# Transcript

## Michael Kormas - National Employment Coordinator with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

Veterans, especially veterans with disabilities who served this country at home and abroad, often find that transitioning into the civilian workforce after they leave the military can be challenging.

High-quality registered apprenticeship programs can provide a powerful boost to such a transition.

They accelerate the career transition for veterans by combining experience in the workplace with technical training in the classroom on parallel tracks.

The average starting wage for someone who has completed a Registered Apprenticeship Program is about $70,000 per year. The employment retention rate of apprentices who complete their apprenticeship programs is 94%.

With all these advantages, apprenticeship programs present a strong option, but why are they still so rare?

It turns out that, for veterans ready to transition from the military, apprenticeship opportunities are not always easy to find.

This is where the Veteran Readiness and Employment Program (VR&E) comes in.

This program is designed to help Veterans and Service members with a service-connected disability transition into suitable employment, which often requires training.

VR&E staff work closely with eligible Veterans and Service members who map out next steps in their career, which may include apprenticeship!

There is no better person to ask how it’s done than Michael Kormas, the National Employment Coordinator with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. He has been advising veterans and employers who are looking to hire apprentices for two decades.

Within the VR&E program, what I do is work with Veterans and employers to make those connections that our Veterans that have come through our program that are now ready to enter employment, based upon their skills their aptitudes and their abilities. So I help make that connection with employers that includes direct prior replacement- and, of course- entry into apprenticeship programs.

Why do you think apprenticeship is such a good fit for many veterans?

The military is an apprenticeship-based program, so Veterans are familiar with a work+ learn hands-on experience for progression, but the true advantage of an apprenticeship program is an individual is employed while they're going through training so they're earning a wage. They're getting benefits. They're working directly underneath the supervision of a journeyman. They have a mentor and a support system- not only with us in the VA, but also through their employer, and through their training providers. So there's an entire team of people that are working with that individual to become successful.

How do Veterans find you?

Veterans come through a lot of different ways. They can hear word-of-mouth, through their fellow Veterans. They can be referred through a Veteran service organization. Sometimes they'll come to us as they're examining GI Bill opportunities. Sometimes it's through a medical provider. It can be through America's Job Centers. As we like to say, there's no solid pathway and there's no bad pathway.

And how do you support them once they're in the program?

Our program has a multitude of different ways we can support individuals. We are an employee employment-based program, based upon, again, those Veterans’ skills, their interests, their aptitudes and abilities; so we help close gaps of what they currently have to what's needed for a new occupational field. Based upon those criteria, it can be formal education. It can be on- the-job training. We can assist with books, tuition fees. We have monthly stipend payments and, in the view of apprenticeship programs, we can help provide materials that apprentices have to pay. We coordinate with training entities and providers and employers to make those connections. We also can assist with Veterans, as needed, with supportive services, medical assistance through VA hospitals, and so forth. So lots of different tools are in our toolbox to be able to help those Veterans obtain successful employment in a suitable occupation for them.

Do Veterans have misconceptions about apprenticeships?

There is this initial piece of hesitation that says, “I just did a four-year commitment with the military! I want to get into an occupation and move forward! Now I have to go through four more years of training?!”

But when they learn that they're on the job, they're getting wages, they're getting benefits, they're learning and advancing, they're accomplishing a mission, they're with a bunch of people that are there to help them succeed- that time period element really kind of disappears, so it's just a hesitation getting into it. I have found, overall, our Veterans that enter into apprenticeship programs are excited about it. They're enthusiastic with it and they're successful in them.

Thanks Chip, do you have any final thoughts?

Apprenticeships work. I think that's the ultimate message that there is. And if you start to think about a work-and-learn process, where people are gaining skill sets as they advance under the guise of a mentor in an established criteria program with an end outcome of a wonderful job, a terrific opportunity of a new career, those are the things. Again, I keep coming back to them but that's what makes apprenticeships successful. It's hard to argue with success when you can look at other models that there are to develop workers or to enter into the workplace that don't have those elements that an apprenticeship program has. There's no bad pathway into a new career. Some are just easier than others and apprenticeships one of the easier ones.

For more information, please visit Apprenticeship.gov or contact your Veteran Readiness and Employment Office or your State Director of Veterans Employment and Training.

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