

# Effective Collaboration Between Jobs for Veterans State Grants Staff and Homeless Veterans' Reintegration Program Grantees

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[Upbeat intro music plays]

**NARRATOR:** Welcome to the National Veterans' Training Institute Podcast Series, where we discuss employment challenges and other pressing issues affecting today's veterans.

**HANNAH TONEY:** This is Episode 7, "Effective Collaboration Between Jobs for Veterans State Grants Staff and Homeless Veterans' Reintegration Program Grantee." I'm Hannah Toney and I'll be your host for this podcast.

As we move forward in a post-COVID-19 reality, we're able to reflect and learn valuable lessons to improve service delivery to those who are most in need of support—we're including, of course, veterans who are experiencing homelessness. We know that the lack of face-to-face contact often made it difficult to cultivate the trust and respect necessary to adequately collaborate in veteran services delivery and in particular, to engage veterans in career development.

Moreover, both veterans and service providers were and are dealing with added trauma, already a factor for most individuals experiencing homelessness, to further complicate these connections. Today, we're going to speak specifically about the collaboration of Jobs for Veterans State Grants (or JVSG) funded staff and the Homeless Veterans' Reintegration Program (or HVRP) grantees. We'll look at some best and promising practices and talk specifically about the lingering effects of the pandemic.

Before we get any further, let's introduce our speakers today. We have joining us: Karen Frias, Sheryl Gillum, Chris Mills, and Brian Ottlinger.

Welcome, all of you and thank you for joining us today to contribute to this larger conversation about the continued collaborative efforts of JVSG and HVRP staff.

First, I'm sure our listeners would love to hear a little about you in your own words! Please share with us where you're located, your organization, and a little bit about your background—why are you passionate about working with veterans?

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**BRIAN OTTLINGER:** Hey Hannah, I'm Brian Ottlinger, and I'm the Veterans' Employment Program Coordinator in Massachusetts. I've been with MassHire for 17 years and I'm proud to be a former Disabled Veterans' Outreach Program specialist (or DVOP).

After retiring from the armed forces, it became clear to me that I needed employment assistance. We were among the initial groups to benefit from the Transition Assistance Program (or TAP), which luckily brought with it local DVOP and Local Veterans' Employment Representatives (or LVER) contacts who eventually provided me wonderful assistance and a realistic employment plan. Without that assistance, I was applying for some jobs that were of no real interest to me, and I wasn't sure how to relate much of my military experience to civilian occupations, despite the fact that I had years of experience and expertise after serving 21 years on active duty.

I'm passionate about working with our veterans because our veterans bring with them many valuable attributes and abilities that should not be discounted.

**HANNAH TONEY:** Awesome, thank you so much for jumping in there and going first, Brian. Chris, how about we hear from you next?

**CHRIS MILLS:** Thank you Hannah—it's great to be with you today! My name is Chris Mills, and I'm the Local Veterans' Employment Representative for Massachusetts. I've been in this role for almost five years, and I have a passion for working with employers and developing significant relationships and opening opportunities for the veteran community.

After my 13 years of service in the U.S. Army, I found myself having difficulty finding quality employment, but was able to take advantage of my GI Bill benefits to get both a bachelor's and a master's degree. Now as a part of my role, I have found a niche with working with technology to enhance business services to employers, especially those impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. I have been working with employers and the state to enhance the technology capabilities in providing virtual job fairs to reach all areas within the Commonwealth [of Massachusetts] and increase the opportunities to the veteran community.

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**KAREN FRIAS:** Thank you for the question. I'm Karen Frias, the Assistant State Director for Department of Labor Veterans' Employment and Training Services [ADVET] in Boston, Massachusetts. I have been with the Department of Labor for six years.

Before VETS, I worked for the Department of Veterans Affairs as a Human Resources Assistant and also a former DVOP. During my transition from the Navy, I was connected with a DVOP through the local American Job Center [AJC]. I was connected to various benefits and employment resources and obtained meaningful employment as a SNAP/Adult Medicaid caseworker seven months post-military.

Although I do not provide direct services to veterans currently, I am passionate about my collaborative partnerships, and making an impactful change through VETS programs in my role as an ADVET.

**SHERYL GILLUM:** Hi, everyone! I'm Sheryl Gillum and I'm the Workforce Development Coordinator with the Homeless Veterans' Reintegration Program (or HVRP) at U.S. VETS in Prescott, Arizona. I've been at U.S. VETS for almost three years, and prior to U.S. VETS, I worked in employment services at the state of Arizona for a few years as well.

I love working with veterans because they are so appreciative of the work that we do for them. Showing them that I am willing to serve them as they did for our country and freedom makes all the difference.

**HANNAH TONEY:** Wonderful. Welcome and thank you all for joining us! First, let's ensure that we're all starting from the same baseline. I wanna make sure our listeners have a basic understanding of both HVRP and JVSG.

The Homeless Veterans' Reintegration Program (HVRP), is an employment-focused competitive grant program of the Department of Labor, Veterans' Employment and Training Service (or DOL-VETS). It is the only federal grant to focus exclusively on competitive employment for veterans experiencing homelessness.

HVRP has two core objectives: 1) to provide services to assist in reintegrating veterans experiencing homelessness into meaningful employment within the labor force; and 2) to stimulate the development of effective service delivery systems that will address the complex problems facing veterans experiencing homelessness.

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The Jobs for Veterans State Grants (or JVSG) program provides federal funding through a formula grant to 54 State Workforce Agencies (also called SWAs), to hire dedicated staff to provide individualized career- and training-related services to veterans and eligible persons with significant barriers to employment and to assist employers in filling their workforce needs with job-seeking veterans.

The JVSG program supports the DVOP specialist position, LVER staff, and Consolidated Position staff. DVOP specialists provide individualized services to veterans with significant barriers to employment, with the maximum emphasis directed toward serving veterans who are economically or educationally disadvantaged. Veterans with barriers include homeless veterans and vocational rehabilitation clients. LVER staff conduct outreach to employers and business associations and engage in advocacy efforts with hiring executives to increase employment opportunities for veterans and encourage the hiring of disabled veterans. Consolidated Position staff serve in a dual role as DVOP and LVER.

Briefly, if each of you would, please describe how your current role interacts with these programs?

**BRIAN OTTLINGER:** Thank you, Hannah. We like to say that our entire Massachusetts MassHire Team proudly serves those who served our country. DVOPs have a difficult job to do, finding suitable employment for veterans with Significant Barriers to Employment.

And we are fortunate to have so many great veteran partners that assist our veterans with the necessary supportive services so they can pursue employment, such as our HVRP colleagues, who help to alleviate some of the most difficult barriers to employment surrounding homelessness, chronically homeless, and sometimes those who are homeless with families. We also have a robust Business Service Team and statewide LVER working to showcase job-ready veterans to employers.

**HANNAH TONEY:** That's great! Thank you so much, Brian. And what about you, Chris?

**CHRIS MILLS:** So Hannah, as the LVER in the Commonwealth of Mass, it is my pleasure to meet with many organizations. Since the onslaught of the pandemic, I was forced to

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really focus on new innovative ideas to reach out to employers through virtual technologies such as virtual job fairs. Since this technology has been introduced, many employers now have the ability to outreach further and open more doors and opportunities to the veteran customers that we serve.

**HANNAH TONEY:** That's fantastic Chris. Thank you for sharing that. Karen, how about you?

**KAREN FRIAS:** DOL-VETS has administrative oversight over both of these programs. As a condition for the receipt of funds, state must deliver the JVSG program as described under Chapter 41 of Title 38 of the U.S. Code. This section includes oversight on the monitoring of priority of service to covered persons and identification of the eligible populations that are served by JVSG programs. Homeless veterans meet the criteria of having a significant barrier to employment. VETS requires grantees serving homeless veterans to enroll participants in the public workforce system while these participants are receiving services through VETS' HVRP grantees.

**HANNAH TONEY:** That's fantastic, Karen, thank you. And you, Sheryl?

**SHERYL GILLUM:** Well Hannah, I work directly with HVRP and I co-enroll my clients in the AJC or American Job Centers. I provide workshops to our clients that cover topics like dressing for success, interviewing skills, resume writing, job searching, job retention, and even e-mail basics. We also provide computer classes and interview clothing.

HVRP allows me to purchase tools and work-specific clothing for veterans who need them to gain or maintain their employment and the program can pay for job training as well. We work with each client to address their specific barriers to employment to help them overcome their individual issues.

**HANNAH TONEY:** That's great. Thank you all, really appreciate the insight on that question. Now, before we move forward, let's talk briefly about trauma-informed approaches to veteran services. How can we consider past and ongoing trauma in veterans when interacting with them to avoid prompting a negative trauma response? I

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know this is a nuanced question, but I do think it's important for us to discuss at the onset of this podcast.

**BRIAN OTTLINGER:** Hannah, primarily we work with SBE veterans. We've learned that, as employment counselors, it is important to listen carefully to what the veteran is telling us and to be patient; and when determining their employment plans, to consider how their new work environment and job duties may affect their mental and physical health.

However, I would be careful to not go beyond that without a discussion with their mental or physical healthcare professional.

**SHERYL GILLUM:** Just like Brian, I focus on our veterans first.

I work in an environment that provides “wrap-around” services. We'll often discuss a client's case with their clinical case manager. Sometimes a homeless veteran thinks that they're ready to go to work because they see an income need in order to gain independence. However, they may need to deal with trauma or substance abuse first. In those cases, we will take the time that the client needs in order to be better prepared for employment by involving those wrap-around services.

Our focus is the trauma before employment—especially when it's bad enough to impede their day-to-day living situation.

**HANNAH TONEY:** Great, that's fantastic answers. Tackling the veteran first is a critical tactic. I also think it is particularly important to focus on one element of Brian's answer: Be careful not to take on the role of a mental or physical healthcare provider or mental health counselor. It's so critical to have a network of references to rely on for mental and physical health professionals so that those elements can be focused on whenever a veteran needs that long-term care.

Chris, what do you typically address in terms of trauma in veterans?

**CHRIS MILLS:** From an employer's perspective, I think it's a great idea, and even a best practice, to introduce employers to the resources to help understand the veteran community and possible challenges that they face. With every employer I meet, I always

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try to, you know, assist them with resources to help understand veterans and some of the past experiences that they may have faced—a lot of which impacts their everyday lives now.

One of these resources is definitely the PsychArmor program, which works specifically with education and training for and about our veterans. This training program for employers really helps with the understanding of the veteran experience, and also gives them the basic premise of what issues could be ongoing.

**HANNAH TONEY:** Excellent, thank you very much. One thing we've certainly heard is that the virtual environment highlighted the need for flexible approaches to veteran services that don't prioritize process over veteran connections. How have you seen this done effectively?

**KAREN FRIAS:** The new normal has required us to use technology exclusively. As we continue to pivot to meet the daily demands, we are ensuring that all customers, irrespective of the program, are assessed, screened, and connected to workforce systems to ensure equitable access to services.

**BRIAN OTTLINGER:** Not only did we continue to use the telephone, but also added many virtual services for those who would benefit from that. We added a virtual walk-in clinic with our HVRP and the Supportive Services for Veterans' Families, or SSVF, and VA partners so we can respond to the immediate needs of our veterans. The virtual walk-in clinic allowed for staff to use break-out rooms to begin to engage the veteran.

Another avenue is a veterans' coffee hour where veterans connect with the DVOP about their issues, which leads to having Unemployment Insurance (or UI) staff taking part to assist some of those veterans.

Our veteran's coalition partners also communicate the immediate needs of local veterans needing assistance.

**CHRIS MILLS:** Hannah, another part of what we've added through this pandemic are the virtual job fairs and training for veteran job seekers on understanding these events and how they really interact with potential employment opportunities. Virtual technology

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has really made a change since the pandemic and is something we need to start teaching as it is here to stay.

**SHERYL GILLUM:** COVID Protocols required us to close our Career Center and follow safety guidelines to protect the veterans that we work with. It also required many of us to think outside the box to be able to connect with veterans who did not want to engage virtually or didn't have access to technology in order to do so. We were able to provide technology for our clients on site and visit in-person while following safety protocols with our clients in the community.

**HANNAH TONEY:** Great, thank you. And I think we've touched on the answer to this question a little bit already, but I wanna [want to] dive a little deeper. What did the virtualization of veteran services bring to light about equitable access to these services, and how can we continue to put those lessons to use?

**BRIAN OTTLINGER:** Hannah, we immediately became telephone-counselors when in-person services were suspended due to COVID, and remained in contact with existing customers. The emphasis was then placed on maintaining contact with all of our veteran partners. However, many SBE veterans did not use cell phones, don't have a computer or laptop, and some don't even have internet access.

**HANNAH TONEY:** A lack of resources is definitely a huge factor in access. Sheryl, what has your experience been with that?

**SHERYL GILLUM:** Well, we were able to make some technology purchases for some clients based on their need for the use of phones or tablets or computers to be able to connect them with employers. This enabled us to connect with them more efficiently as well.

In addition, we were able to create some videos for the orientation workshop and send a link to the client for them to view.

What we ended up discovering was that the clients that were unwilling or unable to embrace the technology were often left out of the loop—regardless of our efforts to integrate virtual technology to provide information to them.



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**HANNAH TONEY:** And, Chris, anything else to add to this?

**CHRIS MILLS:** We actually recently worked on a week-long, state-wide virtual job fair in early August 2021. While this started because of necessary social distancing, we found that veteran job seekers needed assistance in this new realm, accessing this new technology. But with simple collaboration between our partners and available resources, we have been able to make this as successful as possible.

Here are the actual numbers from the job fair: altogether we had 17,264 total registered participants; 14,644 of those actually attended the job fair; we had 1693 employers; we had 678 veterans that actually attended the event, and we had 21,046 resumes submitted throughout the entire job fair.

**HANNAH TONEY:** Those are spectacular numbers—thank you, Chris.

It also sounds like there is a collective issue, unfortunately, with technology and access for veterans, but it also sounds like we're working toward addressing these issues in different ways, which is incredible to have done so quickly and throughout this pandemic.

A key part of virtual success is building and maintaining connections with veterans, which we've heard you all say again and again. How do you establish rapport with your client and with employers? How do you develop a sense of legitimacy as a service provider? Most importantly, how do you manage to successfully translate these connections into the virtual world?

**BRIAN OTTLINGER:** Hannah, we have to listen to what the veteran is telling us and meet them there first, responding to those immediate needs. Sometimes, this means making a referral to a partner first, because that is the assistance the veteran needs first. And making sure we have timely follow-up with the veteran and partner helps keep things on track.

We really have to be in very regular contact and respond quickly in the virtual world. Keeping in contact with those veteran-friendly businesses is important for job referrals and job development.

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**CHRIS MILLS:** Exactly, Brian. It is important to really have a connection with the employer. Listen to what their needs are, listen to see where there could be some wiggle room on certain expectations, and relay that information back to the veteran job seekers and DVOP staff. This way, when we have a good candidate, as a team we know exactly how to approach the employer and how to highlight those skills that will assist the employer.

**SHERYL GILLUM:** Absolutely, Chris—that's how we work, too. Whenever we work with new employers in the area, like I am now—I start with setting up a tour with other employment resource representatives. So, I'll go in and I'll ask the employer, please tell us what your organization is like, what you do, and what the work environment is like. That way we can match you with new employees as new positions open up in our area and as you grow and look to hire people.

We often go in as a team to build that relationship with the employer to build legitimacy as a collective.

For example, we had an employer in the Grand Canyon. When you go work in the Grand Canyon, it comes with housing. So, if you work for, let's say the National Parks Service, your kids would have access to daycare, elementary school, and there's even a high school there—meaning your family can be with you. I didn't know any of this beforehand, so I had to go and learn about that, and go see the housing. That way, when I meet with my clients, I'm able to tell them all about it and kind of paint an accurate picture for them. I wanna [want to] make sure there were no surprises when they arrived for the job, and that they're aware of any pros and the cons.

It's all about putting that extra effort in and bringing in other employment services so that we can sell ourselves as a package deal to the employer; so we can develop a cohesive system between us and the employer to make sure we can match the veterans with the skills the employers need.

**KAREN FRIAS:** The Massachusetts VETS hosts a monthly partnership meeting, which comprises of the Mass VETS staff, Veteran Readiness and Employment (or VR&E) employment counsellors, the JVSG Program Manager and LVER, and DVOPs whose catchment area consists of HVRP grantees.

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The purpose of this monthly meeting is to discuss regular updates, provide best practices, let everyone know what new VETS initiatives or pilot programs are starting, and strengthen co-enrollment with grantees and the AJC—during the pandemic, in particular, those that were disconnected from the HVRP participant co-enrollments in the AJC. VETS worked with the AJC to assign specific DVOPs to provide a warm handover.

The one positive piece this year has been pausing to reflect on how we can help people, and one another, in our respective missions. The pandemic has forced us to invest in sustained preparedness to better respond in moments of crisis.

**HANNAH TONEY:** We also know that veteran services require collaborative approaches with peers and across organizations. Where have you seen successes in building this truly collaborative and multi-tiered approach to veteran services? How have these approaches changed in that respect over the last year and a half?

**BRIAN OTTLINGER:** Through strong partner organizations, we continue to meet (virtually or in person) to learn about their veteran programs and how they benefit veterans. These monthly meetings make it easier to make proper referrals and share responsibility for the success of the veterans.

It seems beneficial to emphasize that HVRP partners should be integrated fully in the career center system, including in the office space. We have partners come in one day a week, and we're trying to make that happen state-wide. That way, they become familiar with staff, they're serving the veterans physically with the DVOP, and that makes case management easier and centralized.

We also do outreach for SBE veterans and we're now asking our HVRP partners to plan outreach with us, because we're also looking to work with homeless veterans.

We can do more together.

**CHRIS MILLS:** I definitely try to work with as many of the collaborations as possible—and let them know that I am here to support them with businesses and open positions in order to allow additional resources to the collaboration for their employment goals.

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**KAREN FRIAS:** I absolutely agree, Chris. That's a great attitude to go with. Speaking to our earlier concern about access during the pandemic, the Healthcare for Homeless Veterans, also known as HCHV programs, have struggled to find transportation for veterans. I partnered with Charles Franklin to create a statement of work that incorporated HVRP and IVTP grantees as a community partner that would provide critical support for veterans in the Boston region, covering Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, New Hampshire, Maine, New York, and Vermont, where rideshare transportation is available.

Partnerships like Ride Share/Homeless Veterans' Employment initiative can be a possible solution to increase employment access for many veterans living in transitional housing and [are] unemployed because of lack of transportation. These services will provide veterans with the HCHV program's adequate and safe transportation during the remainder of the pandemic, ensuring that they have transportation to receive both, vaccines doses and are able to meet their healthcare and housing needs.

Transportation for veterans can allow veterans experiencing homelessness to get somewhere safe by providing immediate transportation, or transportation that can assist veterans in attending all of their housing appointments so that they are not delayed in seeking permanent housing through the VA HUD-VASH program.

In addition, transportation may be provided to veterans to meet with any community provider that would provide critical support to the veteran, or even allow them to get to job interviews. This is a critical service that is so demonstrative of the need for collaboration across partners.

**HANNAH TONEY:** Karen, that's great. Collaboration can lead to some pretty incredible solutions. Thank you all for sharing, there.

Now, we know that there are many methods of collaboration that you've mentioned, but let's drill down here just a little bit more. We just talked about collaborative approaches to veteran services, now let's discuss how you've seen flexible and customized approaches to career development open a wider array of opportunities to veterans. Where have you seen success in this?

**BRIAN OTTLINGER:** We recently invited HVRP and other veteran partners to be part of the planning for two regional job fairs. This involvement early on affords partners some

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input about the skill sets and employment circumstances of their veterans. Some Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act programs are suited for SBE veterans, too, such as Title One Adult short-term training, and Operation Able for concrete steps toward unsubsidized employment.

**HANNAH TONEY:** Oh, that's great. Proactivity is definitely the name of the game. How about you, Chris?

**CHRIS MILLS:** So, a lot of success comes from talking with employers—understanding their needs and desires, but also helping them to develop recruitment strategies both within their organization and outside their organization. Teaching them different techniques that they may not have thought of really helps them understand that working within their own organization can really help in achieving their goals.

With all companies, I always ask them how many veterans do you currently have, you know, that are employed with your company. I ask that question because from an internal standpoint, because your very own workers can be your best avenue of approach to recruitment.

**HANNAH TONEY:** Ah, excellent, thank you Chris. Sheryl, we would love to hear your insight on this question too. What would you like to add here?

**SHERYL GILLUM:** Oh, I've got something to add. Working with veterans with significant barriers to employment presents challenges in assisting them to gain employment, but I've got a couple of great examples. One of the initiatives that I have found successful is developing a relationship with an employer to the point where they're willing to become an employment retention partner with the HVRP workforce program. Typically, this is just a conversation in which I ask the employer who has hired a veteran client of mine to notify me before they fire the veteran, giving me an opportunity to intervene and help the veteran overcome any issues that are keeping them from becoming successful in their new employment.

I've also had conversations with the veteran client asking pretty much the same thing. I ask that if they are thinking about walking off the job or quitting that they connect with me so that I can help them to articulate what the issues are to the employer to see if we can find some common ground.

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This has resulted in some very successful relationships that recently included an employer that was willing to come and pick up the veteran employees who he had hired who had transportation barriers. One of these employers hired a veteran who not only didn't have transportation but didn't have a phone or another way to communicate. This client had had a traumatic brain injury and was finding it difficult to stay employed and find housing. Just this week, I was informed that this client was able to procure housing with his new employment income.

Another way I have found to assist veterans who have SBEs or significant barriers to employment is through a partnership with a lawyer that specializes in child support. Over time, I discovered that some of the veterans I worked with were not incentivized to gain employment because a large portion of their income would be dispersed toward child support. This attorney, who is also a veteran, agreed to volunteer his time on a case-by-case basis to assist veterans in understanding what their next steps would be to handle child support issues so that they could go back to work. I've actually lost count of how many referrals I have made to this attorney, but he has successfully answered questions and created game plans with multiple veterans so that they would not see their child support commitment as a barrier to employment.

**HANNAH TONEY:** Wow, thank you all for those really detailed and insightful answers. So as we're working to close out the podcast here, I do want to make sure that we're getting any other lessons learned in terms of providing equitable service to veterans during COVID-19. Is there anything else that you'd like to share with us?

**CHRIS MILLS:** The biggest thing I've taken away is that we need to be teaching and educating veterans on technology. Really allowing them to experience virtual for themselves as it really has changed how many types of business can be conducted. Most of the time now, you don't even have to leave your house and the convenience of that can be important to the type of work that they are doing.

**BRIAN OTTLINGER:** I agree with Chris. For those SBE veterans without the ability to connect virtually, the Mass InterConnect Program was a valuable tool that provided a Chromebook, internet connection, and/or cable at no or low cost. Many DVOPs were able to assist veterans in using this program. Some DVOPs provided individual or group workshops with veterans to improve their computer use and job search planning.

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Additionally, it was soon discovered that some veterans preferred virtual meetings, as there is no transportation need or cost.

**SHERYL GILLUM:** I agree with Brian. Although I did have some veterans that were amenable to a virtual platform for communication, I also found that the majority of the veterans I was working with preferred face to face communication, especially older veterans. I also discovered that virtual communication leaves out some nonverbal communication that can make it more difficult to express an idea to a client. They kind of hear the words that you say, and they might even see your facial expression completely, but they miss out on body language.

Conversely, I would miss out on some of their communication as well, especially if they were using technology that they weren't familiar with and weren't capturing their face while they spoke. After all, only 7% of our communication is the words that we say. The rest of it is the inflection in our voices and our body language.

**HANNAH TONEY:** So true! Thank you all so much for coming by and speaking with us today about veterans' employment and collaboration between JVSG and HVRP. And thank you all for the work you do and for sharing it with us. To continue the conversation on this topic, please visit the Making Careers Happen for Veterans: Community of Practice.

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