Groundbreaking Veteran Reintegration Study launches

by
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PORTLAND, Ore. –Dr. Leslie Hammer, PhD., and her interdisciplinary team of veterans, occupational health psychologists, retired military, comorbid injury specialists, social workers, graduate students, research assistants and neuroscientists have launched the groundbreaking Study for Employment Retention of Veterans (SERVe), a first-of-a-kind effort to aim the best proven science at the unique reintegration challenges facing today's veterans.

"I couldn't be more honored to be leading this critically important project to help ease the return home for our nation's deserving veterans," Hammer said this week, when asked how she felt about rolling out her five-year, Department of Defense-funded study. "And that PSU is at the center of this is most befitting," she added, alluding to Portland State's founding as "Vanport Extension Center", a postwar urban campus created to accommodate the higher educational needs of WWII veterans returning to the area.

Hammer and her ambitious team of occupational psychologists, veterans and seasoned researchers will have their work cut out for them. Military scholars report that nearly 1 in 5 post-9/11 veterans have difficulty holding a job and many experience family difficulty. But the need for a more supportive workplace for returning GIs may be even bigger in states like Oregon, where military reservists have experienced record-high unemployment alongside a deployment tempo rivaling that of active-duty forces living on posts and airbases *anywhere*.

As evidence of this change in wartime labor demands clashing with the graying of America, two reports by the Oregon Employment Department last year revealed that between 2003 and 2012, as the state's military reservists deployed time and again to combat zones in the Middle East, veterans here exceeded the national veteran unemployment rate 8 of 10 years. In 2011, Oregon's youngest veterans had the highest annualized rate of unemployment in the nation (24.1%), according to a report by U.S. Sen. Bob Casey's office (D-PA). Further, such unprecedented deployment cycles for Oregon reservists are occurring in a state whose general labor force participation rate is on the decline, currently ranking 31st among the fifty states.

That such decade-long provincial statistics as these contrast sharply with the overall national veteran unemployment rate of 6.7%, which presently stands a hairsbreadth above the non-veteran unemployment rate of 6.4%, illustrates how long the news of the day has buried the lead. Multiple reliable sources suggest that Oregon may only be a proxy for a larger generational phenomena that has yet to garner more than a whisper in the national media. Assessing the reintegration success of veterans and active reservists by employment metrics alone fails to explain why *having* a job does not by itself ensure their health, wealth or equal employment opportunity. The question Hammer's revolutionary SERVe study dares ask is: "How do we remake the workplace so veterans can *keep* having a job?"

Unlike much current research on veterans, Hammer will lean heavily on their input. In explaining SERVe's empirical goals, Hammer said, "I don't want to change the veteran. I want to change the systems that make their lives unnecessarily difficult."

To further the societal challenge of remaking the nexus between work and family easier for the expected 3 million-plus post-9/11 veterans by 2018, SERVe recently launched its official website (www.servestudy.org) where Hammer and her team are recruiting employers interested in participating in the study, and where they plan to chronicle their insights, progress and findings on giving veterans a better seat at the big table.

Aside from serving in the Oregon National Guard, Gil Brady is a first-year graduate student, in the Applied Psychology doctoral program at Portland State University, and a graduate research assistant for Dr. Leslie Hammer, PhD, principal investigator of the SERVe *project.*