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Life after hanging up a military career

Programs, loans help veterans rejoin civilian working world

There are more than 26 million veterans living in the United States, according to the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Approximately 225 million active-duty service members transition out of the military each year, VA statistics show.

Many of these veterans look to start their own businesses upon returning to the civilian working world.

The U.S. Small Business Administration reports there are approximately 5 million veteran-owned businesses in the United States and more than 400,000 small businesses owned by service-disabled veterans.

The SBA has a number of resources available to give back to those who have served their country.

One of the newest initiatives is the recent launch of the SBA Patriot Express Loan Initiative, a streamlined loan product based on the agency's SBAExpress Loan Program but with increased loan amounts and availability for military spouses and widows.

Loans are available up to \$500,000 and qualify for SBA's maximum guaranty of up to 85 percent for loans of \$150,000 or less and up to 75 percent for loans more than \$150,000 up to \$500,000.

"It's an extension of SBA's Express Loan Program to help veterans when they come home have additional opportunities for entrepreneurship," said Mike Ernandes, business development specialist for the SBA's North Carolina district. "Many are grateful to have something like this available to them."

In the four months since its kickoff, the Patriot Express program has produced more than 500 SBA-guaranteed loans amounting to \$51 million, with an average loan amount of nearly \$102,000, the SBA announced Wednesday.

In North Carolina, the SBA has guaranteed 15 loans for \$1.3 million under Patriot Express, Ernandes said. There are 36 lenders authorized to do loans in the state.

The Patriot Express initiative builds on the more than \$1 billion in loans SBA guarantees annually for veteran-owned businesses, and the counseling assistance and procurement support it provides each year to more than 100,000 veterans, service-disabled veterans and Reserve members.

Other SBA assistance includes a veterans resource Web site at www.sba.gov/nc; the Service-Disabled Veteran-Owned Small Business Program, which offers contracting incentives to firms selling to the federal government; and an SBA veterans business development officer in each state to provide guidance.

But the private sector is extending its reach to help veterans, too.

The International Franchise Association announced Wednesday that its VetFran program, created to aid former military personnel in the transition to civilian life, has enabled 1,000 veterans to become franchise small-business owners and has 200 more sales pending, according to the association's latest quarterly survey of participating companies.

IFA, founded nearly 50 years ago to represent the franchising industry, re-established the program after Sept. 11, 2001, to help honorably discharged veterans acquire franchised

small businesses.

More than 260 franchise systems that are members of the association currently offer financial incentives, or discounts, to lower the upfront costs of purchasing a franchised establishment. The program receives no government funding.

Individual companies are also getting involved.

Denney, whose Spring-Green Lawn Care franchise serves New Hanover, Pender and part of Onslow counties, took advantage of the Plainfield, Ill.-based company's Military Assistance Program, which offers veterans up to a \$15,000 credit on their initial franchise fee toward startup expenses.

"They're really trying to attract ex-military guys," he said. "It's an environment that's good for us. You give us a plan, you give us a mission, and we'll go do it."

Many companies are seeing the benefits of recruiting former service members, said Joe Stanley, disabled veteran employment consultant for the New Hanover County JobLink Career Center of the N.C. Employment Security Commission.

"Most of the time they have a clean criminal background," he said. "They know how to go to work on time. They'll get the job done. They're very dependable. They're easy to train, and they pick up stuff real quick."

In honor of Veterans Day, the ESC held Hire-A-Vet Job Fairs across the state last week, including one in Wilmington on Saturday. More than a dozen companies were available to talk to veterans about employment opportunities, and Wilmington Mayor Bill Saffo read a proclamation making this week Hire-A-Vet Week in Wilmington.

Stanley said he has counseled 97 people since Nov. 1, most of whom were looking for work.

"The newly separated vets, a lot of them need help with trying to get their resume from being too much military jargon and making it to where civilians can understand it," he said. "We help them rewrite their resumes and give them some pointers on how they can do that."

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