

## NVTI Podcast Series

# 2023 Mark Sanders Award Winners

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

**HOST:** Hello, this is Hannah with the National Veterans' Training Institute, and we're here today speaking with the 2023 winners of the National Association of State Workforce Agencies, or NASWA's, Mark Sanders Award. The Opelika Career Center in Alabama received the prestigious Mark Sanders Award at the NASWA 10th Annual Veterans Conference in Washington, DC. The award is presented annually to an individual or group in the United States that provides exceptional workforce and job market assistance to veterans, especially those with significant barriers to employment. The award is named in honor of Mark Sanders, who, during his career with the California Employment Development Department and in leadership positions with NASWA, was unwavering in his efforts to promote excellence in services to disabled veterans. The Alabama Department of Labor nominated the Opelika Career Center for the Mark Sanders Award for exceptional service to veterans because the Opelika Career Center established new partnerships with the Opelika Workforce Council, the mayor of Opelika, and the Alabama Department of Corrections. The Opelika Local Veterans Employment Representative or LVER provided exceptional service that exceeded state established performance measures, including employer contacts, non-duplicated employer contacts, newly registered employers, job orders, and job developments. In 2022, Opelika Lever Robert Wilson initiated a meeting with Opelika Mayor Gary Fuller and John Sweatman of the Opelika Workforce Council, who requested assistance in filling job openings for businesses in the area with veterans through the city-wide Careers Skills Program, or CSP. Since that meeting, LVER Wilson and the Opelika Business Services representative have been instrumental in sharing information on the citywide CSP program with businesses resulting in 25 businesses enrolling, offering internships and career opportunities for transitioning service members, veterans, and military spouses. With a staff of only ten, only one of whom is a JVSG staff member, the Opelika Career Center was able to

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successfully provide services to 900 veterans. LVER Robert Wilson focused on assisting transitioning service members from Fort Moore to find employment by creating these partnerships with the community. The Opelika Career Center partnered with the Alabama Department of Rehabilitation Services and the Alabama Department of Veteran Affairs to organize and host a veteran hiring event of thirty-one businesses at a local National Guard Armory, targeting those businesses which would best match the skills and career goals of job veteran targeting those businesses which would best match the skills and career goals of job-ready veterans. Although this hiring event was held in a very rural area, at least ten veterans were hired. LVER Wilson and other members of the Opelika Career Center, networked extensively with outside organizations, including the director of Lee County Alternative Sentencing Board, or Veterans Court, and partnered with them for a second chance job fair for those who are justice-involved, during which employment services were provided to more than fifty veterans. Staff of the Opelika Career Center regularly host veteran workshops and resumes to include translation of military skills, organized panels to teach, evaluate, and provide feedback on their elevator speeches, and mock interviews to provide valuable feedback. Now, let's speak with the 2023 winners of this prestigious award. Will you each please take a moment to introduce yourself and tell us a little bit about your role?

**Donal:** I'll start. You want me to start? Donal Cieutat, I'm the Alabama Jobs for Veterans State Coordinator and part of the NASWA Veterans Affairs Committee. My role in this was I went and visited Robert, I was, I heard some things, and we were interested. It kind of started with us working with Department of Corrections in Alabama on SkillBridge, I knew some stuff about SkillBridge and so I reached out to I was talking to Robert, and he said, well, we're doing some things over here in Opelika with SkillBridge with this guy, Eddie Perez out of Fort Benning. And, so I went over there and started looking at what they were doing and they were doing some phenomenal stuff with SkillBridge and just the unique way they had it set up to where they could just hire anybody to work for the city without having to specify which department, they would just pull them out of a pool of people. For the city in general, if I'm not mistaken, Robert,

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you're cringing, but that's the way I understood it and I thought that was unique, but it also helped us work with the Department of Corrections because, I don't know if you're familiar, but Alabama Department of Corrections has had a real struggle, uh, getting employees and security guards. So, this was another way to try to do that.

**HOST:** And Robert, since your name has been used here, you want to really quickly introduce yourself and just tell us a little bit about your role and your relationship to this this overall effort.

**Robert:** Yeah, Robert Wilson, I work at the Opelika Career Center and I'm the Local Veteran Employment Representative. At the time, I was actually doing both the DVOP and LVER positions, so I was doing case management with the veterans and also doing outreach to the community. So how I got started is I actually went and spoke to the mayor, and then he connected me with economic development, and then I had spoken to Eddie Perez at Fort Benning at the time, now Fort Moore, and they were working together on just starting the CSP program and what they did was they actually blanketed the entire city. So instead of each individual business trying to go through this whole application process, the city did it for everybody. And it took about a year and a half to do, and Auburn just got accepted as well, and it took them 2 1/2 years, so it's quite a process to be a part of the program, but actually being able to help John Sweatman from the city, and also Captain Goodson from the Department of Corrections, get this off the ground. It was a lot of fun.

**HOST-** That's amazing. that's fantastic. I don't want to ignore Sam's presence either here. So, so Sam, if you'll tell us, you know, I know you're a member of the Mark Sanders Award committee. Like to know, you know, obviously introduce yourself please, but also a little bit more about your relationship to this effort and kind of set the stage for us to talk about the rest of this. Tell us what it led you to award this to this particular Career Center.

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**Sam:** Certainly, thanks, Hannah. So, I'm Sam Mitchell and I'm the administrator for WorkSource Joint Base Lewis-McChord's present here on the on the installation in the great state of Washington, and I also have the honor of being the Technical Vice Chair for the NASWA Veterans Affairs Committee, and I also chair the Mark Sanders Award committee, so, it was great to see this, this nomination this year from the great state of Alabama. And it was especially touching to me because as I said, I oversee services to transitioning service members here on a military installation, so it was great to see that Alabama is getting upstream and serving those populations. So, the Mark Sanders Award itself has been around since 1990, and each year, we acknowledge a state that has gone above and beyond either in a special initiative or just in providing services that are beyond what's required of the law and what's required of the Department of Labor mandates for the programs that we operate. And it doesn't necessarily have to be the Jobs for Veterans State Grant; typically, it's a whole combination of folks that come together to make it happen, which I think was a case for Alabama. So we were, we're excited to see this. We're particularly excited that it was catching folks that are coming out of the military that often get forgotten in the mix of what we do and particularly the impact as I recall, it was something like 110 participants in the first year of this program that makes a big difference and it makes a big difference not just to the folks coming out of the military but to that community that, that rural community that's being served by those folks that bring great talent and they're able to keep them there in Alabama. So, as you know, us as a committee, I think we all walked away from that looking at that package and I think the thought was this, this is what it's all about. This is what this award is about. So, my hat's off to Alabama and to all the folks there that have been a part of this.

**HOST:** Oh man, that's so exciting. So, I think, and we got to hear a little contextualization of this, a little bit about the Opelika Career Center, but I think we want

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to really learn some more about your location. What is the staff of your center like? Some of the demographics, the information of where you are, who you're serving, who's performing the work, all of that kind of stuff. So, if you can jump in and just kind of set the stage for us with that, I'd really appreciate it.

**Robert:** But we're located at 2300 Frederick Rd, which is right next to Tiger Town in Opelika. We have a staff of approximately 20, and I mean we serve anybody that walks through the door. Obviously, for the JVSG side, they have to be referred if they have a qualifying SBE, but once they get to us, I mean it can be anybody. They can be 22 years old, up to, I think, the oldest was about 72, I think. So, there's Vietnam Veterans that walk through the door and need something to do to help pay bills or uh, what out. But I mean, we serve just about everybody.

**Donal:** I just want to explain; he's talking about it right next to Tiger Town. The reason they call it Tiger Town is because it's right next to Auburn University. This is the same area. Tiger Town.

**HOST:** Gotcha. I knew I knew, but then again, I'm in Georgia, so I'm not that far away.

**Donal:** The sad part is he's an Alabama fan too, so he's an Alabama fan stuck in the middle of Tiger Town.

**Robert:** I went to the University of Alabama, so it's kind of hard not to be.

**HOST:** Yeah, you kind of have to be. Well, that is great, but you are in a pretty rural location. That's the other thing I heard Sam say, right? So that comes with its own challenges, own barriers to employment that we know, and we've actually done some podcasts on that. So, we've set the stage, as it were, for this award. So, let's dive in. What did you do? What were the results, accomplishments, and the ultimate impact of the work that led to this nomination?

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**Robert:** So, there's a lot of connecting people, having meetings in the office. Going to, I mean, I went to the mayor's office and had a meeting with him. I mean, it was a lot of work just figuring out how the program worked and what it could do. Once I figured that out, I said OK, I can really help push this. I did have to get permission to go to Fort Moore cause it's just across the state line in Columbus, but when there's thousands of veterans transitioning from there all the time, going over there and talking to veterans and explaining how great Opelika it is. I mean it. It was a win-win for everybody.

**Donal:** I think from being on the Veterans Affairs Committee for 12 years, me and Sam have been around together a long time doing this, but when I saw all the resources coming together, you know, the community, the state agency, the local community, and the military coming together, it was kind of what we have been told was, you know, the textbook bringing of resources together. It actually kind of fascinated me the way it just worked together. You know, we've been told that's the ideal situation, and then it just clicked there. We're trying to replicate that in another area of the state, down near uh Novosel, call that the Wiregrass area, Dothan enterprise area. And we're gonna try to work to replicate what they did in Opelika down in that area, and hopefully, it'll catch on. You know, we've got Huntsville where all of those federal research, R&D contractors are at, and you know, we haven't even tapped in there. So, I think it's the beginning of a wildfire that we're gonna try to spread across the state.

**HOST:** That is amazing to hear. I think the being able to replicate the success, I mean, that's even why we're doing this, so that we can talk about how can other places do this. We definitely know this can't be done alone, and we are already hearing that in your descriptions and some of the partnerships you're talking about. But I want to dig a little deeper tell us some more about the interagency partnerships, business partnerships, and other collaborative efforts that helped lead to your success.

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**Robert:** Yeah, I was living in Tuscaloosa at the time and working in the Birmingham Office. And the current LVER, the previous LVER that was here had left.

So Donal had asked me to come down and take over the office, so I was totally new to the area, so I kind of just went straight to the top, and I said I just need to introduce myself to everybody and get this going. So, it kind of worked well meeting the mayor first because then he kind of sent me to the right people. And then I just started going to all these different meetings, and it was just like, OK, alright, cause most of them are civilians with no veteran or military background. So, the fact that I speak veteran and have that background, it was, it worked really well that I could be there to assist with that.

**Donal:** I think the other thing that helped him in and, he's been a self-starter since we hired him. Like I say, he started out in Birmingham, and then we moved into Opelika for a variety of reasons, but he's a self-starter, and he's one of those people that's not afraid to walk in a door, and they walk up to somebody's office, and I think that's what helped, and like he said they were kind of tippy-toeing in the in this process, I guess and but he showed them how to navigate it once he got there because he was aware of what was going on and what they were trying to do. Now they've done their part of it too. I mean, it was, it was absolute team, you know. The award was an absolute team. We found out what he was doing, I took that, I took my staff to put my staff together, and we did the nomination off the information he provided to us, so the whole thing was a total team effort. But what they did there in Opelika was just it all the stars aligned, you know? And it was real easy for everybody to work together. You know, the one thing about it is nobody had an attitude, so they just jelled completely, and Mr. Wilson is a he's one of those level-headed Army guys, uh, so you know, there wasn't a lot of emotion tied up, and it just happened. And you'll owe me for that young man.

**HOST:** That's awesome. I love it. I love it.

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**Robert:** Being the LVER and doing the outreach as well and realizing all the all the opportunity that is here in Opelika and Auburn. Just the fact that the salaries are high, there's a lot of careers that veterans can basically just walk into. I really wanted to push that. So that's why I spent so much time on it as well.

**Donal:** It also helped that the Opelika/Auburn area is one of the fastest-growing areas in the state. You know that helped. I mean there the opportunity was there for it to grow; all we did was put the water in the fertilizer on it, and it grew. Mr. Sweatman is actually going down, I saw one of my other one of my staff that works in Mobile, the Chamber of Commerce is having him as a guest speaker in Mobile to go explain what they, what happened in Opelika so that they can look at doing it in the Mobile area. So, it's just it's just caught on like wildfire.

**HOST:** I love that, and we want to see those successes. You know. you do want to see that, you want to see it grow and grow and grow and spread out more, and so much of that is about Robert, you know, approaching it like it, it sounds like you did just with a go get em attitude, and go in, and I'll talk to you. It's like always reminds me of being a kid, and if you don't tell a kid they can't do something, well, all of a sudden they can, they can do anything, you know they can, they can learn anything, they can be anything, and it's because no one told them they can't, and you sound like you were approached this that way. You didn't tell me I couldn't, so, I'm going to make it work. I love it. That's just amazing.

**Robert:** And thankfully, Donal trusted me enough to insert myself and all these situations. So, and it worked out.

**HOST:** That's really important, that leadership trust. Yeah, I'm glad you mentioned that because that is a really key component to success. You've got to have a team you can trust, and leadership has to trust the team to do their stuff. So, I'm glad you mentioned that. I'd love some examples of because we heard Sam mentioned at the beginning



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here, as we started talking, that this is really an award for above and beyond. Doing something that is outside the norm, and obviously, really this whole program sounds like it is, it's just fantastic. But I'd love some specific examples of what did "above and beyond" look like, and Sam, I'm feel free to jump in here too, if there's something that stood out in the application process. But yeah, what did, what are some of the things that we're truly above and beyond about this?

**Sam:** I think from my perspective, one of the things that we look at as a committee, as we look at you know everybody that's working in this space, does it because they have a big heart for serving their communities, and in particular the military communities, communities and so many people in this business like Donal and Robert come from that background, have that tight connection to the military. So, there's a lot of good work that goes on out there, but what we look for is, you know, going taking that extra step, taking that, bringing in extra partners, and I thought that was what was unique about this, was your leveraging the SkillBridge program, which is a Department of Defense program, to serve folks that we often forget about until they leave the gates, and that's the transitioning service members, where you're getting upstream and serving that population before they get in, in, in a dire need where they're unemployed. And you're doing it in a rural community, which is much of our nation that gets forgotten. So, I think you're really serving our communities, serving our warriors in a very unique way, and I was impressed that you're able to bring all those pieces together and make them work together because that doesn't happen always in government, and you can strike that comment if you like. But I think it's important that there are people out there that, as Hannah said that they don't see the normal limitations, that some people do and are willing to knock on those doors and to bring down those walls that sometimes we either perceive, or sometimes they're actually, there but to make things like this happen. So, I think that's what set this nomination apart and got them this well-deserved award. That's not an easy venture.

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**Robert:** And just to add it's the Career Skills Program or CSP is what they call it, but it's an Army-specific program, SkillBridge for all branches, but with four more being so close, about approximately 40 miles, that's the resource that I was able to tap into.

**Donal:** I think Sam brings up a good point you know they we like I said, you know, this was the model process that we always discuss, but it doesn't always come together. I think that's the big thing that made it above and beyond, we knew how to get there, but it doesn't always happen, and here it happened, and I think that was where the above and beyond part came from.

**HOST:** I can completely see that because it does look like, I mean all the pieces fell into place here and just all the right, all the right people in it for all the right reasons, and those reasons are, of course, the veteran. I'd love to focus on how veteran services are integrated into the Career Center. What does that service look like for the veteran? And I know this was one of the components of the nomination form for this award. What does service look like through this program for a veteran? Can you kind of walk me through the veteran user experience going through this, just so that we understand kind of the flow of service provision?

**Robert:** So approximately 18 months before they ETS or get out of the military, they start the transition process, and Eddie Perez is the manager of the Transition Assistance Program. So, they all go to him, through Eddie. So, he's been a great contact and he's the one that Opelika is the first city in the nation to set up the blanket program over a city. So that was also one of the important aspects of it, just to see how it would go and it's done really well. Any business within Opelika city limits. So in the military there are so many different MLSs, backgrounds, people have so many different jobs, that's the appeal to come to Opelika, because whatever background that you have, there is most likely a job here for you. So, the way the career skills program works is they have 120 days where they can do an internship, and they can do multiple internships, if they want. So, they can do thirty days with one, thirty days with another,

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or they can do as many internships as they like. The military still pays their salary, but they come work, their duty assignment will be at whatever business they choose. They'll still most likely be living in the Columbus area and commuting to the Opelika area, gaining, through this internship, the skills that they need when they get out; that way, they are not getting out and trying to get either a certification, or trying to get some kind of experience in a career field that they want to go into. So, which I think a lot of veterans kind of get caught up in, once they get out, then they're kind of floating for a little bit until they can figure that out. So, the fact that we can do that beforehand is great for the transitioning veteran.

**Donal:** Tell her how they find out about these jobs. I mean, there's, like, a classified ad, right?

**Robert:** So there is a website that for the career skills program. so, anybody that's serving around the globe can actually see. So, if they click on Opelika, it'll actually have John Sweatman's name. Every Wednesday, there's, it's almost like a job fair; they have all the tables set up with all kinds of different employers, and Griffin O'Connor, who runs the program now, actually goes to Fort Moore, and they have it from 10-1 on Wednesdays. So, all the veterans that are transitioning at the time will walk through and talk to you. So, the fact that we can actually talk face to face to the veteran while we're there and explain all the benefits they have on coming to Opelika because their internship is up, and they are getting out. If they get offered a job, they also have incentives too. So, if they buy a house, you know they're giving \$1000 cash towards their closing, a membership to the Sports Plex. it was about \$550. depends on if they're single or family or not. The also reimbursement on their utility hookups. So, they're getting the benefit of getting to work with the company so the company can actually see them. It's not just a 10-minute interview where they have no clue they actually get to watch them work, they get to gain the skills. I mean, it just benefits, everybody all around. And Opelika, like Donal was saying, is a very veteran-friendly city. We have two

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Metal of Honor winners, I mean, the VFW, American Legion, DAV, everything around here, uh, just work so well, and I'm grateful to actually be a part of it.

**HOST:** That's just um; I mean, it's so obvious why you all won, a talking about this. Just amazing partnerships and spectacular opportunities, I mean, getting to the veterans, as you put it, you know, really, really, before they're veterans. So, there's not that break and being in this very supportive, obviously veteran-friendly environment, and then the whole internship component of it. I mean, that's just, that's beautiful. Let's say somebody wanted to do this, and we've already heard that that you know there's some duplication efforts going on right now, and with great reasons. What's some advice that you would give? Maybe some lessons you've learned through this? Love to hear advice on, on how others can make a success of a similar program.

**Donal:** As far as when I retired from the Army in 2004, this is light years. I could've, I could have saved six years of my life wandering aimlessly around with a program like this. You know, I went, I did, I was a warehouse manager, I had a business administration degree. Shortly after I got out, I'd worked on it while I was in, and I worked in as a warehouse manager for about two years. and that did not help my bad back that I got in the army. And so I went into IT thinking I'd be spending most of that time behind a computer. Well, that didn't work either. A lot of time crawling through attics, running cable and fiber optics. So, I mean, it was a six-year waste of my life until I got my BRNE counselor was working with the state intensive service coordinator, and he mentioned to him that there was a job coming available with the state and the VET program and that's how I ended up here. And I've been doing this for the last 12 years, so it would have saved me six years of my life that were are pretty much just gone wandering around, you know, and you know, it had to develop, but the TAP when I got out in 2004 was a week long. We were in civilian clothes for a week. We heard different things. We worked on a resume, and that was pretty much it. So it the it's a light years better than what it used to be, you know, and it'll it allows the veteran, the transitioning service member, to focus on or get focused on what he wants to do. Like they were

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saying in the video that you know, that we produced for the award, you know if you, you may not like it but, at least you find out within 120 days that you don't like that and you don't waste year after year after year, you know you can scratch that one off, and try different one you know. So, I think in that it personally it would have helped me. I mean I wasted, like I said, six years trying to figure, renegotiate because I hadn't had a different job in 20 years.

**HOST:** And that's what so many veterans go through. I mean, what you've described is, is an experience that so many veterans go through. and I do think something really special about the program. So, I really appreciate that story. I think that that really drives it home to hear that, that difference. But yeah, I mean, you know, Robert, what are some of the what were some of the trip up some of the things that took you by surprise that you were like? Oh, I thought that was gonna work, but it didn't work, so now I have to pivot and try something different. Where are there any lessons learned along the way that and things that you might say, hey, be ready for this, or be prepared for this, to someone who wanted to do a similar thing?

**Robert:** I mean, it runs so well. I mean, I don't really have. The biggest thing when I speak to veterans, they just talk about how much less stressful the transition period is being able to come work with the company, and a lot of them have families, so a lot of them are terrified to actually exit, but being able to work at the company, being offered the job, there's no floating period like I talked about, cause some of the veterans that I'll talk to, they'll be out for a year, and they're still trying to figure out how to do a resume and do this and do that, and it's just like it's kind of sad really. So the fact that this program kind of checks every box, it's been great, especially for, like the Department of Corrections for Alabama. I mean the fact that they were hurting so bad for people, the fact that all of a sudden they have all these in shape veterans who are ready to go, they were very excited to start hiring people. So, it's been, it's been great. I don't really know about any trip-ups at this point.

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**Donal:** I think I think one thing we talked about that was kind of a trip up, and it wasn't a big trip up because each entity kind of worked itself out, but if it was far enough away from Fort Benning that they couldn't drive back and forth, they would have to stay overnight, and each entity kind of figured out how to deal with that on their own. As far as DOC, they have a training center, obviously, they had to be certified, so the length of time that it took to go through the training process for DOC was actually shorter than the 120 days. It was 90 days, if I'm not mistaken. So, they could go be certified and work for 20 days in the prison, go back out processing and move directly there, and by then, you know, they found a house and a community live in, and kind of gotten into the swing of things. I think that was one slip-up they had, if I'm not mistaken, you know, if it was further away that they couldn't drive back and forth in a day, you know, it was too long a drive to find housing.

**Robert:** Yeah, if it exceeds 50 miles, then they have to provide housing. So the fact that Opelika is so close, that's kind of what, I guess, tripped Auburn up, as far as the time to get them approved for the whole blanketed city program, it took them longer just because they're outside of that limit.

**HOST:** Sam, you were going to jump in and say something there, too. You want to, you want to add some?

**Sam:** Sure. I was just going to piggyback on something that both Donal and Robert hit on, and I think, you know, there are it truly takes a village to prepare people to come out of the military and to integrate into civilian society in the workforce, and so on. And I think there are a lot of partners that do little pieces to that, but this is what brings it all together. This is these types of initiatives are what puts jobs in hands. These are initiatives that changes lives. it changes families. Umm. And I think you know there's a lot of data out there on the military as, as a family business because about 80% or 80 plus percent of the folks that join the military have an immediate family member that also served. So it's important that as we integrate people back into our civilian

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workforce, that they're having a good experience because the next generation of our military is coming out of those families. So, things like this do make a difference; they help to, you know, we've all got a story of how we came out, and as Donal said, time wasted. Time spent trying to figure things out this is, this is huge, this is something like I said that put jobs in the hands of 110 people last year and I'm sure it's gonna continue on, and getting this on a national stage is huge as well, because every other state across this nation's looking at it and saying how do we do this, and every military base is able to look at this and say how. do we make this work for us? So, it's much bigger than I think what we're hearing today, and I don't think we can overemphasize the impact that it could have on our transitioning service members and their families

**HOST:** Thank you. That is so right. I think you are, I mean, so completely correct, and honestly that's, Sam, that's a perspective I don't even think I took on it, you're really preparing the next generation as well with the positive transition experience. I mean, that's, I never really thought of it that way, but you're absolutely right. That's part of what, what this is all about, is also making this attractive for future members of our military as well, to let them know that they are going to be taken care of upon transition and not forgotten. So, so huge. So, this is a question for Robert in particular, but anybody can jump in by all means, but what's one piece of advice that you would give to a transitioning service member?

**Robert:** When it comes to the career skills program, I mean, they can do more than one internship, so they don't have to be locked into the entire 120 days with one employer. I mean, if they if they need to, if they are interested in HVAC or electrician or welding or whatever, uh, they're interested in in having a career in, they can do multiple internships. So I would say to take advantage of the time that they have before they get out to figure out what it is they really want to do.

**HOST:** That's, that's great advice. I think that's fantastic and really across the board. Are there any, anything we haven't talked about yet or any final thoughts, anything you

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really want to emphasize and make sure that our listeners here from this conversation? If they take nothing else away from this, what do you want them to know?

**Robert:** Stop by your local Career Center. I mean, we have the connections, and I mean, I mean we can help people work where they want to go. So that's my final statement.

**Donal:** Yeah, I think we get a bad name sometimes, and you and you got to understand, you know, sometimes it works out, and sometimes it doesn't. It's like life, you know, but we're trying the best we can to make it work for the mass amount of people. I ran into a Vietnam veteran one day when I was traveling and we got to talking, he was talking about how horrible they were treated when they got back and I said yeah, because of you, things were better for me, and because of things were like they were for me, they're better for the generation now. So, we just have to keep building on that, and sometimes it seems like it's too big a task to conquer, but if we keep chipping away at it, we can get there. It's obvious we're getting there, you know, so that's my final word of wisdom.

**Sam:** And if I could piggyback on what Donal just said, I think there's just a plethora of resources out there for military members, but it's tough. They're getting a lot of information, as you said earlier, Donal, in a short time, and the more that we can bring those resources together, as Alabama did in this award in this initiative, the more we can bring those resources together and simplify it for them, you know, taking, taking the Army Career Skills program and merging it with the needs of employers in a city that's within commuting distance of a major military base, and just kind of bringing that all together for them so they don't have to, I think makes it much easier because transitions not easy. You're still trying to hold down your military position. You've still got a mission to support. You've got a family to support, and at the same time, you've gotta plan for your future. You gotta make sure you have a job that you can continue to put food on the table and a roof over everybody's head. So that's a lot, that's a lot to go through, and



## NVTI Podcast Series

# 2023 Mark Sanders Award Winners

things like this make a difference. They make it a huge difference for those folks so, that this this is good stuff, and this is stuff that I hope to see replicated across the nation.

**HOST:** Thank you so much Robert, Donal, and Sam, for joining us for today's podcast and sharing how the Opelika Career Center in Alabama exhibited exceptional workforce and job market assistance to veterans, earning them the 2023 Mark Sanders Award. To our listeners, if you would like more information about serving veterans, please visit [nvti.org](http://nvti.org) to access resources such as this podcast. We are constantly adding new material at [nvti.org](http://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](http://www.nvti.org).