

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH CHARLES CICCOLELLA, ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF LABOR FOR THE VETERANS EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING SERVICE VIA TELECONFERENCE TIME: 3:29 P.M. EDT DATE: WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 20, 2008

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LIEUTENANT JENNIFER CRAGG (Office of the Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs): So with that, I'd like to go ahead and get started and say hello. And I'd like to welcome you all to the Department of Defense's Bloggers Roundtable for Wednesday, August 20th, 2008.

My name is Lieutenant Jennifer Cragg, and I'm with the Office of the Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs. And I'll be moderating our call today.

A note to the blogger on the line, as soon as -- also when Bryant comes on -- please remember to clearly state your name and the blog or organization that you're with.

And today our guest is Charles -- people often call him "Chick" -- Ciccolella -- if I said that right, sir -- MR. CICCOLELLA: Yes, you did. Thank you very much. Thanks.

LT. CRAGG: -- the assistant secretary of Labor for the Veterans Employment and Training Service, who will discuss the Department of Labor's new website which is aimed at employers seeking to hire traumatic brain injury and post-traumatic stress disorder veterans. And this website is called America's Heroes at Work.

So with that, sir, I'm going to turn it over to you. And you can start with an opening statement, if you'd like.

MR. CICCOLELLA: Well, thank you very much. And thank all of -- all of you all for dialing in and listening.

We are very happy today to have launched a very important new Department of Labor initiative. And we did this at the National Press Club. The initiative is called America's Heroes at Work. And it's an initiative that is managed by two agencies in the Department of Labor: the Office of Disability Employment Policy and the agency that I belong to, and that's the Veterans Employment and Training Service.

And the initiative, America's Heroes at Work, really focuses on the employment challenges of our returning veterans from the war on terror if they are living with a brain injury or living with a stress disorder, whether it's

combat operational stress or, you know, the clinically diagnosed post-traumatic stress.

Now, we have a very important purpose in this initiative and that, of course, is to help our transitioning veterans with traumatic brain injury and/or post-traumatic stress disorder succeed in the workplace.

And I think all of us have read the articles about returning veterans and so we know that in addition to those coming back who are maybe wounded and injured in sort of the traditional sense, those who were wounded by bullets or made -- have had amputations or things like that -- we know that there are some silent injuries, and we know that a number of our service members are coming back with some level of brain injury as the result of blast injuries or successive blast injuries, or may be coming back with stress.

And there have been some figures quoted out there by some of the folks who have studied this issue, and so we know that it's a significant enough issue that we want to pay some serious attention to it. And that's what's happening at the Department of Defense level, and it's certainly happening at the VA and the Department of Labor, because all three agencies are collaborating and working together to help make the transition of our veterans back to the civilian workplace and to their communities as smooth as we can make it.

The kinds of injuries that we're talking about -- sometimes they're referred to as silent injuries. They sometimes can lead to things like headaches or vertigo or balance problems, sometimes things like anxiety and sleep disturbances. And they can also lead to some cognitive issues, including, you know, memory deficits and things like that, concentration issues.

And -- but we also know that as our service members fold back into their jobs or go into work in the first place that they can succeed in their jobs. And we know that employers are in a talent war today, and they are particularly focused and interested in hiring veterans. And we also know that these kinds of injuries -- in most cases, there are some very simple workforce supports that can help individuals succeed in their jobs. And we also know that employment plays absolutely a major role in the rehabilitation of our service members, regardless of the kind of injuries that they may have.

Now, employers understand this. Employers are looking for veterans. They're looking for the best employees they can possibly get. And it's also clear -- and this is what we knew at the Department of Labor, working with the Department of Veterans Affairs, Department of Defense, with the Defense Brain Injury Center and the Defense Center of Excellence for the Study of Post-Traumatic Stress and Traumatic Brain Injury -- that employers do have a sense about these injuries, and that they want to help. But we want to make sure that they have the education and information that they might need, to help service members who may have a problem with post-traumatic stress or brain injury.

And that's what our initiative is about. And we've launched a very comprehensive website. It is located at www.americasheroesatwork.gov. And on that website, there is a huge amount of information, for employers, that informs them, informs the human resources managers and as well the workforce development systems and others, on the kinds of very simple accommodations that they can make to our service members, if they return with TBI or post-traumatic stress.

And so on that website, you're going to find a lot of resources, factsheets, reference guides, training tools and real-life success stories. And

I think I'll just end it right there, except to say that the collaboration today -- by the Defense Department, the Department of Veterans Affairs and in this case, this initiative led by the Department of Labor -- is really, absolutely superb. And you know, it's like one agency now working together collaboratively, to make the transition of our service members as smooth as it can possibly be.

I guess the only other thing that I would say is that most of the brain injuries are very, very mild concussions that can be healed up very quickly. And most of the post-traumatic stress disorder, properly treated, can also be cured very easily. So let me leave it at that and let's get to some of your questions.

LT. CRAGG: Thank you, sir. And while you were speaking, I know, another caller had joined us.

Is that Bryant?

Q Bryant Jordan, yeah.

LT. CRAGG: Okay, great.

So we're going to go ahead with Carla first. Then we'll go with Bryant.

Carla, go ahead.

Q I just wondered whether there were any specific incentives being offered for employers, to hire disabled veterans. MR. CICCOLELLA: Well, you know, there is a tax credit that is called the Work Opportunity Tax Credit. And Congress has been working legislation, to make that tax credit even more well known to employers.

What I'm finding now is that employers are beginning to use that tax credit and particularly when they hire, you know, a disabled veteran.

But if you go up on our website, you will also see that -- and I'm just reading from it -- that there are several tax incentives available to help employers cover the cost of accommodations. And there's a small business tax credit, which is an IRS -- defined in the IRS code. And all that information's on the website and the information about the work opportunity tax credit is also on there.

So I think the answer to your question is yes.

LT. CRAGG: And I don't know if anybody else is on the line. I hear typing or rustling of papers. So just, if you can -- just an admin note -- just keep it to the minimum as possible.

The next person is Bryant, if Bryant --

MR. CICCOLELLA: Earthquake here. I'm sorry.

LT. CRAGG: No, no, no, no. I just wanted to make sure -- I wanted to make sure I heard you correctly.

MR. CICCOLELLA: Oh yeah, yeah.

LT. CRAGG: Bryant, please go ahead.

Q Thank you very much. I was wondering, are there any -- are there any particular sectors of business or industry that seem more taken with this, are more involved with this program?

MR. CICCOLELLA: You mean business sectors who are receiving their veterans back, their employees back, or particular industries where service members go?

Q Yeah, where service members who have suffered these kinds of injuries may be going, yes.

MR. CICCOLELLA: Well, you know -- you know, service members come back from the military and they're very well-qualified. They've got a lot of experience, education, training. And, of course, that's before they go in the military. It's enhanced while they're in the military. So they're getting a great deal of experience and skills in the military, hard skills as well as the -- as the soft skills. You know, a lot of service members will go into first responder type occupations: the police, EMTs, firemen, that sort of thing. And that's very appealing to a number of our servicemembers. And so, you know -- and those are professions that have, you know, similar kinds of experiences and those individuals may also experience the kind of injuries that we're talking about.

But in general, our service members come back and they go into all sorts of lines of work. So I don't really think you can peg it to one particular, you know, vocational area or occupational area.

Q Well, again -- again, I'm specifically asking about service members who are coming back with, you know, brain injuries, TBIs.

MR. CICCOLELLA: Okay. Let me make sure I understand the question.

Q All right. I'm talking about veterans who come back with brain injuries. I mean, are you seeing them in the same kind of numbers as those with non-brain -- (audio break) -- first responder -- (audio break)?

MR. CICCOLELLA: Well, I don't think we have any data on that. I'm not sure where you're going with the question. I just don't -- I don't think we have any data on, you know -- we don't track service members after they leave the military in terms of what their occupations are. We know some -- through our surveys at Bureau of Labor Statistics, we know some of the career fields that they go to, but the information that we have would not indicate, you know, that they -- they're going more frequently to first responder type jobs, if that's the question.

Q Well, I asked that -- I asked the question of where they were going because I -- as I understand, your website is intended to -- at getting employers who are trying to find, to hire service members who have traumatic brain injury. But if that's the case, then you may have some kind of inkling as to which employers, which -- at least which segments of the -- of industry and business are -- more than others may be hiring these veterans. But apparently you don't have any data like that.

MR. CICCOLELLA: No. No. I mean, we know that service members are more inclined to work for, you know, companies with -- you know, that are more structured. We know those kinds of things. But service members come back and work in all sectors across America.

Q Yes. I understand that. Okay. Thank you.

LT. CRAGG: And Carla, if you want to go back and -- Carla and Bryant, if you want to go back and forth, I have some questions that I'll ask toward the tail end. So if you want to continue --

Q I just had -- are veterans offered any specific transitioning training in terms of coping skills for, you know, cognitive issues, concentration, memory and that? Is there any specific attention paid to that for the transitioning members?

MR. CICCOLELLA: Well, all service members, when they leave the military, go through a transition process that includes separation counseling, employment -- the opportunity to attend employment workshops, and of course there are Department of Veterans Affairs briefings. So they're briefed in that regard. At those sessions -- and I will say at all of those sessions there's the opportunity for a service member to self-identify if they have particular issues, and get a assistance, whatever that assistance is -- medical or counseling or anything else -- either while they're in the military before they're discharged or after they leave the military.

Now, the other thing that's very significant is that prior to deployments today, our service members receive a health assessment. I'm sure you're aware of that. And when they come back, they receive a health assessment, and then six months later, after they're discharged, they receive a health assessment. And the Department of Defense and the Department of Veterans Affairs -- and I can't speak for them, but I do know that they work very closely together to encourage the identification of these issues, whether they're brain injury or stress disorders or issues, so that they can be treated. And that's because we certainly know so much more about these issues today.

Q Thank you.

LT. CRAGG: And Bryant, do you have a question?

Q Yes, I do. Thank you. How would you measure the success of this new website?

MR. CICCOLELLA: Well, in the traditional manner, we'll measure it in terms of, obviously, the number of unique visitors that we receive. We will also work with the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Department of Defense to determine whether more individuals are self-identifying. But I think, you know, this is an outreach initiative. It's an outreach initiative to employers. And obviously, it benefits the service members, as well.

Q Yes.

MR. CICCOLELLA: We'll also reach out to the workforce system, America's publicly funded workforce system -- that's the system that has over 3,000 job centers or one-stop career centers -- to make sure that they have this information. And we'll be pulsing them, because we have veteran employment

representatives in over 2,000 of those workforce centers. So we'll be able to get some additional metrics from that

Q Okay. Thank you.

LT. CRAGG: And sir, I have a question. This is Lieutenant Cragg. On the website, you have a link that says, where do I find these vets? For any of our listeners, because this will be available for any listeners on DefenseLink, dod.mil, where would they find these veterans? Can you explain? MR. CICCOLELLA: Sure, absolutely. And I think you've hit on a real important point. You know, the issue for us at the Labor Department is clearly connecting the veterans with the employers. Employers want to hire veterans. In many cases, they don't know, you know, how to hire veterans or they don't know where to find them so they can hire them.

Several years ago, we launched a campaign, HireVetsFirst. And on our website, hirevetsfirst.gov, there is an employer zone and a veteran zone. And employers can go up on that website and find veterans through the public workforce system, through our veteran employment representatives, and they can connect to their local one-stop career center and contact that career center and avoid the headhunting exercise. Because the veteran employment representatives and the workforce system all provide priority to veterans who use that system, and they also provide extensive outreach to employers.

So in a sense, we drive employers to the hirevetsfirst.gov website so it makes it easier for them to find veterans.

Another way that this happens is at the transition points, because what's happening at the transition points, of course, service members are in many cases -- most cases -- attending the employment workshop that the Department of Labor facilitates. Many of our transition managers, working for the Army, Navy, Air Force and Marine corps, at the same time, or right after the transition sessions, the employment workshops, are holding veteran career fairs. And many of the employers who come to those veteran career fairs actually come with their job lists. And they can accept resumes. And so you start the process right there at the transition point.

So there are a number of ways that employers can connect with veterans. And I think the key is to go up on the HireVetsFirst website.

The other thing I would tell is that last year we did a blitz of job fairs around Veterans Day, and we held over 200 career -- veteran career fairs around the country, which really raises the awareness of the value that veterans bring to the workplace and communities. And we'll be doing the same thing this year.

LT. CRAGG: And Bryant or Carla? Because I have another question, if you guys want to go ahead.

Q I'm fine for now. Go ahead.

LT. CRAGG: Okay. So, you answered my question about how do employers find veterans. How do veterans find employers? I know you said about the career fairs and all that, they can go to the website, but any other tips or advice?

MR. CICCOLELLA: Absolutely. Well, obviously, they can go up on the hirevetsfirst.gov website. That's one way to do it. And we teach them that in the employment workshop. But we also teach veterans in the employment workshop how to translate their skills, their education, their training and their experience onto resumes that employers can understand. At the same time, we teach them how to do networking and we teach them how to do interviewing, because those aren't things that, you know, military people do on a regular basis.

And we encourage them to do job searches on the state Workforce job boards and with, for example, the military affinity websites -- you know, like RecruitMilitary. And we encourage them to go up on the HireVetsFirst website and found out where the career fairs are and, you know, to attend those.

So we work with the service members as well to begin introducing them to the paths toward finding employers.

LT. CRAGG: Thank you, sir.

And Carla, Bryant?

Q What types of push is there in terms of getting this information to veterans' facilities, VA medical centers and vet centers, you know, who treat these guys and see these guys with PTSD and TBI after they get out?

MR. CICCOLELLA: You mean how are we going to --

Q How are you communicating this new program and HireVetsFirst? I mean, I really spend a lot of time at our veterans center and at our VA medical facility here, and I've never -- this is the first, really, I'm aware of this, as well as the HireVetsFirst.

MR. CICCOLELLA: Okay. And I understand that -- well, not the HireVetsFirst, I don't, but the other part I do.

Look, this is a partnership. And in the press conference that we did and the roll-out that we did, we had the VA present and the Department of Defense present as well. As a matter of fact, the undersecretary of VA for Health Affairs was there.

We will work very closely with the Department of Veterans Affairs to make sure that they have -- at the secretary's level and the undersecretary's level -- the information and the fact sheets. And we'll obviously encourage them -- and obviously they'll do it -- to send this information or convey this information down their chain of command to all the hospital administrators and throughout the divisions.

And I think especially we'll do outreach to the vet centers. And we'll do that in -- we'll let the VA do that, obviously, with their communication channels, but also we have veteran employment representatives who are disabled veteran outreach program specialists. They specialize in assisting disabled veterans and helping them get into employment. And they have an outreach responsibility to the vet centers as well. And we are doing extensive research -- I'm sorry, extensive effort right now to convey this initiative, which we just rolled out today -- to convey this initiative to them.

So it's all part of, you know, our public awareness campaign. And I would ask that, you know, we need your help, as well, to convey the message that we're trying to send here.

Q Well, and I'll certainly -- well, certainly the bloggers will be doing their part. But I have one other suggestion, in that this new population of veterans is so technology-savvy. And if you go to, like, the VA website or USAjobs.com, you know, where guys are looking for work, these links should be there. There should be icons that allow these guys to go immediately -- including employers who post on these sites -- to go directly back to hirevetsfirst.gov as well as the American Heroes at Work, because they're not there, even when you go to specialized tabs like disabled veterans and work programs.

There aren't links to these things between the various government sites, and it can be very frustrating for these guys, and especially if they're tuned to looking for a job on specific sites and they're not getting this additional information. It's a sorry state of affairs.

But, you know, we'll do our best to get the information out, but there are other things, I think, that can be done.

MR. CICCOLELLA: Well, you've really made an excellent point and I thank you very much. And I'm going to write your point down because I fully endorse that, I really do, that on websites like the OPM website where you have servicemembers -- and a lot of servicemembers do want to work for the federal government -- that these links be there and certainly on the websites, you know, that the Department of Veterans Affairs has.

And I think, you know, what you just told us is that we need to sort of plan a linking campaign for America's Heroes at Work. So we'll take your admonishment and we'll operationalize it. How's that?

Q Works for me.

MR. CICCOLELLA: Yeah. Thank you very much. I mean, that's great.

Q Sounds good. Don't forget usajobs.gov too. (Laughs.) That's a great one.

MR. CICCOLELLA: Well, that's exactly right and that's what I meant by OPM. But you are exactly right. And you know, I talk to a lot of the servicemembers in their transition employment workshops, their TAP workshops. And what I find is that many of the servicemembers want to work for the federal government.

You know, they've built up that great institutional loyalty, to the military service they're in, and to carry that ethos, you know, sort of forward, to serving the federal government. So you make a very good point.

Q But you know, you might also want to, you know, contact monster.com and, you know, all of those huge websites.

Q Military.com is owned by monster.com.

Q Oh, okay.

Q So you've got us right here.

MR. CICCOLELLA: Well, but you know and you just got me thinking about this, you know, we have outreach to the military affinity websites. There are a dozen or so very effective entities out there, affinity groups, military affinity groups that are working, to help veterans link with employers and employment opportunities. And we need to reach out to them.

And so in our linking campaign, and I will talk to the folks who are working that campaign, I assure you, they have done an absolutely magnificent job, of getting this initiative coordinated with these federal agencies and now publicly out there. So I know that they're going to be extremely receptive. And my guess is, they're already thinking about those things. Q Well, you know, we can't leave things like the Military Officers Association of America -- they have a huge impact and a huge readership and membership -- as well as VFWs and, you know, DAV. I mean, there are private organizations, you know, the Iraqi and Afghanistan war veterans. There's, you know, Vets for Freedom.

There are tremendous numbers of military-related membership organizations that, I'm certain, would be absolutely first up on the list, to put a link up on their sites and to become familiar with these programs and disseminate the information about it.

MR. CICCOLELLA: Well, I appreciate your thought. And on MOAA, they have already agreed; they're going to link to America's Heroes at Work. And I'm going to talk to the American Legion, as a matter of fact, on Sunday, to their commissions out in Phoenix. And I'm going to talk about this as well, because the veterans service organizations can be extremely effective in carrying this message. And it's not only the American Legion and the VFW but the DAV and the PVA also have very effective programs now that are focused on helping veterans get into employment. So we intend to outreach to them in a very big way.

Q Good.

Q Very good.

LT. CRAGG: Well, sir, thank you so much. For the bloggers that joined the call, there were just two other people that were here just to gain more awareness of this new website. It was Natalie Fry (sp) and Tom Kaminski (sp). Do you have any follow-up questions or anything?

Q No, I don't have any questions. Thank you so much for letting us join in. Very informative. And we'll certainly check out the websites and explore what we can learn there. So thanks again for the opportunity.

Q Thank you very much.

MR. CICCOLELLA: And Jennifer, listen, you know, you're -- please contact Mike Biddle (sp) for any further information that we can provide to you and the bloggers. And you know, we would love to be partners with you all on the outreach on this.

LT. CRAGG: Well, with that, sir, I can turn it over to you, if you have any final statements that you want to add. And certainly I'll get a hold of Michael after the call. But if you have any closing thoughts --

MR. CICCOLELLA: Well, you know, my closing thought is sort of the same thought that I always have. You know, we have the greatest military that we have ever had. We have the most courageous and motivated service members today in the military. They come in as volunteers. They're extremely well-qualified. While they're in, they gain great education, experience and training. And when they get out, I like to say that they're an employer's dream, because they're exactly what employers tell us that they're looking for. And let's face it; employers are in a talent war today. They want the best employees.

So you know, this is about helping our veterans, particularly those who are wounded or injured or afflicted by something like brain injury or post-traumatic stress, to facilitate and help their transition into not just employment and not just jobs, but jobs that lead to really great careers.

But the really good news today is that more and more employers are understanding the value that veterans bring to the workforce, and they understand that hiring veterans is really, really good for business.

So I think maybe that's the thought that I would leave you with.

And we can't do enough for our servicemembers. And I think that's the way that we feel at the Department of Labor and I think I would speak for the VA and DOD as well. And so we're going to continue to make this initiative as well as all of our other programs that focus on transitioning servicemembers and veterans as effective as we can.

I really, again, want to thank you all for what you're doing every day to help our veterans.

Q Thank you, sir. Thank you very much.

LT. CRAGG: Thank you, sir. And today's program will be available online at the bloggers link on dod.mil, where you'll be able to access a story based on today's call along with the official bio, audio file and then print transcript.

Again, thank you for our guest, Mr. Ciccolella, and our blogger participants. I really appreciate it. And this concludes today's event.

Q Hey, Jennifer?

LT. CRAGG: Yes, ma'am.

Q Jennifer, it's Carla. I have one last request. Is it possible to disseminate a widget for America's Heroes at Work and the hirevetsfirst.gov site so that bloggers can pick them up and stick them on their site?

LT. CRAGG: That's something that I can talk with Michael off-line. But thank you, Carla, for that suggestion.

Q Okay.

LT. CRAGG: And then Michael will inform Mr. Ciccolella about it.

MR. CICCOLELLA: Absolutely, okay. And I'll talk to Mike about it, Jennifer.

LT. CRAGG: Okay, roger that. Anything else, anybody?

Q Nope, that's good. Thanks so much, Jennifer. Great job.

LT. CRAGG: Okay. Thank you all.

MR. CICCOLELLA: Thank you, everybody.

END.