

The New York Times

Helping Veterans Find Civilian Jobs

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Published: November 10, 2010

MANY veterans are finding that jobs in this difficult economy require skills and training they do not have. Government data shows a higher unemployment rate for recent veterans than for the general population.



Kevin Moloney for The New York Times

RETRAINING Through Veterans Green Jobs, Josh Kemp learned to weatherize homes and is now an energy auditor in Denver.

A Promise to Give Away Fortunes Stirs Debate

40 of the wealthiest Americans pledge to give away at least half of their fortunes, about \$600 billion. This, and more articles and multimedia about philanthropy.

A number of companies, including [Microsoft](#), [Wal-Mart](#), [J. C. Penney](#) and Activision Blizzard, which makes Guitar Hero and other video games, have stepped up with millions of dollars for programs that provide computer skills, green expertise and health care training. Many gifts were announced this week, tied to [Veterans Day](#).

Microsoft is giving \$2 million in cash and about \$4 million in software to programs that help former military members with technology skills, career counseling and job placement.

Ross Janson, 30, who recently left the Navy after nine years, signed up for computer courses at Veterans Inc., a nonprofit group based in Worcester, Mass., after he could not find a job using the aircraft-maintenance expertise he acquired on active duty.

“I couldn’t find anything as a mechanic, so I tried for just about anything else — fast food, copy places, you name it,” he said. He moved from the Virginia Beach area in

September and found Veterans Inc., which provided him with transitional housing at a group residence and is helping him get on his feet professionally.

Mr. Janson acknowledged that he needed “to put new skills into my bag of tricks” if he were going to find work.

Microsoft awarded Veterans Inc. \$200,000 and software to help train Mr. Janson and about 170 other vets, including some who served in the National Guard or the Reserves. [Denis Leary](#), the group’s executive director, said the grant would allow it to add more computer courses.

“We are trying to package our offerings so these vets will have a safe, affordable place to live and basic computer or other skills, so they can go out and get work to sustain themselves,” he said.

Microsoft began its veterans initiative this year. In March, unemployment among Iraq and Afghanistan veterans was 14.7 percent, before dropping to 10.2 percent in September, according to the [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#). The national unemployment rate was 9 percent that month.

Microsoft chose six nonprofit groups this week, including Per Scholas Inc. in New York, for its [Elevate America](#) grants for veterans, which include transitional assistance to spouses and families.

But placing retrained veterans in jobs may be growing tougher.

Veterans Inc. had an 89 percent placement rate in the fiscal year ended in June, said Allison Alaimo, its director of finance and development, but in the three months starting in August, the rate fell by one-third, to 56 percent, in the “extremely challenging job market.”

To help reintegrate veterans, the Wal-Mart Foundation is providing \$10 million over five years to nonprofit groups, focusing on job readiness and training and higher education.

Two years ago, it donated \$3.6 million to colleges and nonprofit groups, including \$750,000 to a group in Denver, [Veterans Green Jobs](#), which trains returning veterans for green industry jobs.

Josh Kemp, 30, an Army intelligence officer for eight years, including two tours in Iraq, was one beneficiary. After leaving the military, he earned a degree in psychology from Wichita State University in Kansas. But when he started looking for work in social services, he found that “in this economy it’s hard to find work with a bachelor’s degree, so I searched for entry-level work in other areas, but I had no luck.”

Mr. Kemp found Veterans Green Jobs on the Internet and applied in January, moved to Colorado and trained for four months. He found work as a technician weatherizing people's homes and in July was promoted to energy auditor. Now he reviews homes of people receiving state assistance to pay their energy bills and recommends energy-saving measures.

Through partnerships with state and local agencies, and grants, the group has created about 100 jobs, said William Doe, its chief executive.

The number of unemployed veterans persuaded Robert Kotick, chief executive of Activision Blizzard, to create a \$1 million foundation to help them. The company, based in Santa Monica, Calif., last week announced a second \$1 million gift.

This year, the company's [Call of Duty Endowment](#) helped 1,000 veterans, he said. Other groups around the country that help veterans with career placement and transitions include [Hire Heroes USA](#) in Georgia and [Pragmatic Works](#) in Florida.

In October, J. C. Penney and the clothing brand Joseph Abboud combined for a \$1 million gift for about 5,000 military veterans to buy business attire for the civilian workplace.

Another unusual, smaller effort is the [Farmer-Veteran Coalition](#), in Davis, Calif., which tries to recruit, train and place veterans in organic and other farming.

Michael O'Gorman, its executive director, said federal data showed that 16 percent of Americans lived in rural communities, while 45 percent of the military members were from rural areas — and faced high levels of unemployment there if they returned.

A former farmer and farm manager, Mr. O'Gorman gathered \$220,000 in financing, including \$50,000 from the comedian Lewis Black, to help veterans interested in farming. The coalition hosts five farming retreats, introducing around 20 veterans each session to agriculture as varied as raising organic fruits and vegetables, poultry, sheep and goats, to maintaining orchards and vineyards. It also lists farming jobs on its Web site.

After some false starts, Aaron Newsom, who spent six years in the Marine Corps, including a tour in Afghanistan, as an aircraft recovery specialist, found the Farmer-Veteran Coalition and learned of a retreat near his home in the Santa Cruz area.

"We stopped by a large garden, then an orchard with apple and pear trees, and an [organic food](#) stand," said Mr. Newsom, 27. "I knew then I wanted to know the biology of it all." He is now studying for a horticulture degree at a community college.

"It's a kind of healing," said Mr. O'Gorman of veterans who decide on farming, "and it's an income."