

NVTI Podcast Series

Annual AJC Highlight: 2026

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Narrator

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

Rebecca

Welcome to today's NVTI podcast, Annual AJC Highlight. I'm your host, Rebecca, and we're excited to have the recipients of the 2026 Mark Sanders Award CareerSource Palm Beach County with us today. The Mark Sanders Award is awarded annually at the National Association of State Workforce Agencies or NASWA Veterans Conference and recognizes a one-stop career center whose efforts to serve veterans go above and beyond the scope of mandatory service provision. This prestigious award is named in honor of Mark Sanders who, during his career with the California Employment Development Department and in leadership positions with NASWA, was untiring in his efforts to promote excellence in services to disabled veterans. Today we'll speak with CareerSource Palm Beach County, who were nominated by Florida Commerce. Steven and Frank, congratulations and welcome. To get us started, please introduce yourselves and tell us a little bit about your roles.

Steve Gustafson

Oh, great to be here. My name is Steve Gustafson. I am the first Vice President and Chief Operating Officer for CareerSource Palm Beach County. I oversee the Workforce Board in partnership with Frank overseeing the Jobs for Veterans State Grant program.

Frank Mieses

My name is Frank Mieses. I am the Veterans Program Manager at CareerSource Palm Beach County. I oversee the DVOP and LVERS and the JVSG program.

Rebecca

It's great to have you both here. So, to help listeners understand the setting for your work, how would you describe Palm Beach County and the veteran community that you serve?

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Frank Mieses

Yeah, so Palm Beach County is a large and diverse community and we serve veterans from all generations, backgrounds and stages of their careers. So, one thing that really makes our county unique is that we don't have an active duty base in our area. So many of our veterans have already separated or they are retired from the military and are spread throughout the county. This can really make reaching veterans challenging because there isn't one central place where they are connected and many may not know about the services that we provide here. That's why our community partners the partnerships that we have, and our outreach is so important. We have to be visible, build those relationships and make sure veterans know there is a strong network in Palm Beach County ready to support them.

Rebecca

Your team has taken an integrated approach to JVSG and WIOA services. Can you walk us through how that model works and why it creates a better experience for veterans? What did it take to prepare your staff to work effectively across both programs?

Steve Gustafson

Yes, so the program actually started as part of a pilot with the state of Florida where they had a set aside grant for the governor's office that allowed DVOPs to pilot administering WIOA services to their clients. And one of our goals with that was to prove that individuals, although showing up with barriers to employment, can still have positive outcomes under the WIOA performance. And so we proved that through that pilot. And one thing for Palm Beach County, we looked at the state enrollment numbers under the Workforce Innovation Opportunity Grant adult program is currently at 5% at the state level, and that's about in line with national average, which is around 4%. Our adult population of veterans is 12% in the state of Florida, so we wanted to get closer to that. And we've kind of achieved that because we're near 20% of our WIOA enrollments are veterans here in Palm Beach County. So, it's been very successful and it opens up an avenue of giving resources to DVOPS where they don't have to send the veteran away to another staff. They can enroll the person right then and there and give them access to training scholarships, supportive services to help eliminate some of those barriers and kind of just be that one stop shop for that veteran. What it really takes is the right DVOP. The DVOPs have to see the value for the veteran and all of our DVOPs start with they care deeply about this mission and about serving their fellow brothers and sisters in arms. So, it really is that drive on their end to learn WIOA, to learn the rules behind that program in addition to

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their Jobs for Veterans State Grant program to their ultimate aim, which is to see the success of that veteran. So that was really the aim of how it works is because our DVOPs are really dedicated to the end goal.

Rebecca

You described a very intentional handoff between your DVOP and LVER staff. What does that process look like from the time a veteran first enters the program to the point where the team begins to work with employers?

Frank Mieses

It starts immediately. So it starts with the DVOP building rapport with the veteran, understanding their goals, identifying their barriers, and developing a plan. The wraparound services are very critical because through our partnerships and supportive services, we work to address those barriers so the veteran can really focus on becoming job ready at a stage of the process. Our DVOP and LVERs, they work very closely together, we work as one team. Once the veteran is ready, there is a seamless handoff. The veteran isn't starting over with someone new. The LVER then takes it to the employer side, they advocate for the veteran, they identify those opportunities, and they make connections that lead to interviews and placement.

Rebecca

Steven, from a leadership perspective, what stands out about this team's work? Are there staff members or specific roles you'd like to recognize for helping build the program's success?

Steve Gustafson

I think it's kind of touching on what I spoke about earlier, where it's just starting with the team that really cares, right? And that's kind of where it all begins. So, each one of our staff members are really invested in the veterans they serve. They're really here for the right reasons. They're not in it for the money, obviously. They're here to make sure that they make a difference in the veteran community. And Frank has really built that culture, being very meticulous on who he hires. He actually brings his veteran staff onto the interview panel to make sure they fit right with the team. They don't just have the skill set, but they're also a good fit. And every one of our people have just done, they do such amazing work every day. Our consolidated position, Jesse Mejia, our DVOPs. Consuela Benjamin, Vanessa Cardoza, and Andrea Daggs. And then we also have Angelika, who's our former DVOP, who's now an analyst with us, and a former LVER,

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Tory Renza, who was really impactful towards some of the stuff that happened in this award. But they really start with building that relationship because again, they care not, with just that veteran, but also with the community, with employers. And that's what really brings that whole thing together. When all those resources are connected and we build the buy-in within our community, not just with the veterans, but also with all of our partners, that's what makes it work. In addition to that, our CEO, Julia Dattolo, is a retired US Navy captain. So for us, having her at the head point, it really kind of sets the tone for the entire organization. And then all the way down the line, our Director of Operations, Cody Melton, he's an Air Force veteran. Obviously, Frank is a Coast Guard veteran, and I was a Marine. So, it's just something that's ingrained within our organization. So as a DVOP or LVER all the way up your chain of command to the top is another veteran there that understands the mission.

Rebecca

The idea of serving the whole veteran comes through strongly in your work. Without sharing identifying details, can you tell us about a veteran whose path to employment also requires support with needs such as housing, transportation, healthcare benefits, or training?

Frank Mieses

Sure. So, one of our veterans that came in, he really stands out because he was incarcerated for 18 years. He was homeless, sleeping on the beach when he came to us. He wasn't even connected with the VA. So, employment was only one piece of what he needed. So our DVOP, Vanessa Cardoza, she helped him register with the VA, assisted with his disability claim, connected him with the shelters, secured temporary hotel accommodations through our partnership with ReloShare Safe Stays, where we're able to book them a hotel for a period of time. And we provided a bus pass to address his immediate transportation needs. Once we addressed all of those barriers, at that point, then we focused on his career. So, through WIOA and the Get There Faster grant initiative, we enrolled him in CDL training where he earned his credentials that he needed to move forward. He ultimately secured employment as a CDL driver. That success really shows what serving the whole veteran means to us, addressing barriers, providing that wraparound support, which is critical, and creating a pathway to employment and long-term stability.

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Rebecca

Thanks so much for sharing that story. Partnerships also seem to be essential to your model. How have partner organizations helped you to respond to the needs that workforce funding alone can't cover?

Steve Gustafson

Exactly what Frank just touched on. So, we have veterans that show up every day that we cannot meet their needs necessarily on our own. So, if we tried to, even though we co-enroll with WIOA and we have access to those resources, it can't meet the need of everything. And so when Frank mentioned ReloShare and our partnership there, we've worked with United Ways Mission United, and they provided us a grant that allows us additional funding that can be used to put homeless veterans into a hotel while we try to stabilize them. And we also have started using an organization called Care Portal. We reach out to churches and local organizations in the community and we tell them a story about someone we're serving and they commit to helping us on that end. And that was impactful just a few weeks ago. We had a veteran come to us with his daughter who is 15 years old. And they were sleeping in there in his truck. They were homeless and school was starting the next day. And so we had to use that ReloShare funding through Mission United to get that veteran and his daughter a hotel. So she had a safe place to start her first day of school and be stabilized. And in addition to that, we had through Care Portal commit to send us funding to offer another two weeks of hotel stays. We ended up going through a third partner, Adopt-A-Family, and they were committed to pay for continued hotel stays while we stabilized the veteran and his daughter. And so we reached back out to CarePortal and they committed to saying just keep the funding and use it to help the veteran. So we're helping him with supportive services, gas cards, bus passes to make sure that he stays on track. He now has a job. He started last week. So Frank did an amazing job getting all that set up with him and the team. But it really comes down to being able to leverage funds that are more flexible than often offered under federal rules and regulations. And that's again, bringing together those community partners together and those resources available to us so we can serve the whole veteran.

Rebecca

You emphasize that serving veterans can't mean simply waiting for them to walk into an American Job Center. So how does your team build trust and stay connected to the veterans in

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the community? And how has that community presence changed the way veterans engage with your services?

Frank Mieses

Yeah, so we don't wait for the veteran to come to us. We try to go out to the community and meet them where they are. So, a lot of it has to do with the events that we participate in. We build strong partnerships with veteran organizations throughout Palm Beach County, and our partners trust us to follow through and consistently refer veterans to our team. We stay visible by attending and volunteering at veteran events, stand downs, veteran resource fairs, and community activities. We also host many of our own veteran focus events, such as Paychecks for Patriots. That consistent presence builds trust and creates strong word of mouth referrals. So we get a lot of referrals from the VA and a lot of our veterans, they feel comfortable reaching out to us when they need help.

Rebecca

You mentioned Paychecks for Patriots. That's one of your largest events. So what makes that event effective and how do you prepare veterans and employers so it leads to more than just introductions on the day of the event?

Frank Mieses

Sure. So we call Paychecks for Patriots, that is our Super Bowl job fair. It's really all hands on deck. LVER, Jesse Mejia and myself, we work very hard. We bring over 80 plus employers, veteran organizations and community resources in one location. Before the event, the DVOPs work directly with the veterans to make sure they're prepared, confident, and ready to connect with employers and really take advantage of those opportunities. We also prepare employers to understand the mission of the event, so they prioritize our veterans. Veterans receive stickers so employers can easily identify them and connect with them. For us, success isn't about how many people walk through the door. It's all about what happens afterwards. We want interviews, job offers and lasting connections.

Rebecca

So looking ahead, what's next for CareerSource Palm Beach County? And for workforce professionals listening across the country, what is one practice from your model that you believe they could begin adapting in their own communities?

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Steve Gustafson

I think for us, it's continuing to innovate and next for us is innovating a lot of technology into what we do. The latest better program letter authorized states and local areas to integrate technology to screen for DVOPs. And so, we want to increase accessibility to accessing these services for individuals who want that and are eligible. And so through our web portal, we're going to allow individuals to go in, be pre-screened through that portal and book appointments in real time through our software Calendly with our DVOP staff immediately. So they won't have to go through filling out forms just to get access to those services. With regards to how we would say a best practice out there to the workforce community. I think the biggest component is making sure your Jobs for Veterans state grant program isn't on an island. You have to integrate the JVSG program into the overall workforce system. That's what WIOA calls for, and it says it in name, but doing it in action is a lot harder. And that involves making sure that your DVOPs are integrated with WIOA, cause there's such a commonality there, and that they understand at least how to make a good referral over to WIOA. How to access those services for their clients. And streamlining that process so that the customer experience is one that not only makes sense, but is responsive to the needs. Because as we've heard today, we have so many veterans walking in where their needs are immediate. They can't wait in line or through bureaucracy and paperwork. We've got to get them access to these services and resources as soon as possible.

Rebecca

Steven and Frank, thank you for sharing this important information with us today. And congratulations again. For our listeners, if you'd like more information about serving veterans, please visit nvti.org to access resources such as this podcast. We're constantly adding new material, so please check back often. We also, of course, invite you to continue the conversation at the, 'Making Careers Happen for Veterans: Community of Practice'. Thank you all so much.

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