
Let's hire our heroes

By: Amy Pechacek, Department of Workforce Development Secretary-designee

Military members and veterans live by a strong code of ethics and core values that we should all strive for: commitment, integrity, accountability, loyalty, and service before self. In a word, they're heroes, and we want heroes in our workforce. In fact, we need them. That is why the aptly named Hire Heroes Program is supported and strengthened in Gov. Tony Evers' Badger Bounceback plan.

The Department of Workforce Development's (DWD) Office of Veteran's Employment Services (OVES) is committed to connecting local employers with qualified veteran employees. In 2020, DWD staff assisted over 1,082 veterans in seeking new employment through the state's network of Job Centers and connected 682 employers with those talented veteran job seekers.

Some veterans, however, face significant barriers to entering the workforce after transitioning from military to civilian life. Through the Hire Heroes program, DWD, with the support of the Department of Veterans Affairs (WDVA) and the Department of Children and Families (DCF), help these veterans gain needed job skills by encouraging employers to provide veterans with in-demand, transferable skills. The program subsidizes the costs paid by local businesses who hire and train veterans at transitional worksites where they earn the skills necessary to move into unsubsidized employment. Employers are reimbursed federal minimum wage, federal social security and Medicare taxes, state and federal unemployment insurance contributions or taxes, and worker's compensation insurance premiums when hiring eligible veterans.

While we want to assist as many veterans as possible, the current program eligibility requirements are very narrow. Hire Heroes is only available to veterans who apply within seven years of their military discharge date. However, veterans with significant barriers to employment have often been separated from the military for 10 years or more – many are homeless or dealing with medical or emotional challenges that have kept them out of the workforce. For the program to truly be successful, Hire Heroes must expand beyond that seven-year cutoff date so we can focus our efforts on all veterans who are in most need.

Gov. Evers' budget plan repeals the provision specifying that veterans can only apply for the program within seven years of their discharge from military service. It also provides additional funding to help increase employment and job training services for veterans with high employment barriers.

We know that with expansion and investment, the Hire Heroes program can bring positive change for Wisconsin's veterans who are most in need. Our veterans have already served our state and country. It is time that we all live up to the core values that they already possess. Let us give them our commitment, integrity, accountability, loyalty, and most of all, let us provide a service to them. Let's hire our heroes.

To be eligible under the current program, an individual must meet these requirements:

- At least 18 years of age,
- A veteran, as defined under Wis. Stat. § 45.01(12),
- Apply to the program no later than seven years after the date of discharge from military service,
- Be ineligible to participate in the Wisconsin Works (W-2) program,
- Be unemployed for at least 4 weeks, and
- Satisfy all requirements related to substance abuse screening, testing, and treatment.

Eligible veterans and interested employers should contact their local job center for more information and enrollment details. Find your local job center at JobCenterofWisconsin.com/directory.

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