

Intro: Welcome to the National Veterans' Training Institute podcast series, where we discuss pressing issues affecting today's veterans.

Host: Hello and welcome to today's NVTI podcast Serving Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander, or AANHPI, veterans. I'm your host, Hannah, and we are really excited to learn more about this diverse population of veterans and best practices to serve them from this amazing panel today. We are really pleased to have you all with us, and to get us started, let's just take a couple of moments to get you to introduce yourselves. Tell us a little bit about where you're from, your role, and how you serve veterans. Ron, I think we'll go with you first, if that's OK.

Ron: Yes, Hannah. Thank you. I'm Ron Sagudan, and I am the Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander veteran liaison at the Department of Veterans Affairs, Office of the Secretary, the Center for Minority Veterans, or CMV for short. Our center is established by public law 103-446, in November 1994. As the Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander veteran liaison, I serve as the advocate for AANHPI veterans and all veterans by conducting outreach and engagement activities to promote awareness and use of VA benefits and services to our veterans, their families, caregivers, and survivors.

Danielle: Hello. I'm Colonel Danielle Ngo, thank you for inviting me today. I was originally born in Vietnam and grew up in Massachusetts. I joined the Army when I was 17, and I served for 34 total years, part of those enlisted, and the rest as an engineer officer. I retired just last year. And besides commanding at various levels of engineering, I served time at NATO, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in Belgium, a fellowship at a Washington, DC think tank, and as an Inspector General. Currently, I serve as the Vice President for the nonprofit Japanese American Veterans Association, or JAVA for short. This organization is an advocate for all veterans with Congress on policy and entitlements, educating the public on the Japanese American experience during World War II, and perpetuating the memory and history of its veterans. Thanks for having me.

Jeanette: Hello everyone, this is Jeanette Yih Harvie. I'm a Research Associate with the D'Aniello Institute for Veterans and Military Families, or IVMF, at Syracuse University. IVMF was founded as higher education's first interdisciplinary academic institution. We focused on advancing the lives of the nation's military veterans and their families. We deliver class-leading training programs and services to the military-connected community at largely no cost to participants in support of the transition from military to civilian life and beyond. And my research at IVMF focused on a wide variety of military family quality of life topics, Asian American veterans in service and transition, and the role of veterans in U.S. politics. I have an academic background and training in political science, and I was previously on the faculty at CalState LA. I'm also a military kid and military spouse and have lived in three continents, three countries, and eight states so far. Thanks for having me this morning.

Ramon: Aloha, I'm Ramon Ruiz, United States Air Force (Retired). I served 24 years. I was born in Kalihi, Hawaii, and blessed with the ancestry of my mother's side that goes as far back as my great, great grandparents who immigrated from Puerto Rico to Hilo, HI in the 1900s to work on the plantations. I lived in the Republic of South Korea and the Philippines during my military career. I also lived in or visited seventeen other countries. Together with my family, we have had the opportunity to live in the mainland Japan, as well as in Okinawa, and have interacted welcomingly with the cultures there. My family and I have had the opportunity to share the Hawaiian culture when I served as the president of the Hawaii Club at Misawa Air Base, Japan. We danced hula and sang Hawaiian songs, entertaining the Japanese population as we also learned about their culture. After I retired from Hickam Air Force Base, Hawaii, I became an Employment Service Specialist III, DVOP, which is a Disabled Veteran Outreach Program Specialist. I worked closely with the Refocusing Initiative mandated by the U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration and Veterans' Employment and Training Service, to provide intensive services and long-term case management to eligible veterans and spouses until 2019. At this time, I became an Employment Service Specialist IV, which is a LVER, Local Veteran Employment

Representative. As a LVER, I have the daily challenge of developing relationships with employers, recruiters and HR staff and business owners considering their employment needs while simultaneously keeping the focus on our veterans in Hawaii and their employment. Some of the organizations affiliated with the Hawaii Department of Labor and Industrial Relations, or DLIR, at the American Job Center or AJC, are the Business Engagement Teams, the Military and Veterans' Affairs Committee, the Disability: IN Hawaii, the Hispanic Chambers of Commerce, the Hawaii Chambers of Commerce, and the Vet Center in Kapolei, which I was part of the Kapolei Advisory Committee, pre-COVID. I was recently appointed to the State Rehabilitation Council, or the SRC, for the Governor of Hawaii.

Host: Like I said, folks, this is an amazing panel today. Thank you all so much for joining us. Over the past few years, we know the White House has made promoting the safety and equity for Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander communities a top priority. With approximately 300,000 Asian American, Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander veterans in the United States, we have to ensure that they are all receiving the best care and support possible. Understanding that these veterans trace their heritage to over thirty countries is very, very important to the conversation. So, let's start off by talking about how veteran service providers can incorporate culturally competent practices to best serve a wide array of backgrounds.

Danielle: Yes, Hannah, it's difficult to combine a group this large because although there are some similarities, each community has its own distinctive culture and traditions. It's like trying to say that people in the Middle East are the same or Europeans are the same, and we know that's not true. This is the biggest takeaway from this question that providers and services need to understand. They will need to dig deeper than the stereotypes to understand the veteran. Involve groups like JAVA and other cultural veterans' groups and discussions on policy and implementation, and really try to understand each individual group as smaller groups and as individuals.

Ron: I agree, Danielle. At the Center for Minority Veterans, we acknowledge the diversity of all veterans and value their strength and their uniqueness, and how it contributes to our great nation. VA service providers should always recognize veterans for their individuality. Like you said, Hannah, there are well over 30 countries, and with these countries there may be many different ethnicities, dialects, and religions practiced. Many Asian American and Pacific Islanders address themselves by where they're from, for example, Hawaiians, Chamorros, Chinese, Filipino, and Korean. On the other hand, many may be AANHPI veterans who were born in the U.S. as well, and their families have migrated to the U.S. several generations ago. Their heritage comes from Asia or the Pacific, but America is their birthplace. Similar, but different, are Hawaiians and U.S. territories. They are Americans and address themselves as Hawaiian and Chamorro and Samoan. I've never addressed myself as AANHPI or Asian. I've always considered myself as Filipino American. Recognizing their identity. Never assume anything, if you don't know, just ask respectfully. the AANHPI veteran is not monolithic and can be so different in many ways, but similar in other ways. Since coming to my position, I became a student as well. I tried educating myself on different cultures and ethnicities. For example, I learned about how the government sent Japanese Americans in the continental U.S. to internment camps during World War II. Also, I learned about American Samoans not having birthright citizenship, and how they have to come to the United States to apply to be U.S. citizens. I've learned the Philippines was once a U.S. territory, but later became independent and that Filipinos also served in the United States Armed Forces in the Far East in World War II. Also, when outreaching to AANHPI veterans in their communities, I also try to educate and engage myself with the AANHPI veterans to learn their culture and their history. Being genuine and open to learning different cultures are always a good step. Veteran service providers must be understanding of all veterans. It is also important to not be swayed by stereotypes and biases.

Jeanette: To add to what the others have shared, broadly speaking, I think cultural competence in regard to AANHPI veterans is not just about recognizing their heritage or

ethnicity or race. It's also being sensitive to the varying history of immigration, political incorporation into the U.S., and service-related experiences for those specific ethno-racial groups.

Ramon: I agree that it's virtually impossible to cover that many, nor is it feasible to do so. The veteran service providers should understand that differences in cultures exist. Also, the chance that someone living in Hawaii, the Pacific, may embrace their own culture more, so it is important to be aware of the level of impact that their culture may have on their veterans. It is important to understand key approaches, "the dos and don'ts," and it's okay to ask the veteran to share a little more about the culture they embrace.

Host: Those are great points. Thank you. We've come a long way in recognizing, as a society, that representation is so important for all groups. So how can veteran service providers ensure that AANHPI veterans see themselves represented in the spaces where they come for support and assistance?

Jeanette: Since I've mostly worked in higher ed, I will borrow a bit from my experiences there. I think people feel seen and represented when the service providers, administrators, or faculty they interact with acknowledge their individuality and needs as veterans. For example, I used to have students who have to drill or work on the weekends because they also serve in the California State National Guard, and I do my best to structure my courses' assignments so that these students are not scrambling to accomplish class assignments after they've been working the whole weekend. Acknowledging that they have different needs and being willing to help work around those challenges are all steps to help students be successful in school and in service. Additionally, veteran students appreciate dedicated administrators on college campuses who can help them with benefits and other needs. They also appreciate the ability to find their own people, so to speak, through these social nodes. I think this may be similar for AANHPI veterans, which is knowing service providers are cognizant of their needs and the struggles and have dedicated liaisons or staff that can be supportive and

provide assistance. They all help with helping AANHPI veterans feel represented and heard.

Danielle: I wanted to add on to what Jeanette just said. When I was in college, I really was grateful for the Veterans Affairs Office at the school, and I think that's something that Jeanette was talking about that needs to keep being utilized because those are the first people really that the veterans in colleges turn to. So, knowing that there are groups who get to provide input into policies and procedures for veteran services, I think it's important, for example, that JAVA has a representative at Veterans Affairs meetings and we have a seat at the table. The members are then informed about the VA's new initiatives, events, and updated resources for veterans. We are also invited to join in signing letters to Congress with other organizations to help advocate for veteran support. JAVA also works together with other nonprofits and government agencies, and we provide a newsletter with up-to-date information based on these meetings for veteran members and their families. Then veterans have information that they need and hopefully feel more empowered and supported that way in the future.

Host: Person first. That's a huge takeaway, no matter who you are working with. Thank you again. I want to talk about that topic a little bit more. And for starters, why is it important to empower AANHPI veterans to feel comfortable about their racial or ethnic heritage, and beyond that, what are some ways veteran service providers can help these veterans with that?

Ramon: Veterans, like anyone ideally, should always feel proud about their heritage. Nothing is worse than being in a place where you do not feel you have a heritage. This is what many of us non-Hawaiians may have felt at least once. The longer your heritage goes back, the more you feel you belong. One's heritage is important, and you can always find something good in everyone's heritage. As veteran service providers, I think if we listen and treat veterans as unique individuals, they will feel comfortable talking about their heritage and culture and how it affects their transition or job search.

Ron: VSPs must show commitment to the community and earn their trust. When the budget allows, I try to immerse myself in AANHPI community by attending different community meetings and introducing myself to their community leaders and even ventering at the vendor tables at their events. This would grow my network and increase my outreach through word of mouth. I often get referred by the community to their veterans. Investing your time in the AANHPI community and learning the issues affecting them speaks volumes to the community. Like they say, it adds skin in the game. Veterans who feel that their service providers see and understand them will usually feel more comfortable with themselves in the process.

Danielle: Veteran service providers should connect veterans with other veterans or agencies of similar cultures for peer-to-peer mentorship and advice with someone who has already navigated some of the obstacles and challenges of the system. One of the best ways to feel that your heritage is given recognition and importance is to see others who look like you either succeeding or getting the proper treatment that they deserve. Whether it's seeing someone getting an award or seeing someone as an honorary speaker or seeing someone get support at a veteran's event, just seeing someone like you getting the help or recognition may make it easier for you to step forward yourself to get the help that you need. And networking and recommending mentors is an important part of this process.

Jeanette: I think some of the other panelists have touched on this, but I believe it may have to do with the rapport building between vets and their providers. If veterans don't feel like their providers understand or care, they might not share their needs and challenges with those providers. And sometimes there are ways to accommodate different needs, such as the need for flexibility in their schedules due to caregiving responsibilities, as this can be a huge barrier for those in the so-called sandwich generation, who essentially, these are people who have caretaking responsibilities for both children and elders. These accommodations and problem solving can't happen if vets don't feel like they can talk to their providers about challenges. As Ron said, getting

to know the veterans and their communities is so important so that they can feel supported and understood.

Host: I absolutely see your points and I'm actually going to repeat, kind of foot stomp, one important point there, and that was veterans who feel that service providers see and understand them will usually feel more comfortable. It really is about getting to know the whole person. What challenges might this veteran population face as they navigate their available benefits, like medical care, employment support, housing, and such? And how can veteran service providers assist in making this process more transparent? And frankly accessible, to use your word.

Ron: AANHPI veterans have many challenges depending on where they are located. For Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander veterans that are on island, a major challenge is access to benefits, medical care, and employment because of them being in rural environment with limited access to even some of the basic necessities. There is a need for transportation assistance due to costs involved in traveling to access their benefits. Even though they were recruited from the islands to join the military, it can be very difficult to meet the veteran service providers when they leave the military and return home. The veterans in CONUS or on Hawaii may be siloed in their own communities. Some live in communities where they feel comfortable, speak the same language, and share the same culture. These communities will cater to their every need because they have their own clinics, their pharmacies, and grocery stores. They'll stay in their AANHPI community before using their veterans benefits and services. For AANHPI veterans culture plays a role in obtaining these benefits. They will not take a job outside of their area because it would be away from their community or their family. They would rather settle for a lesser position. Although it may not be an issue for the veteran, there can be a language barrier for their family members, so VSPs should understand the environment of the Asian American, Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander veterans. Many company positions are becoming virtual, which could allow those in more remote areas access to better jobs. Having programs that will give them tools to work in a virtual

environment or be trained in these positions is a solid way VSPs can support the AANHPI veteran.

Danielle: There's so many different departments to navigate, I think that it can become really overwhelming to veterans. I believe an overall portal that is more user friendly and intuitive, much like the Military OneSource, but for veterans, could be very helpful. I know that there is a VA.gov web page, but I think it misses out on those new veterans who are in the gray area trying to navigate the system while in transition. There are better and better transition programs out there, and I'm definitely the beneficiary of some good ones since I just retired. But a transition lasts more than a couple of months from the departure from the military, and I think that the veteran systems and providers need to understand that our veterans need more help than just a couple of months. One good program that really helped me was called the VA Solid Start program. This program reached out to me during the first year of retirement for the entire year and answered any lingering questions I had and tried to help me connect with agencies that they thought I needed. I think it was one of the best programs that I've ever encountered, so we should have more programs like this, and I know Congress is trying to work to pass legislation through that can help our veterans in the future, but they really need our help putting pressure on the members of Congress to push these programs through because it needs funding and it needs money.

Jeanette: Some of the top navigation issues we have seen from what limited data that we have collected often relates to not knowing how to access certain services and that veterans are thinking that they were not eligible for services. In one of our surveys over a quarter of AANHPI veteran respondents said that they need help with benefits and claims assistance, but they could not access that help. So, this is the same for employment and career development services. So a lot of services were needed, but our veterans are not able to reach out and find that help for those things that they do need.

Ramon: To expand on my colleagues' thoughts about helping veterans getting access to their benefits and services, I suggest using other tools to complement the information you share with your veterans. These could include videos or literature on the topics in their language that explains how to access benefits or services. This can help with language barriers or even put the veteran at ease, knowing they can refer back to these tools.

Host: Wow, thank you for highlighting some of those challenges for us. We can certainly take access for granted, and it's so important to remember everyone is coming with their own experiences, perspectives, and realities. We often need these kind of upfront reminders. In some of our other podcasts, we've discussed that many veterans don't seek out benefits and services they're entitled to, and I'm hearing some of that here as well. I want to know some specific reasons Asian American, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander populations might not seek services that they're eligible for as veterans. What do you all see as issues?

Jeanette: In my research experience, the top reasons for not using services that may be available include stigma, navigation challenges, and concerns about the affordability of that service. I'm curious to hear what other panelists have seen.

Ramon: It will depend on the type of service they are seeking. Some are more personal. Some may require parent support or approval. Some may be too technical to understand, and the veteran may be too shy to inquire. Some veterans themselves simply don't feel worthy of the service versus those who did not return and gave their lives. They have to be educated on how these services are also meant for them and how through these services there are continuation of benefits earned like the Post 9/11 education benefits, and they are meant to help them to do better in all aspects.

Ron: One saying at our center is, "We don't know what we don't know." I don't mean it in a bad way, but if you are in an AANHPI community and have a family that will provide you with everything you need, would you ever think about going anywhere else? Some AANHPI veterans become sheltered because their basic

needs are met within their community. Some veterans' mindset is that they are better off than the other veterans and are content with not seeking these services.

Danielle: I agree it could be a cultural reason like stigma or pride. I can only speak for myself, but my family culture does not like to ask for help. Not asking for help is perceived as a strength. The family helps family, and seeking help from outsiders is usually something frowned upon. It would have to be a benefit that outweighs any negative perceptions for me to ask somebody for help.

Host: These are really, really critical perspectives and I thank you all for those candid thoughts here. It's crucial we understand the roadblocks that the population of veterans and really all veterans face when it comes to accessing their earned benefits. As we all know, a good job is essential, at least an essential component for a smooth transition from military to civilian life. So let's talk a little about some common challenges the AANHPI veteran population may face in the job market and, of course, what are some strategies or resources that are available to overcome these challenges? Danielle, will you get us started here?

Danielle: Of course, Hannah, thank you. Some challenges I think may include the lack of aggressiveness or self-confidence that one needs to pursue jobs that they're qualified for. The veteran may be undervaluing themselves, especially in areas that do not have many AANHPI in its demographics or in areas where stereotypes are embedded. For example, one stereotype out there is that Asian American Native Hawaiians, or Pacific Islanders the employees are hard workers but are not good in managerial or leadership roles. And that's not true in those areas, it is difficult to find mentors who understand these cultural struggles or the racism that some AANHPI members may face. In today's market, race is more at the forefront, positively or negatively, depending on the institutional culture of the company seeking employees. So how do we help? We spread the word, enact programs that work, and push Congress to fund them.

Ron: In some instances, a common barrier for AANHPI veterans is the job location. They prefer to stay close to family or their community, and it

becomes an issue if the job location requires them to move. Work flexibility can also become an issue depending on the family situation or dynamics. It is not out of the ordinary for a family to have three generations or extended families in their household. So, if a company is flexible with a hybrid environment or liberal sick leave to care for family members, this becomes more appealing to the AANHPI veteran.

Danielle: Ron, you are absolutely right. I just wanted to add in that in my parent's house, my parents live on the top floor of our house. My uncle and three generations live on the middle floor, and my aunt lives on the basement floor. My sister, who is a West Point graduate and veteran, also now lives with my parents as well. She returned three years ago to America after working in Vietnam and Thailand, and although she has lots of experience, it has been pretty difficult for her to find a job for the reasons that you mentioned.

Jeanette: I think AANHPI veterans are just as likely to face challenges associated with what we call the bamboo ceiling in the workplace as their nonveteran AANHPI counterparts. Aspects of this phenomena include racial microaggressions, consequences of structural racism, and workplace policies that advance the model minority myth, which can be seen in several industry and job sectors like tech, civil services, legal services, and banking. Some of these are top industries and occupations for AANHPI veterans. So while companies and organizations have a responsibility to ensure their workplace policies are not unintendedly racist or lacking in cultural sensitivity that prevents AANHPI veterans from their full potential, it will also be very important for veterans to know that the resources and communities of support available to them so that if they do need assistance, they can at least know where to go to get help to overcome challenges in the job market and the workplace.

Ramon: Language barriers are possible, and the first thing that comes to mind. The second would be the business the veteran is applying for. It may be a corporation with the mainland expectations or standards imposed on a Pacific Island versus a local island store. It is used to that culture, which may have rules and expectations far more

conducive to the business environment. It is important to note that we don't assume the fact that the veteran has one eye missing, that he is identifying it as a barrier. Our counselors also do not assume a veteran's race or culture is a barrier as we service them. When it comes to serving veterans and wondering if one's culture is a barrier, as a counselor with 10-plus years in Hawaii, it becomes apparent. Also, considering our time spent in the U.S. military, we have worked with people who were non-U.S. citizens, and we take that knowledge with us as well to perhaps draw from it in our future careers. As we assess and complete our intake, we learn, at least if there is a communication barrier which may be a doorway to discussing culture and any challenges identified by the veteran. I've helped Micronesians, Samoans, Hawaiians, Filipinos, and Japanese veterans, and those that had strong cultural ties and were either 50 years old or more or first generation to Hawaii, averaging around 35 years or older, those of the same descent seem to have done fine in communicating. I do understand that when the veteran is in their family or parent's home, their cultural influence is the strongest. But I have not seen many examples where the veteran is negatively impacted because of their culture. I think that the closest example of a veteran impacted by our culture is a Chinese veteran who was my client when I was a DVOP in 2015. Having served nine years U.S. Army National Guard and even today, he has difficulty speaking English, which has been a barrier to his long-term employment as an IT specialist. His situation is that he was a Chinese immigrant who served 9 plus years in the Army. At home, with his wife and parents-in-law, he spoke Mandarin and Cantonese, and they live in Kalihi community near Chinatown. He has not found a need to assimilate to the Hawaiian or English culture enough to do well. Thus, he is continually unemployed and in state, city and county employment or low-income financial assistance programs. Many of those counselors do not get engaged enough to get the help he needs. He often comes to me for much of the help he needs, and I try to help him. Currently he does have a Mandarin, Cantonese speaking social worker to assist with translating, but he still comes to me to put his fires out. We have had him assessed for language difficulty because it's hard to understand his English and we learned he has no disabilities in that area. In short, it starts with having a dialogue with

the veteran to determine their needs and assessing the veteran to see if a cultural influence could be a factor when referring for help. An additional strategy I'd recommend is working with other veteran services like USVETs or Wounded Warrior Project which are for the most part veterans themselves and are there to serve veterans seeking employment.

Host: Thank you all so much for the input here and in particular for providing these real lived examples. That's, that's really powerful, and I think there's a lot to be learned from that. Now, although many AANHPI veterans can adapt to common workplace practices and cultural expectations while embracing their own cultures, we do know that differences sometimes may impact them, and we've talked a little bit about that already. I want to dive in a bit more and talk about how do cultural practices and preferences among AANHPI veterans highlight the need for more inclusive and flexible services in areas like employment, education, and veteran transition?

Danielle: One point that I want to make is that many of our veterans, their needs are also based on the needs of the family, and we often forget about this. So often there is a decision needing the approval and advice of the family, especially in AANHPI households. It would be helpful if these services allowed family members to participate, and not just in certain areas, but for most of the transition process and obtain the same information the veteran has so that they can make their crucial decisions together.

Jeanette: I agree with what Danielle shared, and I can speak once again more from the perspective of higher education. When we were surveying AANHPI service members and veterans, we found some of the top challenges that they have while pursuing higher education included personal and family obligations, the lack of financial resources, or financial burden. And given that veteran students tend to be slightly older than the average nonveteran students, and we know this because age difference is one of the top challenges reflected by AANHPI respondents, so what they're saying is really not a surprise. Some of the most helpful resources and assets for veteran success include flexible class schedules, a dedicated veterans student office and administrator on

campus, and importantly, the ability to provide preferred classroom settings and instructions for the students.

Ron: Companies or organizations should hold more events in the workplace to get to know their employees, and this can also be in a small group setting. The events can be within the building, but the main goal is to learn about a person as an individual. Simple things such as ensuring that all walks of life are pictured in ads and brochures can also help the veteran feel more welcome and included.

Ramon: Cultural differences can compound challenges and hinder veterans in gaining employment, education, medical care, and in transitioning to the civilian sector. You have to adapt easily, be more motivated, be assertive enough to ask questions you don't know, and then be willing to find the answers. These qualities or skills can facilitate getting the answers you need, but not everyone is comfortable reaching out to help that much over a long period. Not all services are advertised, and it takes motivation to find them. When you find them, you must be motivated to continue seeking your answers, especially if that's the wrong agency, or if you may need a referral to another agency. When I retired, I did not know where to find information I needed, so I went to peers in the same situation. By sharing their experiences, it gave me a direction. One may not necessarily know where to go first to get the information or help they're seeking, especially if they do not have veteran peers to reach out to.

Host: The theme of family and community comes up throughout this conversation, and I want to highlight that from kind of a different perspective here also and talk about how important networking and mentorship is in helping AANHPI veterans connect with employment opportunities. We've covered this a little bit, but yeah, I really want to highlight this some more because it is so critical. Ramon, we'll get you to share your thoughts first.

Ramon: Sure, Hannah. Networking relationships foster patience and understanding. It allows for genuine conversations rather than merely being viewed as another potential client by the employer or agency the veteran seeks

assistance from. Through this networking relationship, the veteran gains access to a representative of the agency they need to engage with, which may not have been available otherwise.

Danielle: Networking and mentorship are extremely important in today's society, either a former veteran mentor or an AANHPI mentor, or both, could really help you navigate through the system. I've heard numerous times you don't know what you don't know. You will remain in the dark until someone tells you or fails to tell you the best and perhaps shortest path to follow without getting lost. Some veterans have only been in one job their entire career and are now entering a marketplace for a job that is likely very different in many ways. So, they are likely older than the average age of the new workplace employee and without networking, it would be difficult to get the job right off the street, so to speak.

Ron: Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander veterans need for established networks and mentorship is very important. This will give the Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander veterans access to a network focused on helping each other find employment. Having a mentor there to guide the veteran through the process will only help the veteran with confidence and gain an understanding of the employment process.

Jeanette: As Ron and Danielle have mentioned, networking is indeed very important, as it is for most people these days. In our programs offered at IVMF, we have a mechanism for participants to continue to connect to their program cohorts after finishing their certification or training. It's a team of dedicated individuals providing post-program support, webinars, and major networking opportunities that are at no cost to participants to help build connections. They are able to build that at a local and a national level, and it's used for expanding their professional community. So, these are the types of opportunities I think will likely be very invaluable, also for AANHPI veterans to help them build community and professional networks.

Host: I don't think we can really say enough about the importance of mentoring and networking to long-term success. Thank you so much for emphasizing that. What are some resources that particularly that we maybe haven't talked about, yet that are available to connect this veteran population with networking and mentorship?

Ron: VA offers resources for transitioning service members on our website. You can find the link to this and other resources like Military OneSource in the resource guide accompanying this podcast.

Ramon: A DVOP, who is a veteran employment counselor, is a great place to start to access resources. Whether a veteran is seeking employment or not, we have continually been a central point in referring the veteran to the best resource as a solution. I don't see any other agencies spending more time than DVOPs to help a veteran in different circumstances. The VA and other agencies are limited and perhaps have more rigid guidelines. On-island, social groups may be available to help immerse oneself into the community, like the Fil-Am (Filipino American) Club, Hispanic Chambers of Commerce, churches, and so forth.

Host: Knowing what factors may affect veterans when seeking employment and what resources are available to support them is critical. Another topic we need to discuss is mental health. We know it impacts every aspect of our lives. According to a May 2022 report released by the VA's Office of Health Equity, AANHPI veterans report poorer overall mental health and lower use of VA and non-VA mental health services. What factors might contribute to this, and how can veteran service providers encourage their clients to seek the help they might need?

Ron: Family and culture are the center of the AANHPI community. One factor is the family being able to take care of their family is a must, and who better to take care of their family member than their own? Depending on the family dynamics, that also makes a difference. If you are a young person, your elders will play a more influential role. For example, I have heard of a family taking care of their veteran member to a point where they became a barrier to the veteran seeking

care. Another factor is pride and shame or protection. There is a strong sense of pride to have strong family structure and ties. Having a mental health issue is an unseen disability and causes some cultures or families to want to shelter and to protect their family member from the stigma of having someone with mental health issues. For the veteran or the family, they believe this shows weakness, failure, or even shame. They will go to lengths not to talk to people outside of the family. They may seek traditional healing before going to the hospital or to see a doctor. The veteran and the family should be involved because it affects them all. It should be stated that if you seek help, it can be treated, and everyone can be better for it.

Danielle: I can give you my personal story of trying to get mental health services for almost an entire year. The Veterans Affairs, when I got out, did a good job keeping me prescribed with medication during my transition, but it took several months to get a new doctor to evaluate and provide new prescriptions. Fortunately, I never ran out of the medication. On the negative side, I needed in-person therapy, and because of some eye surgeries that I was undergoing, I needed one closer to where I was living, and it was almost a year that it took for them to try to solve this problem. And the VA Community Care is a platform that you can use, but even they couldn't find someone who would take the insurance that the VA had and that was less than a 30 to 40-minute drive from where I lived. So, it just took too long, and I finally had to find my own care. The provider I found said they accepted VA Community Care insurance, but it wasn't connecting, and it took a while to finally get it approved and accepted, and that was only through my doctor pushing it through to get accepted. And I'm not even sure to this day if it was properly vetted and accepted. So, I'm just going to have to wait to see if a bill shows up, but it shouldn't take that long to get mental health services that veterans need. And although they have mental telehealth and that's okay for some veterans, veterans such as myself, we want to see somebody in person. We need that personal connection instead of just doing something over the computer. And I believe the majority of veterans are seeking to talk to someone in person as well. And the difficulty

in assessing care like this could be a factor in what discourages veterans like myself from seeking out the care that they really need.

Jeanette: I will add the caveat with my comment here that there absolutely should be more data specific to AANHPI veterans being collected by both public and private entities, but in what limited data we do have and is collected by ourselves here at IVMF, it is true that since 2020, behavioral and mental health is one of the most used resources for AANHPI service members and veterans. However, a good portion of those who we surveyed also told us that they needed this service but could not access it. Some of the top reasons for not using services include stigma, which is such as worried about what family, friends, coworkers, and supervisors think if they use this service, issues related to navigation, such as they didn't know how to access the service, or didn't think that they were eligible, and also affordability, which is related to whether they can pay for the service. So, these may be some of the reasons that veterans are not able to get the mental and behavioral health support that they need.

Ramon: Through my personal experiences, the VA faces challenges in providing medical care by itself. They do well in maintaining products you regularly need or things that can be automated, like my supplies for my bypass machine or medications, but my journey has not been easy. Any veteran less motivated or capable may be left behind. I had not had a primary VA provider since pre-COVID 2019 when she was tasked to head up the COVID team for our VA clinic. She promised to assist me, but no one told me I was dropped, not even by her. In times I needed her, especially for most referrals for other services which is required, I did not get care. I don't think equity plays a part, and once I learned what had to be done to get a VA primary care provider, I chose to use a civilian one who will most of the time always be there. For some veterans, this may be a little harder. This person may be less assertive, knowledgeable, or even intellectually capable, and this could be compounded by their disability issues that they're going through.

Host: This certainly highlights how important the support of knowledgeable and capable veteran service providers can be. Advocacy and support seem like they could be critical factors to persevering and gaining assistance. Now, we've spent much of our time focusing on veterans and veteran service providers. but we also know it is so important for employers to understand their employees as individuals. So, let's focus a little bit here on how veteran service providers can help employers that they collaborate with to be more culturally sensitive. Jeanette, what are your thoughts here?

Jeanette: This is such a good topic to discuss, Hannah, because whenever cultural sensitivity is mentioned, I think there may be this tension, right, related to whether people are seeking accommodations, but I don't think that's always the case. As a Taiwanese Chinese American person with multiracial, multi-ethnic family members, I always appreciate it when my coworkers approached me with this genuine curiosity to hear me share my unique personal and family history without any sort of posturing on their part. I think many AANHPI veterans are also like this in the place in that they don't need their coworkers to make accommodations, but they definitely would be appreciative of respect and genuine dialogue about their experiences and also their background.

Ron: I do agree getting to know the employee as an individual is very important. One of the first things I do when I outreach, engage, or work with the AANHPI veterans or their families is to just listen. Planning events outside of the work site is one way employers can also get to know their employees much better.

Danielle: Unfortunately, in different organizations and workplaces in today's society, there are different tiers of minorities, in my belief. Some employers will see Asians as minorities, others will see them as second-tier minorities behind African Americans and Hispanics, and others will not categorize them at all as minorities. And so instead of stereotyping, I believe that it is more important for employers to consider their employees as individuals and judge them based on the same merits as everyone else.

Ramon: I feel it could be a great idea to have classes or training for those working with people in the Pacific Island environment. I took one as a manager in a major on-island Japanese company. We learned about Asian Pacific Islander cultures as workers. These workers would be managed by mainland manager styles and expectations, and it was important to understand certain expectations that might differ from the norm. For example, as a manager at this company, I had to help our Pacific Islander workers understand why they needed to clock out during lunchtime and then clock back in versus just leaving the workplace. This was different from Pacific Island norms that they were used to. That was hard for them to understand, overall. The class was very helpful to me and allowed me to understand these workers better.

Host: This has been a great conversation today. Thank you all for sharing your expertise and experiences with us. I think two of the most important lessons we can take away from this podcast are that it is crucial that we actively listen to the veterans we serve and embrace each of them as individuals, I'm hearing that again and again. I would love to hear if you have any closing thoughts for our audience today.

Ramon: Cultural barriers are still there and possible to see today as we continue to open our doors to other nearby countries to include into our military. Here in Hawaii, it is not Asian, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders alone anymore. If you continue to believe that, then your solution will be incomplete, and your program will be considered ineffective. On Maui alone, there has been a large Hispanic growth from more than four different countries dating back at least 15 years. I've served Guatemalan, Ecuadorian, Argentinian, and Mexican families. It's important to take the time to see all your clients as the individuals they are and learn about them to ensure you can provide them with the best support and services.

Jeanette: I will shout it from the top of a mountain when it comes to AANHPI veterans, we need more data. We also need more robust program evaluations to tell us whether some of these solutions that we have been put in place are working as well.

Serving Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander Veterans

Host: Thank you so much to our whole panel for joining us for the podcast and providing all of this valuable information to help veteran service providers better serve and support Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander veterans. To our listeners, if you would like more information about serving veterans, please visit NVTI.org to access resources such as this podcast. We're also constantly adding new materials, so check back often, and, of course, we invite you to continue the conversation. At the Making Careers Happen for Veterans: Community of Practice. Thank you all so much.

Outro: 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 and Training Service, and administered by Management Concepts. For more episodes, visit the NVTI website at www.nvti.org.