

NVTI Podcast Series
SERVING RURAL VETERANS

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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.

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DAN GRIFFITHS: Welcome! I'm Dan Griffiths, and in this episode, *Serving Rural Veterans*, we'll be talking about the challenges facing rural veterans and ways to better serve them.

I'm lucky to be joined by four veterans' employment and training professionals who collectively have over three decades of experience serving rural veterans. Brandon Harting is a Consolidated Veterans Services representative, and is joining us from Colville, Washington. Welcome, Brandon! And tell us, what was your branch of service and how long did you serve?

BRANDON HARTING: Hey, thanks Dan. I served with the US Army's 82nd Airborne at Fort Bragg for about a little over 4 years. And I also was in the Louisiana Army National Guard for about 3 years.

DAN: Brandon, we are glad to have you on the podcast. As we discuss rural veteran issues in this podcast, we'd like to hear more about your service area around Colville Washington. I was stationed there at NAS Whidbey Island and know a little bit about the state's geography. So Colville is north of Spokane in the eastern half of the state and home to the Colville Confederated Tribes. It is worth mentioning that most tribal lands in the U.S. are located in rural areas.

We also have Eileen Boylston, who has over 20 years of experience as a DVOP and in the consolidated DVOP/LVER position. She joins us from Soap Lake, Washington, which is located in the center of the state. Eileen, where did you serve and for how long?

EILEEN BOYLSTON: Well Dan, I was in the Army, and I retired after 24 years.

DAN: And you and Brandon work together?

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EILEEN: We do know each other; we were recently acquainted just before COVID hit. We did attend a meeting together sharing our services to the Colville Tribes. And we were planning to do a farm visit to a Vet Farm, but that had to be postponed. We do attend various virtual meetings, trainings and job fairs together, however.

DAN: That's great! I hope we can hear a little more about the Vet Farm and how that weaves into your service strategies...so thanks so much for joining us Eileen, appreciate that. I've had several participants in NVTI training classes from Washington who have spoken about the state's strategy to position Consolidated DVOP/LVERs into the rural areas in order to provide the widest range of services available to veterans under the Jobs for Veterans State Grant (JVSG) program. We also have Danny Wyatt, a Rural Veterans Career Advisor, joining us from Waxahachie, Texas. Hey Danny, what was your branch of service and how long were you in service?

DANNY WYATT: Hey Dan, I was in the United States Air Force for just a little bit over 22 years.

DAN: That's awesome, Danny, thank you for joining us today.

And then finally, we have Katie Baillio, a Rural Veterans Career Advisor, joining us from Denison, Texas. Same questions for you Katie, where did you serve and for how long?

KATIE BAILLIO: Hi Dan! I actually served in the Army, and I retired after 20 years.

DAN: And you and Danny work together?

KATIE: Yes, both myself and Danny work for the Texas Veterans Commission. We're in the same District but we're on the different sides of the DFW Metroplex. We have worked with each other for about 5 years now, but never in the same office.

DAN: Now Katie, I managed several workforce development projects in north Texas during my career and found that the greatest need for those programs were in the rural areas surrounding the Dallas/Ft. Worth Metroplex.

By way of a short personal introduction – I'm a Navy veteran. I served from 1969 to 1973 as an avionics technician, and I retired in 2016 after 30 years of public service designing and managing workforce development and training programs in state agencies and higher education. For the last 4 years, while I'm supposed to be retired, I have been operating my veteran-owned small business where I serve as an instructor for NVTI virtual, remote and classroom course deliveries. I always comment to our NVTI participants that selfless service is in our DNA having been members of the armed forces or civil service, and now helping our veterans, their spouses, families and caregivers access much needed resources to find sustainable employment – a HAND

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UP instead of a HAND OUT. So, for today's podcast, we're going to hear from four experts who work with different types of communities and veteran populations.

DAN: I want to start off by asking you, Katie, who are rural veterans? What's special about this population compared to veterans in urban areas?

KATIE: Well Dan, according to the VA, there are almost 11 million working-age veterans in the US. And about a quarter of them are in the rural areas. And many times, veterans choose to live in rural communities for many reasons: to be close to family and their community, for the lower cost of living, and all the benefits of rural life. Rural veterans tend to be older (the average age in my area is 65). And many of them live with disabilities or health challenges. Because we live in rural communities, they face geographical barriers that make it harder for them to access jobs and health care and other services they need.

DAN: So, let's talk about those barriers. Brandon, what do you see as the major challenges rural veterans in your area are facing?

BRANDON: Dan, what I can see up in my neck of the woods is a lot of these jobs are kind of labor-intensive type work, or labor-intensive type jobs. And, you know, some of those veterans aren't able to do those jobs anymore. At the same token, some of those veterans aren't able to do the jobs that require more tech savviness or technical ability. So being able to match up those individuals with those jobs, or jobs that are out there available to them is quite the challenge. You know, the other, obstacle that we see, with being in this rural area is we have, a connectivity issue when it comes to internet. For example, I live up on top of a mountain pass and, gosh, you know, I'm lucky to get 1 Mb per second, at best. So, you know, it's a struggle.

DAN: Yeah, wow, that's not very much!

BRANDON: No, it's not much at all but we do what we can up here. But, you know, a lot of the higher paying jobs are in the Seattle or in the Spokane city areas and you know, a lot of folks don't want to leave our awesome area up here and they'd rather pitch a tent and be up in the freezing cold than, than living in the city.

DAN: Wow. So what I'm hearing is that we have demographics, technologies and geography that shape our rural veteran populations, with unique challenges such as bandwidth, for instance, that narrow job opportunities for our veterans. Eileen, you're also in Washington state. Are you seeing the same barriers with the veterans you serve?

EILEEN: Dan, absolutely the same type of barriers. A lot of people want to work close to home because they don't want to deal with long commutes, so they don't even do the

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research to see what's further away, even to find out if it's worth the drive. So sometimes they're missing out on that perfect job that's definitely worth the drive.

DAN: Right, and what if that person doesn't have a car? Are there transportation alternatives that they can take, like public transit?

EILEEN: Public transit is not adequate in our area. Basically, if you work a 9-5 Monday through Friday, you might be able to use public transportation, but we have a lot of plants, and many operations are 24 hours, so it doesn't work at all. Basically, if they don't have a vehicle or driver's license, they're hugely disadvantaged. Unless they can find someone to give them a ride, they are limited to the area they can bike or walk to.

DAN: Right.

EILEEN: That is one of the things that we do try to address. If somebody lost their license because it expired, there are programs that sometimes will pay that fee so that they can get their license back.

And we have a really good relationship with our county service officers and other veteran programs, and sometimes they can pay for things like minor car repairs or gas. And that can make a huge difference in someone getting a job.

DAN: Yeah, I can see how that would have a huge impact and open so many doors to employment opportunities. Danny, does this align with the challenges you're seeing in Texas?

DANNY: Dan, I can tell you one of the most frustrating parts of my job is the availability of services. I'm in a rural community in Waxahachie, Texas, and it seems like all the services stop at the Dallas or Tarrant County lines, you know what I mean?

I had three cases this last year where veterans showed up at my door with everything they owned in their cars. I had nowhere to refer them to; I had to really scramble around, calling any veteran organizations I could.

DAN: OK, so, what happened then?

DANNY: Well, in this case, which was unusual, I actually had to work locally to find them some space in people's houses where there were no services or facilities available.

DAN: So, you have to be really creative to overcome these obstacles and find a solution – kind of thinking out of the box seems to be a skill required for your job, for your work. Katie, you're also located in Texas in that general area. What do you do when someone comes to you – and you don't have a place for them?

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KATIE:

Well Dan, I'm actually about two hours north of Dallas, and the homeless programs with the Dallas VA, well, they're two hours away. I have a very limited shelter capacity in my county, and there's less space for female veterans.

So, Dan, if a homeless veteran comes to me, I have to try to evaluate their needs. Because we might not have space in a shelter, my job then is to help get them to the Dallas metroplex to get their services.

If they're escaping domestic violence, well we can probably place them in a shelter for that.

DAN: Katie, thank you for mentioning women veterans. They have unique needs when dealing with housing and employment issues. NVTI has committed to developing training and future podcasts here in the near future focused on this special population of veterans.

DAN: So if we have veterans coming to you needing various services, how do you help connect them to those services? Brandon, you talked about people who would rather sleep in a tent than move to the big city. How can you help someone in that position?

BRANDON: Well, so Dan, like I said, some of those folks, they would rather hunker down in a poncho liner or a sleeping bag and spend those cold months in those type of conditions rather than move in the big city. You know, we can't ignore them, we've just got to figure out how to help them, how to help move them to the next level. And, you know, fortunately, in my neck of the woods we have some great partner agencies and great nonprofits to help out with folks like that when they're in need. The thing is, we gotta help meet them where they're at. You know, the big thing is understanding where your resources are, and how to contact them when you've got that veteran that's in that need, or in that situation.

DAN: Yeah, that sounds like what Katie was just talking about. Those relationships, then, with community organizations and partner agencies – those really seem critical to meeting the needs of rural veterans. Katie, what have you done that's helped you build those partnerships?

KATIE: Dan, just like Brandon said, understanding your resources and establishing those relationships is so important. You need to be ingrained in your community. It's why I'm able to pick up the phone and call a local organization, and say, "it's Katie," they know who I am and are ready to help out.

DANNY: [chuckles] And believe you me, they know me when I call, too.

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DAN: [chuckles] Right.

KATIE: Right, Danny. So for example, I'm part of a social services organization. That way there's someone who represents veterans, and you're able to hear what's going on in the community.

If you're just starting out, check the local directories to see what the organizations are out there. Use the magic of Google. Pick up the phone. Start getting involved.

DAN: You know, what we're really getting at is, networking and engaging in your community. Doing your research, getting involved. Danny, I understand you've partnered with a number of organizations in your area. Could you tell us about those?

DANNY: Yeah well, the Texas Veterans Commission has a list of veteran-related grants awarded to organizations across the state. So sometimes I'll look at this spreadsheet that they provide and can use that to look for organizations in my area that may have received these grants.

I also have one program I'm involved in, it's the North Texas Regional Veterans Court, which is a diversionary program with veterans facing criminal charges. And something that's kind of spun out of that is a program called Valor. It's a residency program for incarcerated veterans with intensive training that helps them get back on their feet and back into their communities with intensive services provided in-residence.

DAN: Yeah, these are some great examples of programs that help veterans integrate back into their communities and help them gain employment. I've done some volunteer work with our Williamson County Veterans Treatment Court and understand the value of providing those solution sets for our justice-involved vets. We've got a lot of folks from the community, as well as the Texas Veterans Commission that participate in these activities. But what about from the employer side? How do you help connect employers to veteran job candidates?

DANNY: I'm glad you asked that, Dan. We don't want to forget about the other side of the equation, from the employer's perspective.

I've had employers walk in my office with 50 job openings. Employers sometimes think that we can just magically produce veterans, and that we have 50 veterans in my pocket ready to go to work. And that's just not the case.

DAN: I see. Eileen, how do you cultivate those veterans to be able to fill those positions?

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EILEEN: You know, Dan, in the city, I think a lot of your veterans walk through your door looking for a job. I serve veterans in a rural community where you really have to go out and find them. It requires a lot more outreach.

For example, getting involved with other service providers and referring back-and-forth. If a provider is working with a veteran, they'll usually let me know. And if I'm working with a veteran that might be a good fit for their services, we share that information. And pre-COVID, I used to be able to walk up to the desk so they'd see it on the spot.

And like Katie said, it's really critical to get involved with these different organizations and show up to activities in your community.

A lot of people don't know there are veteran reps out. So, it's about getting that word out to them and being visible.

DAN: So how about job fairs? Is that something that helps you connect with veterans?

EILEEN: Absolutely. In rural areas, people have to travel long distances to apply for jobs and talk to employers. I've found that doing job and resource fairs are really useful. I do about 4 or 5 them a year in different areas. And I try to get the VA to come down so that the individuals have access to both community resources, and veteran resources, as well as employers, all in one spot.

DAN: So, rural job fairs need to be kind of a one-stop shop for veterans looking for employment and other resources?

EILEEN: Exactly.

DAN: You know, we've been talking about different barriers that rural veterans are up against when they're looking for employment. One of the running themes, it sounds like, is finding jobs that are accessible to people in rural areas when there are geographic barriers and potential challenges with transportation.

Looking forward toward the future, Eileen, a lot of jobs are going remote. Do you see a potential for more remote positions becoming available to rural veterans?

EILEEN: That's an interesting question, Dan. Up here in Washington state, a lot of highly skilled positions are in the Seattle area.

The transition that's been happening from the traditional office model to remote work, it's really totally changed the landscape. I think a lot of employers never considered it as something that would work. And now that they've *had* to make it work...employers are realizing it does work.

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DAN: Right. Does that expand the territory for employers you might reach out to, that you might not have considered before?

EILEEN: Yes, if an employer has remote positions open and I've got veterans who are interested, absolutely. I will say that, in our county, we actually do have pretty decent internet.

DAN: So this is all such interesting and important information that I think could really help veteran service providers support rural veterans more effectively and efficiently.

Last thing before we wrap things up: I want to ask each of you, if you could give one piece of advice to providers serving rural veterans, what would that be? Brandon, let's start with you.

BRANDON: The best advice I can give is make sure you get connected and stay connected with your veterans, your employers, and your resources, and treat them all like family. I guess that's the best thing I can give you.

DAN: Yeah, there you go. All right Eileen, you're up next. What advice would you give?

EILEEN: The one piece of advice I would give is that you have to get out there. Many of those in need, haven't the slightest idea that there are so many resources available – so they'll never walk in your door because they don't know you exist.

DAN: Right, I've heard that before. And Katie, how about you?

KATIE: Dan, I would say, be connected and understand that for many veterans there are many benefits and services they are not aware of, and you can help or provide resources for them.

DAN: OK. And finally, Danny, what advice would you give?

DANNY: Be flexible, be able to think on your feet, know your county and who you can rely on.

DAN: Yeah absolutely. Brandon, Eileen, Katie, Danny – it's been great talking with you. Thanks so much for coming on the podcast.

BRANDON: Thanks Dan!

EILEEN: Thanks, Dan!

KATIE: Thank you, Dan.

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DANNY: Thank you, sir!

DAN: You bet. And to our listeners, thanks for listening in today on today's episode of the NVTI Podcast Series.

[Upbeat outro music plays]

NARRATOR: 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.

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Thank you.

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