

Supporting Veterans with Accessibility Needs

INTRO: Welcome to the National Veterans' Training Institute Podcast Series, where we discuss pressing issues affecting today's veterans.

HOST: Hello and welcome to NVTI's podcast, Supporting Veterans with Accessibility Needs, my name is Hannah Toney, and I will be the podcast host today. I want to start off by taking some time to introduce our panel. Would you each please share your name, your role, and where you are located?

Nikita: Good morning. My name is Nikita Floore, and I am a licensed attorney and Certified Rehabilitation Counselor (CRC) currently serving at the U.S. Department of Labor's Veterans' Employment and Training Service (DOL-VETS) as the Senior Compliance Investigator for the Atlanta Region. I am a veteran of the U.S. Army and have worked with veterans for the bulk of my career. I am excited to join you today and share additional information about how we can serve and support veterans with accessibility needs.

Nuno: Good morning, my name is Nuno Medeiros, and I work in the Office of Research and Policy at the Department of Labor's Veterans' Employment and Training Services. I am a combat veteran of the U.S. Army and have worked with veterans for the past 15 years. I am happy to join you today and share information about how we can support veterans with accessibility needs.

Micah: Good morning. My name is Micah Foster, and I am a Research Analyst Lead for the Disabled Veteran Program under the Office of Research and Policy at the Department of Labor, Veterans' Employment and Training Services. I also serve on the Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility (DEIA) team at DOL-VETS. My former role was as a Disabled Veterans' Outreach Program (DVOP) specialist and Local Veterans' Employment Representative (LVER) for the Colorado State Jobs for Veterans State Grants or JVSG program. I too, like Nuno, am a combat Army veteran located in Colorado and thrilled to be a part of this podcast in support of sharing information about serving veterans with accessibility needs.

Supporting Veterans with Accessibility Needs

HOST: Welcome and thank you for being part of today's podcast! As we get started, it is crucial to understand the term accessibility. How do you define accessibility? Micah let's start with you.

Micah: I would define accessibility in a couple of ways. First, accessibility to me means equal opportunity to access resources and/or services to accommodate access needs or challenges, whether seeking employment and training opportunities, supportive services, improving quality of life, and so on. Second, the ability to understand what accessibility means to you as an individual and defining and personalizing your experiences on how you see yourself moving through life with accessibility needs is important to understand about yourself.

Nikita: For me, accessibility is a nuanced term. In the general sense, accessibility refers to one's ability to access resources and services fully to participate and contribute to society. More specifically, accessibility is the design, construction, development, and maintenance of facilities, information, and technology programs and services, so that all people, including people with disabilities, can fully and independently use them. Accessibility and how an individual accesses resources and services can be extremely personal and individualistic. It is always important to remember that what may work for one, may not work for all, in terms of creating accessible environments.

Nuno: For me, accessibility includes the provision of accommodations and modifications to ensure equal access to activities for people with disabilities, the reduction or elimination of physical and attitudinal barriers to equitable opportunities, and a commitment to ensuring that people with disabilities can independently access every outward-facing and internal activity or electronic space. Accessibility is one way we can ensure inclusion and equity for all.

HOST: Thank you, that is excellent information, and I think really important for us to get started. Based on your experience, what should service providers, and employers, understand about veterans with accessibility needs? Nikita, will you start us off here?

Nikita: Sure, this is a great question. In my experience as a vocational rehabilitation counselor working with veterans with co-occurring mental and substance abuse

Supporting Veterans with Accessibility Needs

disorders, I often noticed that they did not always want to disclose additional accessibility challenges that may prevent them from obtaining employment or returning to work. The veterans expressed feeling like the mental and substance abuse disorders were enough to deal with and already created many challenges preventing them from obtaining employment. Therefore, disclosing other disabilities that are not visible, and may come with additional accessibility challenges, was a decision they made to prevent being labeled or having to explain further and be excluded from opportunities. Service providers and employers should know that there are often invisible disabilities with accessibility challenges associated with them. These disabilities may have been heavily stigmatized by society which makes veterans apprehensive about disclosing them. In order to provide optimal support and assistance, it is vital to inform veterans that the more you know and understand the challenges they face, the better you can support them. Providers should also listen for the “words between the words” when veterans explain their challenges to understand when accessibility needs are not explicitly verbalized. Often the stories veterans are telling inform providers about how a veteran may benefit from accessibility resources that may be available to them.

Micah: As a disabled veteran, who utilized employment and training services while unemployed, it was important for me to be upfront and honest about the disability challenges I was going through so my career counselor understood and could personalize my career path in pursuit of my next employment opportunity. However, this can be challenging for many disabled veterans who may not want to acknowledge a disability and/or share their disability or disabilities they face every day. Therefore, access to mental and physical disability resources and services is vital to supporting an employment and training goal. It is also important to acknowledge your disability or disabilities and use your existing accessibility accommodations to your advantage. If you’ve had to adjust or accommodate your lifestyle to improve your quality of life because of a disability or multiple disabilities, then that is a skill set you should be proud of, and it shows your ability to adapt and transition into a lifestyle that meets your needs.

Supporting Veterans with Accessibility Needs

HOST: Thank you both for that information. No we often hear about being Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) as well as Section 508 compliant, but often compliance is not sufficient to meet an individual's needs. What advice do you give service providers and employers to create an inclusive environment?

Nikita: The ADA and 508 compliance are legal frameworks for ensuring more accessible environments, but as we know, the law is rarely black and white. With so much gray area, it is essential to understand that ADA and 508 compliance only scratches the surface of creating inclusivity. Creating an inclusive environment begins with listening to understand and learn how one may be helpful. Using respectful language and identifying areas of opportunity to serve are always important aspects of inclusivity. Further, challenging stereotypes and responding from a place of personal experience helps to advance the conversation and keeps it open to all. Supporting differences reinforces an individual's ability to show up as their authentic self and know that what is put out will be reflected back. Finally, always treating others with respect and taking the time to get to know them aids in building critical rapport essential for creating an inclusive environment.

Nuno: I agree, Nikita. Building a good working relationship with individuals and creating a supportive environment is essential. Understand that as an employer or service provider, there may be times that you need to seek external experts and professionals to provide guidance and support. No one is an expert in all areas, so having a team of others to lean on can be helpful in finding solutions while maintaining inclusivity and promoting equity in the workplace.

Micah: I would encourage you to educate yourself on disability and accessibility resources and policies and ask questions. In multiple job roles, I have personally requested a disability accommodation to improve myself as an employee and person. We live in a world where our career culture is changing across companies that are making necessary changes to accommodate accessibility for individuals with a disability or multiple disabilities and accessibility challenges faced by many other underserved communities. Additionally, I would also suggest being creative and offering flexibility. As

Supporting Veterans with Accessibility Needs

an employer, have conversations with human resources, finance, and leadership to discuss job development, job accommodations, and guidance and support from management to produce awareness and accountability to your employees.

Host: Thank you. Another issue we sometimes hear about is that veterans may feel their accessibility needs limit their options. If you would, please tell us more about this and how service providers and employers can work to change that belief. Nuno, if you wouldn't mind, get us started here.

Nuno: It's important to understand yourself, your needs, and your individual values. That said, no job should be out of reach with customized employment. Customized employment is a process for achieving competitive integrated employment through a relationship between the employee and the employer that is personalized to meet everyone's needs. It is a universal strategy that benefits many people, including people with disabilities who might not have found success through other employment strategies. Overall, working creatively can be a winning combination to overcome limitations.

Micah: Absolutely Nuno. It's no surprise that the last couple of years of COVID-19 have allowed companies to offer their employees remote work. This opportunity removes so many barriers for so many people. Commuting, fuel, groceries, childcare, flexibility with schedule, mental/physical respite, virtual meetings, and so on. If your services or employment opportunities require in-person work, then I go back to my previous statement to offer services virtually, creating job development opportunities to accommodate a job candidate or existing employees and providing room for flexibility. These changes impact your employees' or customers' morale, productivity, and quality of life and will likely promote a positive trend. The investment also shows your dedication to the employee and organization.

HOST: Thank you so much; those are some really great points. Working creatively can help both veterans and employers, for sure. In your experience, what role does cultural competence play in understanding how to support veterans with accessibility needs? Nikita, would you begin here for us?

Supporting Veterans with Accessibility Needs

Nikita: Sure thing. Cultural competence is the ability to understand, appreciate, and interact with people from cultures or belief systems different from one's own. Cultural competence has been a critical aspect of working with individuals with accessibility needs for many years. Cultural competency begins with valuing diversity and understanding differences, which are crucial aspects of supporting veterans in general. Cultural competence plays a major role in working with veterans with accessibility needs. That provider or practitioner understanding and honoring the history, culture, language, tradition, and other practices of those they support demonstrates a willingness to offer support and assistance that encompasses respect. Developing cultural competence begins with self-knowledge and awareness about one's own culture and worldview, allowing one to better understand those they serve.

Micah: Speaking to my work as a former DVOP specialist and LVER for the JVSG program, it's important to have employment and training service providers who either are disabled veterans or individuals who live, or have lived, with accessibility needs, or have established supportive service referral partners to assist with working with veterans with accessibility needs. To me, this defines cultural competence. Having this experience or a supportive service partner with this experience improves your ability to create trust and build rapport with veterans with accessibility needs. Additionally, it is essential for the veteran with accessibility needs to share their experience with the service provider to have the proper discussions and provide the appropriate guidance and resources. Both parties should be transparent in these conversations.

Nuno: I also believe it is important to try and understand other people and continue learning. Seeing things from someone else's point of view or experience helps you to understand how to support veterans with accessibility needs. Therefore, continuous training is vital.

Host: Absolutely, Nuno; continuous training and learning is critical, as well as understanding different perspectives. What are some perspectives you have seen as a focus when working with underserved communities? Nikita, would you share?

Supporting Veterans with Accessibility Needs

Nikita: Some perspectives I have seen when working with underserved communities begin with understanding the employment needs of the individual community and the individuals that make up the community. Often, there are challenges unique to an underserved community that may not appear obvious. For instance, in some communities having a close-knit extended family unit is important; therefore, the proximity of a job to one's home is critical in maintaining long-term employment placement. This falls directly in line with cultural competence when working with veterans with accessibility needs. Many underserved communities have a prolonged history of generational poverty, which informs their decisions about employment and what employment resources may be available to them. This is specifically true if a veteran has accessibility needs and is a member of a historically marginalized community. There are often stigmas associated with seeking help which may cause additional challenges in job placement.

HOST: Thank you. We know that veterans may not have accessibility needs at the time of transition, but they may develop one or more later. How can service providers support and encourage veterans to share their needs before, during, and after their transition?

Nuno: If possible, providers can share information about the resources available. Letting veterans know about what's available to them and how to access those resources can help the veteran if and when the time comes, and they need support or service.

Nikita: I agree, Nuno. I would also encourage providers to support veterans in sharing their needs before, during, and after their transition by identifying resources that may be available at each of these critical points in the transition process. Often, there are resources that may have time limitations and may no longer be available if the needs were not identified early on. As a provider, it is best to collaborate with agencies and other providers so that information at these critical stages is shared and processes for applying are understood. Again, having conversations with veterans throughout the job

Supporting Veterans with Accessibility Needs

placement process and after successful employment will encourage continued discussions around how best to provide support and what resources may be available.

HOST: That is fantastic feedback; this knowledge is so critical. I know we have talked about this some already, but I do want to dig deeper into why is it essential to encourage veterans to speak about their accessibility needs? An more into when looking at employment, what is required for a job to truly be accessible? Micah, can you begin here?

Micah: I think it's important for veterans to address their accessibility needs early on as it can prevent challenges later on in life. For example, if a veteran with mental health challenges seeks services through an organization that can offer the necessary tools and resources to assist the veteran with addressing their mental health and proven modalities to improve their access, this may expand the veteran's idea of what employment opportunities they envision as a good fit. These modalities may include assistive technology, training environments (virtual/in-person), meetings and documents but with 508 Compliance, the timing of accommodation requests, promising/best practices, sit-stand desk, interpreters, speech recognition software, and centralized funding to support. The requirements for a job to truly be accessible depend on the veteran for them to understand their boundaries and capabilities. This is important to know based on previous work, training, education, and experience. Work to identify what helped the individual be successful and what were the growing pains.

Nuno: It's important for veterans to understand their values and to understand their needs. From there, veterans need to address their accessibility needs with employers early on and go in with an open mind. Communication and understanding the organizational culture can help individuals navigate what is required for a job to truly be accessible.

HOST: Experience can also play a significant role in how someone assists a veteran with accessibility needs. So what about when someone is new to working with individuals who have accessibility needs? What advice do you have for them?

Supporting Veterans with Accessibility Needs

Nikita: There is an old adage, “Experience is the best teacher.” As such, when assisting veterans with accessibility needs, the more a provider has seen, the better they may be at helping. Often this experience may allow a provider to pick up on nonverbal cues and utilize their knowledge of a specific type of accessibility need to offer support and assistance. For new providers, it is always great to ask questions and seek out experienced providers to discuss cases. This will allow a different perspective and an opportunity to gain knowledge and information from a more experienced professional as one builds up one’s skill level. Personal advice would be that practice makes better. The more opportunities one has to work with and support individuals with accessibility needs, the better they will get at identifying available resources and support.

Micah: I couldn’t agree more with Nikita’s response to this question. I would also add that co-collaboration meetings can benefit veterans with accessibility needs. For example, there is a great advantage to a veteran client’s time, convenience, multiple perspective opportunity, and access to a co-collaboration meeting with, say, a DVOP, LVER, Workforce Innovation, and Opportunity Act (WIOA) counselor and Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) counselor as a team. Additionally, having individual conversations, if “Return on Investment” has been established, with another service provider working with the client and offering insight into details they may have shared beyond your discussion with the client. Constant communication and cultural competence are key.

HOST: Respect and understanding are often expressed in the words we choose. What role does inclusive language play in building relationships between veterans and service providers, as well as between veterans and employers?

Nikita: This is a great question. Building rapport and relationships as a provider helps to demonstrate a willingness to offer support and assistance from a place of mutual respect and understanding. Inclusive language allows an individual to understand that a provider sees them and has a general understanding of who they are or is willing to obtain a deeper understanding of the individual. Inclusive language demonstrates a

Supporting Veterans with Accessibility Needs

provider's ability to avoid using terminology that may be offensive and further stigmatize an individual one is attempting to serve.

Micah: Nikita did a great job explaining this in her response. I would add it establishes trust between you and the veteran. When you speak using inclusive language, it shows you have done your research, are accountable, and provides an opportunity for the client to share important details about their life, which can assist you with their employment, training, or supportive service provider search while considering accessibility needs.

HOST: We know that sometimes veterans may not receive all the accommodations they need for their job to be accessible, or, as we've discussed, those needs may change. How can service providers ensure that a veteran's accessibility needs are being met fully? Micah, can you start us off on this one?

Micah: Be creative about accessibility accommodations if you have flexibility within your organizational space. Communicate with the veteran about reasonable accommodations within the company's policy and continue conversations with your leadership if the request exceeds what is deemed reasonable. Sit-stand desks, speak-type software, noise cancellation devices, flexible work schedules, virtual work, and many other modalities can be modestly priced. In order for change to take place, challenging conversations need to happen.

Nikita: Checking in with the veteran early and often may help in determining whether the appropriate accessibility needs are being met. Sometimes this may require on-the-job observation. If not on-the-job-observation, then periodic check-ins at critical points during a veteran's employment will allow a provider to ask questions to determine if additional resources may assist in meeting accessibility needs.

HOST: In working with veterans, what are some of the most critical resources you recommend for veterans who need accessibility assistance?

Micah: A few that come to mind are first, the Jobs Accommodation Network, which can offer answers to questions from general rights under the ADA, how to disclose a disability and request accommodation in the workplace, negotiating accommodations,

Supporting Veterans with Accessibility Needs

and accommodation ideas. Also, the Veteran Affairs - Veteran Readiness and Employment, and State Vocational Rehabilitation Agencies offer employment accommodations, job training assistance, education, and independent living services. Lastly, working with a DVOP under the JVSG program as a “disability” meets the criteria for employment and training services. DVOPs are valuable service providers supporting veterans with significant barriers to employment who collaborate with other supportive service providers such as Veteran Service Organizations and other state agencies and are knowledgeable about local resources to support veterans with accessibility needs.

Nuno: Great information, Micah. The Office of Disability and Employment Policy is also a great resource.

HOST: It is also critical to involve employers in conversations regarding accessibility needed. In your experience working with employers, how do you explain some benefits of hiring veterans with accessibility needs? How can service providers share these with potential employers?

Nikita: Bottom line, upfront, is that hiring people with disabilities is good for business, the economy, and team morale. As a vocational rehabilitation counselor working with veterans with disabilities, I often worked with those who had significant barriers to employment or what has become known as SBEs and needed special accommodations to return to work. Sometimes this meant working fewer hours than a full-time work schedule or needing reasonable accommodation to reduce stress or accommodate physical impairments. When working with employers, I would often include in the conversation how research indicates that hiring people with disabilities can increase profit margin, diversify company culture, increase employee motivation, and reduce turnover. There are also federal and state tax incentives that may be available when hiring employees with disabilities. Federal financial incentives include the Work Opportunity Tax Credit (WOTC), the Architectural Barrier Removal Tax Deduction, and the Disabled Access Credit. State tax credits vary by state. Providers can share this information by meeting with employers in advance of attempts to make direct placements to prime the employer with this information and answer any questions

Supporting Veterans with Accessibility Needs

employers may have. These meetings in advance of direct placements help to encourage hiring veterans with accessibility needs.

Nuno: Hiring individuals with disabilities is good for business as it opens up candidate pools, enhances organizational knowledge and perspective, and positively impacts organizational culture.

HOST: Fantastic information, thank you all. As we wrap up today, what is the most critical piece of advice regarding accessibility you have for veterans and veteran service providers who may be listening to this podcast? Nuno, let's start with you.

Nuno: It is amazing what we learn and gain when we take the time to listen and engage with others. It's also been my experience that working with underserved communities and individuals with disabilities has increased my awareness, expertise, and ability to innovate and lead. Overall, be open and think creatively.

Nikita: I agree with Nuno. Although I have many pieces of advice, if I could offer just one, I would strongly encourage listening to understand when assisting veterans with accessibility needs. Often, veterans with accessibility needs seek providers willing to learn and understand how to best support them and build a meaningful relationship throughout the process.

Micah: As a veteran, take the time to research, understand, and educate yourself on your own disability. Analyze your day-to-day lifestyle and determine what types of accessibility needs you require. Consider these accessibility needs when seeking a new career opportunity or evaluating your accessibility needs within your current employment or other engagements. As a veteran service provider, asking the right questions and showing your support will go a long way to establishing trust with a veteran with accessibility needs. Prepare yourself before the engagement with a veteran and follow up with actions you've agreed upon to build your relationship with them.

HOST: Nikita, Nuno, and Micah, thank you so much for sharing these last words and for joining us for this podcast today. To our listeners, if you would like more information about serving veterans, please visit [NVTI.org](https://www.nvti.org) to access resources such as this podcast.

Supporting Veterans with Accessibility Needs

We are constantly adding new material at NVTI.org so check back often. We also invite you to continue the conversation at the Making Careers Happen for Veterans: Community of Practice. Thank you 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 & Training Service and administered by Management Concepts. For more episodes, visit the NVTI website at www.nvti.org.