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# TECHNICAL REPORT

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## Employer Partnership Program Analysis of Alternatives

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## Summary

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The Employer Partnership Program (EPP) was launched by the Chief of the Army Reserve in April 2008 to foster employer readiness for mobilization of their reserve and guard employees, to make hiring and retaining reservists attractive to civilian employers, and to identify opportunities to share the costs of training and employee benefits such as pensions and health care. In support of these long-term goals, efforts through September 2010 have focused primarily on reducing unemployment among reserve component (RC) service members, improving linkages between military and civilian skills and occupations, and establishing closer working relationships with employers. One of the primary features of the program is a job search website for RC service members, veterans, and family members that allows employer partners to recruit employees from this population. The website also lists jobs from state employment agencies and other sources, so it serves as a resource to help unemployed RC service members find jobs. Originally intended to serve Army Reserve soldiers, the program, including access to the website, was extended to the Army National Guard in 2009, and to the other services' reserve components in 2010.

The Army Reserve asked RAND Arroyo Center to examine experience with the Employer Partnership Program, identify candidate occupations and/or skill sets for partnerships, identify the costs and savings associated with employer partnerships, and make recommendations to expand and strengthen the program.<sup>1</sup> To assess the program's progress in reducing unemployment among RC service members, improving linkages between military and civilian skills and occupations, and establishing closer working relationships with employers, the research team conducted three analytic tasks. First, we analyzed data collected from the EPP job search website on the total number of visitors and users over time, as well as more detailed data on the military status, pay grade, and military occupations of website users. Second, we conducted case studies of seven Army Reserve units located in four metropolitan areas across the United States to examine opportunities for RC service members to find civilian jobs related to their military skills. Third, we conducted interviews with 25 stakeholders, including current and former program staff, program support managers, and employer partners, regarding their experiences with the program and suggestions for improvement.

The program continued to evolve during our study, with turnover in program staff, expansion to other services' reserve components, and the launch of a new website in November 2010. We note these changes and adjust our analysis and recommendations as appropriate. Although some of our findings may no longer be directly applicable to the Employer Partnership Program, they can help inform other efforts to support RC service members and veterans leaving

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<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, existing data do not allow us to identify which RC service members were hired through the EPP or the employers who hired them. Therefore, we were unable to quantify the costs and benefits associated with the program.

active duty who are seeking civilian employment. For example, the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Reserve Affairs' Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Program launched the Heroes 2 Hired website ([www.H2H.jobs](http://www.H2H.jobs)) in 2011 for soldiers, veterans, and family members seeking private-sector employment opportunities.

## Reducing Unemployment

Unemployment rates in the Army reserve components have generally been close to the U.S. national average since 2003, but they began to rise above the national rate in 2009. Unemployment has been particularly high among junior enlisted personnel (E1–E4), rising to 25 percent in the U.S. Army Reserve (USAR) and 23 percent in the Army National Guard (ARNG) as of December 2009. By comparison, the national unemployment rate for the 18-to-24 age group was about 18 percent in December 2009. Given that the authorized Selected Reserve end strengths of the USAR and ARNG in FY10 were 206,000 and 359,000, respectively, there were substantial numbers of unemployed RC soldiers who could benefit from the EPP job search website, in addition to other potential users (employed RC soldiers looking for new jobs, veterans, family members, and survivors).

After the website was launched in October 2008, the number of monthly visitors averaged about 5,000 through November 2009, while the estimated number of unemployed USAR soldiers rose from 17,000 to 24,000. The number of website visitors spiked following publicity events in January and April 2010 and plateaued at around 10,000 per month as of August 2010. The percentage of visitors who clicked on job listings and filled out a registration form remained steady, at about only one-third of website visitors. This pattern suggests that many website visitors did not find job listings that were suitable or sufficiently appealing to them. Although junior enlisted personnel were almost half of website users during a seven-week period when more detailed website data were collected (May–June 2010), they were equivalent to only about 6.5 percent of the estimated number of unemployed, junior enlisted soldiers. Website usage was highest relative to the estimated number of unemployed junior officers (O1–O3) but was still quite low at about 19 percent.<sup>2</sup>

During the seven-week data-collection period, there were 3,350 unique website users who viewed a total of almost 31,000 job listings. Seventy percent of users only viewed job listings on one visit during the seven weeks, and 21 percent only viewed one job listing. Unless these users were able to find a job after only one visit, they may not have thought the site was worth a return visit, or may not have found any additional job listings that were appealing to them. Users who made multiple visits also downloaded many more job listings. These results suggest that there is room for improvement in outreach to RC service members and attracting return visits to the job search website.

The EPP launched an updated website with additional features in November 2010, but there may be some remaining challenges to increasing website usage. First, some unemployed RC service members may not be aware of the website. As the program is expanded to the Army National Guard and the other reserve components, the target population will increase and the 20 Program Support Managers (PSMs), who work to raise awareness of and participation in

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<sup>2</sup> Since unemployed USAR soldiers only represent one possible source of website users, these rates are based on conservative estimates of the population of potential users.

the program among soldiers and their families and among employers, will be spread increasingly thin. Second, some unemployed RC service members may not have easy access to the Internet. As of 2009, about 70 percent of U.S. households had home Internet access, but there was considerable variation by race/ethnicity, education, and state. Internet access may be more problematic for junior enlisted personnel based on their likely educational attainment, particularly for African Americans and Hispanics. Third, the low percentage of website visitors who become registered users suggests that some visitors were not able to find job listings that were suitable or appealing to them. Improving search results, either by increasing the number of job listings or by modifying the website's search algorithms, could attract more visitors to become users and more users to return to the site for multiple visits.

### **Improving Linkages Between Military and Civilian Occupations**

The EPP program also seeks to enable soldiers to leverage the military training they receive into a job that recognizes and utilizes those skills. When there are close similarities between military and civilian occupations, the benefits of a closer skill match extend to the employer, who may avoid initial training costs and has ready access to a well-trained employee; to the soldier, who is able to take advantage of his or her military occupational training; and to the Army, which can be more confident that those occupational skills are kept current. To examine the effectiveness of the EPP website at identifying opportunities for RC service members to obtain civilian jobs related to their military occupations, we conducted case studies of seven USAR units located in four metropolitan areas: Baltimore, Maryland; Baton Rouge, Louisiana; Des Moines, Iowa; and Las Vegas, Nevada. For each unit, we identified the top five civilian equivalent occupations and searched for jobs in the metropolitan area on the EPP website using the Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) code for enlisted personnel or Area of Concentration (AOC) code for officers as a search term.

The case study results indicated that there were some problems with the crosswalk that was used by the EPP website to map from military to civilian occupations. MOSs with similar skills sometimes got very different search results from the website. Some MOSs had no civilian equivalent and so did not return any job listings, particularly in combat arms but also in other fields, such as Psychological Operations and Military Intelligence. Some civilian occupations considered equivalent to MOSs were declining or were no longer broadly used by civilian employers (e.g., Computer Operators), whereas others using similar skills had large numbers of job listings (e.g., Network and Computer Systems Administrators). Thus, there should be an initial revision of the crosswalk; then, the EPP website should update it annually to keep abreast of changes in MOSs and civilian occupation titles. In addition, since some employer partners are looking for generic military skills and training rather than specific MOS skills, it would be helpful for the EPP website to offer an occupation category for generic military skills and training both to employers and to RC job seekers.

Stakeholders we interviewed also suggested some additional challenges to improving linkages between similar reserve and civilian occupations. RC service members may lack civilian credentials for jobs they are capable of performing in fields such as medicine, trucking,

and vehicle repair.<sup>3</sup> Although there are examples of some successes in incorporating civilian credentialing into military MOS training, some interviewees expressed frustration with a lack of progress in this area. In some cases, RC service members may not know or be able to communicate that they have the skills required for civilian jobs. They may need more hands-on assistance with career counseling or résumé building than PSMs were able to provide.

## **Establishing Closer Working Relationships with Employers**

Some employer partners that we interviewed had unmet expectations for the EPP. Some said they expected large numbers of job applicants, but they didn't know which job applicants came to them via the EPP website. Others said they would like to be able to reach out to potential applicants who are willing to identify themselves rather than waiting for RC service members to apply for jobs. Some of these issues will likely be resolved by the new EPP website, which will allow website users to create profiles and online résumés and employers to search through them.

PSMs are the primary means of outreach, both to RC service members and to employers, but there were only 20 spread out across the country. Given the size of their territories, they could not have a deep knowledge of local employer needs or make personal connections between RC service members looking for jobs and employers looking for applicants. Since turnover in these positions was relatively high, some employers expressed frustration at not knowing whom to contact when they wanted to communicate or raise a concern about the program.

Changes in the design and management of the EPP caused confusion and concern among former program staff, employer partners, and PSMs. These changes included an almost complete turnover in EPP central office staff in fall 2009, expansion to the ARNG and other reserve components, and a shift in priorities for PSMs from recruiting employer partners to increasing awareness and usage of the website by soldiers. Given the expansion to all reserve components, some wondered whether program management should move to the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Reserve Affairs or to another organization. Others wondered about the source of future funding. There was also a lack of coordination and considerable overlap with similar job search support services for RC service members, veterans, and family members provided by other military and government organizations, such as the Army Career and Alumni Program (ACAP) and the Partnership for Youth Success (PaYS). Better coordination and cooperation would leverage resources being spent by related programs to address common problems and would reduce confusion among RC service members and employers about the roles each program plays.

Finally, it was difficult to measure the overall effectiveness of the program in terms of the number of RC service members who found jobs through the EPP website. Due to the design of the website, users were transferred to the employer's website when they clicked on a job listing, so employers did not know if an applicant had come to them through the website and the EPP staff did not know how many job applications, interviews, or eventual hires of website users

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<sup>3</sup> Occupations such as these may also require state licensure, which would be easier to obtain if the soldier had the relevant civilian credentials.

were generated from the EPP website. EPP had to rely on PSMs who provide case management intervention or voluntary reports of this information by users.

## Recommendations

At the conclusion of our study in September 2010, we made several recommendations to the Army Reserve and EPP leadership. Some of our recommendations are specific to EPP, but others, such as website metrics, crosswalks from military to civilian occupations, and civilian credentialing, are applicable to other efforts to assist RC service members and veterans seeking civilian employment.

Low usage of the EPP job search website at the time of our study suggested that it may be necessary to invest additional resources in the program to increase outreach efforts and improve users' job search experience. As the program is expanded to other reserve components, additional staff and funding may be needed. The launch of the new website in November 2010 may increase user satisfaction and thus the number of return visits and job listings viewed. We recommend that EPP staff establish metrics for website usage, set goals to increase usage, and monitor progress against those goals. These metrics should include:

- Number of website visitors and users as a percentage of unemployed RC service members (or other measures of the number of potential users);
- Number of website users (who click on jobs and register to use the site) as a percentage of website visitors;
- Number of visits and jobs viewed per user; and
- Program costs per visitor, user, and RC service member hired through the website.

These metrics can serve as a guide to whether additional resources should be invested in the website or alternative approaches should be considered, such as an expanded network of PSMs to develop direct links between RC units and local employers.

In addition, EPP program staff should consider what EPP's unique role should be among other Army, Department of Defense, and government programs that provide employment services to RC service members, veterans, and family members, and explore opportunities to leverage and share resources with these programs.

As the EPP is expanded to other reserve components, the management structure and funding sources may need to be modified. Program management and responsibility for programming and budgeting could migrate to a defense-wide organization. If program management remains with the USAR, other reserve components should contribute to staffing and funding, since their members will also benefit from the program. Improved continuity of central office staff would also benefit the program, so that knowledge, experience, and personal contacts with employer partners are not lost. In addition, the number of PSMs should be increased to improve outreach to RC service members and employers. Their service territories could be based on a target population of RC service members per PSM.

Tracking website metrics is critical to meeting the EPP's objective to reduce unemployment among RC service members. If usage metrics do not improve after the launch of the new website, additional action may be needed to determine why unemployed RC service members are not using the website. Identifying whether the problem is a lack of awareness or Inter-

net access, user satisfaction with the website, or some combination of factors, is critical. One option would be to establish a feedback mechanism for website users, such as a pop-up window with a short survey or a sidebar encouraging comments and suggestions for improving the website. Another option would be to examine the best practices of other military and civilian job search organizations. In any case, it is important to ensure that users are satisfied with the website before launching extensive publicity campaigns, since bad experiences with the website could create unhappy visitors or users who are unlikely to return to the site or recommend it to others.

To increase synergies between reserve and civilian occupations, EPP staff should improve the website's mapping of military occupation codes to civilian occupation titles across all reserve components. Initial search results should include a broad range of relevant occupation titles that the user can narrow down if desired. Crosswalks developed by other military organizations, such as Army and Navy Credentialing Opportunities Online (COOL) and the Army Career and Alumni Program, could be used to aid this effort. EPP staff should also explore opportunities for RC service members to obtain civilian credentials related to their military occupations, either as part of their military training or by encouraging vendors to offer gap training, possibly coinciding with weekend drills or annual training periods.

There are several actions that EPP staff could take to establish closer relationships with employer partners. First, the benefits of the job search website should be made more transparent to employers, for example, by providing visibility of job applicants coming through the website and allowing employers to reach out to website users to directly market job opportunities. Second, EPP staff should develop a mapping of all RC units by location so that they can establish partnerships with local employers relevant to nearby unit types and provide information to employers about the size and type of RC units and the military occupations of RC service members near their location.<sup>4</sup> Such a mapping could also be used as a basis to develop closer relationships between employer partners and local units to share information on training and deployment schedules, recognize reserve- and guard-friendly employers, and discuss concerns such as civilian credentialing. Third, EPP staff should explore strategic opportunities to benefit both the reserve components and employers by targeting occupations with high recruiting and/or training costs or with shortages of qualified personnel in both the military and civilian sectors.

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<sup>4</sup> While some soldiers may travel considerable distances to drill, among website users, half lived within about 25 miles of their units.