

QUALIFIED, COMBAT-TESTED, DISSED

Unemployment rates for veterans are higher than the national average. Adding insult to injury, vets' military qualifications garner little respect from civilian employers.

By Amy Stevens

Danna Cravens leans back and crosses her arms over her powerful frame. She brushes a strand of wheat-blonde hair off her face and smiles slightly. Her easy, confident demeanor belies the age on her driver's license: 23. The Army vet is gearing up for another week at Mesa Community College's Fire Science program, in Mesa, Arizona. So far, she's excelling in the course and doesn't seem to mind the strict rules or the challenging physicality of the work—it reminds her of the military. But behind her stoic front is a growing sense of frustration and disillusionment. Cravens had been trained in the military to provide patient care at a level equivalent to that of a civilian physician's assistant, but when she entered the private sector, she was barely qualified to give oxygen. "All because I didn't have a piece of paper," she says.

Cravens served in the U.S. Army as a combat medic for four years. Her military experience included a yearlong deployment to a forward operating base in Kirkuk, Iraq. She can administer IVs, tracheotomies, and intraosseous infusions (injections directly into bone marrow to provide a patient with fluids). Cravens also knows how to suture, how to remove benign tumors, and how to do nerve blocks on patients who need minor procedures.

Today, as a civilian, she can't legally perform any of those procedures. Less than half of the states allow transfer of military certifications to the civilian job market, and that's a problem, according to Paul Rieckhoff, CEO and founder of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America: "We have to smooth that transition so it can happen more easily."

When Cravens left the Army in August 2011, she immediately began searching for a position as a hospital emergency-department technician. She felt confident that, even without a full battery of civilian certificates, her military experience would give her a competitive edge in the job market.

After more than a year of searching, however, she set her sights elsewhere. "I think most companies that see my résumé don't think twice about me," she says. "I applied to five hospitals and I have yet to get a call."

A handful of military specialty certifications, like those for aviation maintenance and heavy-machinery operation, transfer to the civilian world more easily. In October 2012, President Obama signed into law the Military Commercial Driver's License Act, which allows—but does not require—states to remove a number of barriers that prevent service members from earning CDLs while on active duty. Texas lawmakers are currently considering a bill that would allow some military veterans to skip most police-academy training to become officers. These are steps in the right direction, Rieckhoff says, but they're not enough. "Certification transfers are low-hanging fruit that will allow people to move much more seamlessly from military life to civilian employment," Rieckhoff says. "But right now it's a pretty bumpy road."

A white paper published on the



Department of Labor website refutes the idea of interchangeable military and civilian job licensure. Problems related to credentialing stem from “differences in the training and experience obtained in the military and civilian workforces,” the report claims, and adds that establishment of a system that would allow such a transfer would be irresponsible. The paper recommends military leaders simply keep their troops abreast of changing civilian-certification requirements—ostensibly so troops can pursue training on their own time and their own dime. The report also calls for training units to provide “maximum accommodation and support” to service members seeking civilian credentials. But, particularly in the age of sequestered budget cuts, the idea of military leaders diverting their limited operating budgets to support troops in acquiring nonessential certifications seems unlikely to be a success.

Former service members like Chris Gatpandan dismiss such a narrow view of possible solutions. Gatpandan served in the Navy as a hospital corpsman, and he resents the idea that he should return to school for years of training to get a job he can already perform. “Outside the Navy, I am not allowed to do anything medical besides CPR, which I am certified for through the American Heart Association,” Gatpandan says. “No individual certification covers the full scope of practice for a hospital corpsman; the closest for in-hospital would be a physician’s assistant, which is commonly available as a master’s level program.”

Gatpandan currently works as a medical-simulation specialist, prepping and maintaining lab equipment, computers, and material for students at a private nursing school in Southern California. He’s thankful for the job, but says he wishes he could take the National Registry of Emergency Medical Technicians boards based on his military experience. “In an ideal world, I would be working as a paramedic right now,” he says. “I think there should be a program that allows people to at least attempt the exams so they have a chance to continue the careers they started.”

The issue of nontransferable skills is part of a larger, more troubling trend of high veteran unemployment, according to Rieckhoff. “IAVA looks at information coming from the

Bureau of Labor Statistics, from our members, and from our regular events, and we see that veterans are struggling,” he says. “That’s something the country should be concerned about. Unemployment levels ebb and flow, but the bottom line is that there is a huge area of need that’s being unmet.”

Still, for veterans seeking employment and willing to adapt, there is some good news—even in a sluggish economy. Across the nation, job fairs and placement agencies are boosting their efforts to aid veterans. Veteran-owned businesses like RecruitMilitary and VetJobs sponsor national job fairs and host online job postings. In early March, IAVA launched Career Pathfinder, a high-tech tool that links its members to employment opportunities. Pathfinder has a skill translator to convert military terms into language civilian employers recognize, a résumé builder, and thousands of job postings. “We think this is the best solution out there,” Rieckhoff says. “You can’t just build it and hope that they will come. You have to build it in a connected way, and we have more than 200,000 veterans who were able to use Pathfinder immediately.”

The private sector is responding positively. “A year ago, there wasn’t really a national conversation about hiring veterans,” Rieckhoff notes. “Now, there is.” That national conversation has been aided in part by the efforts of special-interest groups, as well as a series of White House initiatives. In February 2013, the White House published a report prepared by the National Economic Council on the issue of nontransferable veteran certifications. The report recommended a number of practices for states and industries to adopt in order to speed up the certification and licensing process for veterans.

The recommendations include allowing states to transfer a limited number of occupational certifications upon proof of proficiency via evidence of training, education, or service in the armed forces. Also proposed was legislation that would empower states to waive licensure exams or civilian certification for EMTs, paramedics, and physicians’ assistants based on military service. These recommendations, if implemented, could smooth the path for hundreds of thousands of veterans who are looking for work.



Gatpandan calls such initiatives “good on paper,” but he believes that employer education is also a key to job creation. He says, “Creating opportunities for employers and the populace as a whole to understand more about veterans and the kind of experience we have would go a long way toward helping us find jobs. I can’t tell you the number of people I encounter on a daily basis whose only knowledge of the military is what they’ve seen in theaters.”

Walmart recently announced plans to provide a job to every veteran who wants one. The move garnered praise from the White House, but Gatpandan contends that such initiatives are almost offensive, saying, “Creating programs that offer vets minimum-wage, unskilled-labor jobs is not only ineffective; it’s a slap in the face.”

Rieckhoff also emphasizes the importance of fostering veteran talent. “It’s not just about creating the next security guard,” he says. “It’s about producing the next Steve Jobs, the next Mark Zuckerberg.”

Businesses needn’t wait for congressional mandates or sleek websites to act, Rieckhoff points out. “The main message for IAVA is that veterans are not a charity, they’re an investment,” he explains. “If you look across our business environment, you’ll see people who are using their experiences as veterans to build great things. Veterans are resilient, creative, and innovative. They’ve been forced to work under some pretty extreme conditions. If you invest in veterans, they will produce a tremendous return on that investment.”