he was responsible for the rehabilitation, transition, professional development, and education of service members with service-connected disabilities.

Mr. Rodriguez holds a bachelor's degree in Political Science from the University of Maryland, University College and a Master of Arts Degree in International Commerce and Policy from the George Mason University School of Public Policy. He also serves as an adjunct faculty member in the government and political science department within the University of Maryland Global Campus.

Thank you, Mr. Rodriguez, for your distinguished service to our nation. We appreciate you participating in this podcast and offering your thoughts to the great team who serve in support of JVSG and HVRP grant funded positions or projects.

For our first question, please share with us how you feel your unique background has prepared you for your leadership role at VETS?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Thanks, Greg. Throughout my career, I've been blessed to be part of high-performing and well-led teams, and I've had the opportunity to lead amazing teams of diverse professionals. I'm super excited to now lead VETS and believe my collective experiences in the military, corporate, and veteran space has prepared me for this role.

One of the most important roles of a leader is to understand what's working and what isn't, and then work to remove roadblocks that prevent the team from performing at their greatest potential.

This organization has the right folks on the right teams, all working toward the same goal, all across the country. And my job will be to clear those roadblocks and empower every team member to do what they do best – assisting our nation's veterans every day to reach their full potential in the workplace.

GREG: That's awesome. Thank you. As you know, HVRP grants are essential to assisting homeless veterans. Uh, because of this, partnerships are critical as the grantees work closely with American Job Centers, JVSG staff, the VA Housing Programs to include Supportive Services for Veteran Families or SSVF, Housing and Urban Development, Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing, the Continuum of Care or CoC, Homeless Assistance Programs, and with other non-profits to include Veteran Service Organizations.

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Based on your experience leading DoD's Office of Warrior Care Policy, what insights can you offer regarding the value of partnerships?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Uh, that's a great question. We are most effective when we marshal our partners' unique experiences, skills, and expertise and create a collaborative and unified effort in support of those we serve – whether it be wounded warriors or homeless veterans. Despite each partner agency having these specific goals, and strengths, we are all working toward the same outcomes. Our challenge is to make these amazing partnerships appear seamless to the individuals we assist.

They should not think of us as HVRP, JVSG, or the VA, but instead view us as a resource working together to provide opportunities, guidance, assistance, and services they need to find meaningful employment and achieve their goals. As we work and interact with our partners each day, remember we are all pulling in the same direction; so we need to support each other, find common ground and make it easier to support the folks we serve. Partners must also support each other by sharing outcomes and best practices to continually improve services.

On a larger scale, I also recognize that VETS can't do it alone in the veteran employment space, and we must leverage the right strategic partnerships to maximize our impact on employment outcomes.

In my role, I intend to work closely with our Government partners at the Departments of Defense and Veterans Affairs, Small Business Administration and other federal agencies; our State Workforce Agencies, and non-governmental partners to include Veteran Service Organizations, labor unions, and industry associations.

GREG: Excellent. Along a similar line, HVRP and JVSG are part of a much larger national effort to end homelessness through stable housing and careers. How will VETS include HVRP and JVSG to take part in this national effort?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Now that's a great question and here are some numbers I want to highlight to give you a solid picture of what we are doing. From July 2019 through June 2020 the JVSG program served over 64 thousand veterans and the HVRP program served over 17 thousand veterans. That's over 81 thousand veterans served by these two programs nationwide. If we are to continue growing in our service of veterans, Local community efforts are going to be key to the greater national effort. I'd say that being part of the 'larger effort' means the following:

Serve as an active member of the Continuum(s) of Care in your area. Learn the needs of your community for veterans and others experiencing homelessness. Meet and find ways to collaborate with other community leaders in housing and supportive services. Contribute insights and offer support if the Continuum of Care uses a "by name list" – if individuals on the list are known to you, or if they might be eligible veterans. Strategize

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with community leaders on how you can contribute to their transition from homelessness and leverage local resources.

Participate in the Point in Time Count. You may know how to find and identify veterans who would otherwise not be counted, so that your community can better understand the real scale of the challenge they face.

Be an advocate for the importance of access to career opportunities in the effort to end homelessness. DOL VETS and their grantees bring a perspective that is often overlooked by agencies that focus primarily on housing and benefits. Real community reintegration for a working age veteran comes from meaningful employment opportunities, social connections, and the income that comes with a career.

Help your veterans tell their stories. Unfortunately, it is all too easy for many in society – including employers – to make assumptions about, and be dismissive of, people experiencing homelessness. Telling – and publicizing – the stories of the veterans we have served who have found success not only demonstrates their potential; it reminds us all that every homeless veteran is capable of that same transition.

GREG: So true. Thank you. What changes are on the horizon for the JVSG and HVRP programs?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: JVSG is in the midst of an important change as we speak. The 2021 Consolidated Appropriations Act extended the amount of time States have to expend each year's funding, which will help increase their stability in staffing levels across fiscal years. It especially helps States that needed to reassign their DVOP and LVER staff to support the unemployment claims spikes last year.

We're exploring ways to collaborate States' JVSG projects with other VETS and DOL initiatives as well. For example, how can JVSG Staff support the Off-Base TAP Training pilot, or the Transition Assistance Programs' Employment Navigator and Partnership Pilot that began on April 1st?

HVRP has extended grants to a three-year Period of Performance. This will allow grantees to serve homeless veterans for a longer time, resulting in a more significant impact within our communities.

GREG: Excellent. We know that veteran apprenticeships are a major focus of VETS. Will you talk to us briefly about the benefits of apprenticeships and the steps VETS is taking to promote apprenticeship opportunities?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: I feel apprenticeship opportunities in general may benefit from broader advertising. How many individuals know that apprenticeships can provide individuals with stackable credentials including earning college credit? Or that the

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average starting salary after an apprentice completes an apprenticeship program is \$70,000, and that completing a registered apprenticeship program can lead to earning \$300,000 or more over a career? Currently 94% of registered apprentices retain employment upon completion of their apprenticeship program. This is a very, very high number that we really want to emphasize.

We need to help get the word out, get more employer and trade groups onboard and streamline the application and enrollment process. New and emerging technologies will create a demand for workers with new skills, and apprenticeships will help fill that demand while at the same time provide excellent career opportunities for the people we assist.

GREG: Thank you. Are there any other recently launched or upcoming projects or initiatives at VETS that you would like to share with our audience?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Yes! And I'm excited about our increased role in TAP with our upcoming Employment Navigator and Partnership Pilot – or ENPP – that we are implementing in April at 13 installations worldwide to include Germany and Japan.

These Employment Navigators will provide a personalized service to help transitioning service members while they are still in uniform answer that all important question: “What do I want to do after military service” and then connect them to the right partner or resource to begin that journey. We do not want to duplicate the many employment services provided by our partners. Instead we want to connect transitioning service members to the programs and services which make the most sense to help that particular service member realize his or her ambitions.

VETS also has a new monthly series of career workshops to provide employment assistance to military spouses. These virtual workshops began in February and are open to all military spouses. We are referring to this curriculum as Transition Employment Assistance for Military Spouses – or commonly referred, via the acronym – as TEAMS.

I am grateful that President and First Lady Biden are bringing back Joining Forces, a team that supports service members, veterans and military families. Joining Forces works hand-in-hand with public and private partnerships and VETS will play a key role in support of the White House's veteran and military spouse employment efforts.

I think many of you are aware of the HIRE Vets Medallion Award – the only federal award that recognizes employers who hire, retain and support veterans. The 2021 Application period opened the end of January and closes on April 30th.

This HIRE Vets Medallion award not only recognizes employers who hire, retain and support veterans, but helps veterans find employers where they'll thrive. We've added to the transition curriculum a demonstration of how transitioning service members can

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access our interactive map on HIREVets.gov to locate employers in their desired locations who have earned the HIRE Vets Medallion Award. This tool helps a transition service member or veteran identify a proven “Veteran ready” employer and in so doing facilitates a more focused employment search.

And I would greatly appreciate LVERs encouraging employers to apply. And for the grantees, please note that non-profits may apply as well! I encourage you to apply online at HIREVets.gov.

GREG: I’ve been doing this a long time, and these are really, really exciting programs and initiatives that are taking place here. This is awesome. Mr. Rodriguez, thank you so much for joining us today. Before we finish this podcast, is there anything else you’d like to say to our JVSG and HVRP listeners?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Yes, and, uh, thank you for the opportunity. We are very aware that the pandemic has hit us all hard. We’ve had to perform in a demanding environment to serve our veterans and I’m proud of how our teammates across the country had to quickly pivot to a virtual environment and to also assist with unemployment claims in many states.

Now is the time to be bold and innovative! We will not forget the trailblazing innovators who laid the foundation on which we now build. But we must look forward. We must communicate and create new pathways and opportunities for the individuals we assist. We can do that by growing and strengthening the partnerships and collaborations we have in place. We are a world-class organization of dedicated professionals doing vital work to serve our veterans and I am humbled and honored to be a part of this amazing team!

GREG: Outstanding. Thank you again for joining us for today’s podcast, Mr. Rodriguez. Remember to find this and other podcasts under Resources at NVTI.org. We invite you to continue the conversation at *Making Careers Happen for Veterans: Community of Practice*. Thank you.

[Upbeat outro music plays]

NARRATOR: This podcast is brought to you by the National Veterans’ Training Institute, whose mission is to further develop and enhance the professional skills of veterans’ employment and training service providers throughout the United States. This program is funded by the U.S. Department of Labor Veterans Employment & Training Service and administered by Management Concepts.

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