Help wanted for hard-hit vets

With returning soldiers’ unemployment rate exceeding national average, Wisconsin leads in seeking ways to help them find work

by Wisconsin Sen. Julie Lassa (senlassa@legis.wisconsin.gov)

A widespread as unemployment is in our society, it’s even worse for our returning military veterans.

While the national unemployment rate for non-veterans in 2011 was slightly above 8 percent, the rate for veterans was over 12 percent. Young veterans had an even higher unemployment rate of about 20 percent in 2011, and estimates of unemployment among disabled vets are as high as 50 percent. With the continuing drawdown of troops in Iraq and Afghanistan, the unemployment crisis for veterans is likely to get worse.

We owe our veterans better than that. When they return home from combat zones, often after serving multiple tours of duty, the challenges of readjusting to civilian life shouldn’t include struggling to find a job.

Since the Civil War, Wisconsin has been a leader in serving the needs of veterans, and that leadership has never been more important. That’s why, as ranking member of the Wisconsin Senate Committee on Economic Development and Veterans and Military Affairs, I was proud to introduce several new measures designed to give all veterans, and especially disabled vets, a helping hand in finding employment.

An incentive to help disabled vets

Right now we have about 15,000 working-age disabled veterans in Wisconsin, with about 3,700 looking for jobs each year.

To address this need, I was the lead Senate author of Wisconsin Act 212, which creates a tax incentive for employers to hire disabled veterans. The new law, which I introduced along with Republican Rep. Evan Wynn, offers employers who hire an unemployed disabled veteran for a full-time position a $10,000 tax credit over the course of four years. For a part-time position, the credit is a maximum of $5,000.

The amount of the credit will vary proportionately on the average number of hours the disabled veteran works each week over the course of the year. This credit will help employers meet any additional costs they incur in hiring disabled vets, and will help break down the barriers our disabled veterans face when they seek employment.

The cost of obtaining a professional license can also be a major obstacle to getting a job or starting a business. Act 209, which I introduced with Rep. Wynn and former Republican Sen. Pam Galloway, waives the fees for veterans to obtain a state license for such professions as architect, nurse and surveyor, as well as a wide array of other licenses, permits, certificates, approvals and other credentials issued by various state agencies.

In order to qualify for this waiver, the veteran must be a Wisconsin resident and have been honorably discharged from the U.S. armed forces. This new law will make career advancement easier for veterans, and make Wisconsin an even more veteran-friendly state.

Currently, state agencies can give hiring preference to disabled veterans, but only for non-professional or entry-level positions. However, our disabled veterans come back from service with all kinds of valuable skills, including advanced managerial and professional experience. If they qualify for professional positions or those above entry level, they should get the same hiring preference we currently give for lower-level positions.

Act 211, which I also introduced along with Rep. Wynn and Sen. Galloway, expands state agency hiring preferences for disabled veterans to all positions in the classified service of the state civil service system. While disabled veterans who are considered for a non-competitive appointment must still be qualified to perform the job, this new law will help give disabled vets an edge in seeking state employment.

I’m pleased that my legislative colleagues passed these important bills, and that Gov. Scott Walker signed them into law.

Entrepreneurship a promising path

Although there are programs at both the federal and state levels to assist veterans in their job search, they tend not to emphasize one of the most promising career avenues: entrepreneurship. Like others who face career dislocations in this economic downturn, veterans can make their own jobs by turning ideas for products and services into small-business ventures.

I had the opportunity to visit with a number of such veterans recently at an innovative business accelerator in Milwaukee, VETTransfer.

Other states, U.S. government also look to improve job prospects for veterans

As part of the American Jobs Act signed into law last fall, the federal government began offering two new veterans-related tax credits: The Returning Heroes credit offers up to $5,600 per year to businesses for hiring an unemployed veteran hired, and the Wounded Warriors credit offers up to $9,600 to businesses for hiring veterans with service-connected disabilities who have been unemployed for at least six months.

In the months following congressional action, several state legislatures have considered adopting their own tax credits for businesses that hire veterans.

Illinois passed a new law this year. The Illinois measure, SB 3241, sweetens an existing state incentive for businesses. Signed into law in May, it provides a tax credit of up to $5,000 for employers of post-9/11 veterans.

Also in May of this year, the Minnesota Legislature passed HF 247, a comprehensive tax bill which contained a credit for businesses that hire veterans. Despite his support of the hiring credit (a larger version of which he had proposed earlier), Democratic Gov. Mark Dayton vetoed the bill, saying other provisions in it were fiscally unsound. Michigan (SB 800 and HB 5144), Iowa (HF 2057 and SF 2142) and Indiana (SB 164, SB 318 and HB 1231) are among the other states where veterans-related tax credits were introduced in 2012.

Launched with the help of a grant from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, VETTransfer provides much more than the traditional business incubator. Entrepreneurial vets get to work with seasoned professionals who help them refine their business models and avoid the pitfalls that stymie many startups. They also work alongside other veterans, creating a familiar and supportive environment that promotes success.

Started in May 2011, VETTransfer’s initial goal was to serve 40 veteran-owned businesses over the course of a two-year pilot project. A year later, VETTransfer serves more than 300 businesses, and a steady stream of exciting new products and services is coming to market as a result. About half of the veterans involved have service-related disabilities. It’s an extremely promising model that we ought to be replicating. I introduced a bill last session that would provide state support for similar business-accelerator programs.

The brave men and women now returning from our nation’s wars volunteered to go into harm’s way to defend our liberty. They and their families have made many sacrifices for more than a decade, especially those who must cope with a lifetime of disability. As legislators, we have a responsibility to take the veterans unemployment crisis seriously, and enact effective and innovative policy to help put these heroes back to work.

Sen. Julie Lassa, a Democrat from Stevens Point, was first elected to the Wisconsin Senate in 2003 after previously serving as a state representative.

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