

Working Alongside our Heroes



by Ms. Katherine Crawford, Staff Writer



The barrage of phone calls and e-mails is increasing by the day, and Ms. Nancy Adams couldn't be happier. Ms. Adams, the military training program manager at Defense Contract Management Agency (DCMA) Headquarters, places disabled service members at DCMA through two programs, *Operation Warfighter* and *Hire a Hero*. The programs have existed in various forms since the Vietnam War era and are part of a renewed campaign to employ injured military personnel in civilian occupations. Both are Department of Defense (DoD) programs, with many other agencies participating as well.

OPERATION WARFIGHTER

Operation Warfighter offers injured active-duty military personnel who are in rehabilitation the opportunity to volunteer at DCMA while they are recuperating or on medical hold. These volunteers typically work 15 to 30 hours a week, developing skills for their résumés, which is important as many will not be going back on active duty.

The DoD program coordinator provides Ms. Adams résumés of interested service members.

Ms. Adams then matches applicants to job descriptions with which they have experience or to career fields they would like to try. "Some of our volunteers are being trained in jobs that they have the skill sets for, so when they separate from the military, they better qualify for permanent employment," said Ms. Adams.

Other volunteers are building experience in career fields in which they are interested. Army Pfc. Tamasa Nelson, an Army laundry specialist, had always been interested in public affairs and is now a program volunteer with the Office of Congressional and Public Affairs at DCMA Headquarters. When asked about the work, she replied, "I love it. [Working here] gave me a foundation to seriously pursue this career field."

Pfc. Nelson has enjoyed the *Operation Warfighter* program experience. Though she initially learned about it from a recruiter at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, it was the

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(Above Left) From left: active duty DCMA staff, Air Force Lt. Col. Christopher Athearn, DCMA Northrop Grumman Baltimore commander, and Navy Lt. Cmdr. Tim Craven, DCMA Virginia program integrator, recruiting – sharing the DCMA mission with visitors to the booth. (Photos by Army Pfc. Tamasa Nelson, DCMA Office of Congressional and Public Affairs)

(Above Middle) Ms. Nancy Adams (left), *Hire a Hero* program manager, provides information to job seekers at Walter Reed Army Medical Center.

(Above Right) Ms. Mandy Laughlin (right), Human Resources specialist, lends a helping hand at a recruiting fair.

Hire a Hero is for qualified military veterans who are 30 percent or more disabled, as determined by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

soldiers already in the program who motivated her to get involved. “Sometimes everything else seems so overwhelming, you think this will be overwhelming, too, but it turned out to be a really smooth transition for me,” said Pfc. Nelson. She now encourages fellow soldiers to get involved. Becoming a volunteer is an easy process. *Operation Warfighter* applicants submit their résumés and list the career field(s) in which they have experience or an interest. If Ms. Adams can make a match between an applicant and a career field, the applicant completes a phone or office interview with a prospective mentor; if this goes well, the applicant begins work shortly thereafter.

HIRE A HERO

Hire a Hero is for qualified military veterans who are 30 percent or more disabled, as determined by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. The focus is primarily on veterans from Operations Enduring and Iraqi Freedom, though DCMA will work with veterans from any era. Veterans who are less than 30 percent disabled cannot go through the *Hire a Hero* program and must compete for jobs with other veterans and members of the general population.

Ms. Adams finds eligible disabled veterans by visiting Walter Reed or by receiving their résumés from other agencies. Once a qualified veteran has expressed interest in working at DCMA, “Any position that has been authorized to be filled by our Agency is eligible for a *Hero* hire,” said Ms. Adams. “It doesn’t have to be advertised to the general public yet, but we have to have been given authorization to fill the position.” Additionally, veterans with qualifying entry-level skills may be considered for Keystone intern positions.



DCMA’s broad range of career fields and geographic locations is a great asset for this program. There are so many jobs “and we have so many offices, that ... we can do a fairly pinpointed placement with them for employment,” Ms. Adams explained. “I think that’s why we have so much success — because there’s choice.”

Mr. Paul Higginbotham, an electronics engineer at DCMA Lockheed Martin Marietta, recently joined DCMA through the *Hire a Hero* program and is doing electrical, electronics and avionics engineering with the C-130J engineering team. Mr. Higginbotham, a former Navy petty officer second class, learned about the program from a counselor at the Veterans Administration’s (VA’s) vocational rehabilitation program. He used this vocational program to earn a degree in electrical engineering from the University of Tennessee, while undergoing intense physical rehabilitation with the VA. Though Mr. Higginbotham was initially reluctant to seek employment with the government, having encountered hiring difficulties in the past, the VA counselor assured him that “under the *Hire a Hero* program I not only could get a real interview with DCMA but, if qualified for the job, I would be hired,” he said. Thus far, Mr. Higginbotham is enjoying his work with the Agency. He has smoothly integrated into DCMA Lockheed Martin Marietta, and “the *Hire a Hero* program has, at the very least, restored some of

(Above) Army Pfc. Tamasa Nelson is an intern in the Office of Congressional and Public Affairs at DCMA Headquarters through the *Operation Warfighter* program. (DCMA staff photo)

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my faith in the government's willingness to do right by its disabled veterans," he confided.

Mr. Higginbotham believes that the *Hire a Hero* program is different from many other veteran hiring initiatives. "Most federal agencies may hire a few token veterans but, for the most part, seem to avoid hiring those with the worst physically apparent injuries. And when they do hire those veterans, it is usually for the lowest-paying jobs despite their education or qualifications," he explained. In contrast, the *Hire a Hero* program is designed to match the experiences of qualified applicants with specific job descriptions, so the focus is truly on building a career.

Hire a Hero – the Hiring Process

Hire a Hero applicants are placed within DCMA via two methods: (1) hiring supervisors and commanders contact Ms. Adams with the job requirements of open positions they would like filled by the veterans; and (2) applicants give their résumés to Ms. Adams, and they are marketed according to their experience and the geographical region in which they would like to work. Ms. Adams works with potential recruits to pinpoint locations that might be a good fit for them and then e-mails those offices' commanders. "If after several weeks there are few or no nibbles, the candidates may ask me to broaden the field," Ms. Adams explained. "At that point I send the résumés out to all commanders in several regions."

The program's hiring process is so efficient because DCMA doesn't need to advertise an open position in order to hire a severely injured veteran. Usually, someone who wants to work for the government has to wait until a vacancy is listed. However, with this program, once an

office has been given approval to do a hiring, Ms. Adams can send the hiring authority a résumé. If interested, the hiring authority can then interview the applicant. If the interview is successful, the hiring authority sends Ms. Adams a job description, and she verifies the applicant's qualifications for the job with the Army Civilian Personnel Office. If Personnel finds the applicant qualified, DCMA can proceed with the hiring. "It can be quite streamlined, and the simplicity is what hiring supervisors find appealing," said Ms. Adams.

DCMA's Participation in the Programs

DCMA began participating in the programs last summer, and employees around the Agency have been extremely responsive, particularly in serving as recruiters for the Agency at job fairs. "The DCMA staff have been very generous with their time, volunteering to work the booth and speak with job candidates" noted Ms. Adams, and, "DCMA's military personnel are especially helpful. When we bring our uniformed staff with us to the job fairs, the injured Service members really respond to them and engage in talking to them about what we do as an Agency — the military folks are just an enormous asset." The DoD contractor for these job fairs, Monster.com, has not yet released the 2006 schedule, but proposed job fairs include events at Balboa Naval Hospital and Camp Pendleton in the San Diego area, Madigan Army Hospital in Seattle, Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio and Fort Campbell in Kentucky.

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Programs are Experiencing Success

The reaction within the Agency to both *Operation Warfighter* and *Hire a Hero* has been

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overwhelmingly positive, and DCMA continues to recruit more injured service members. With offices nationwide and overseas and a broad range of job offerings, it is no surprise that candidates see DCMA as an option. As of Feb. 6, 2006, there were four *Operation Warfighter* volunteers and three *Hire a Hero* employees, with five additional hires for both programs awaiting security clearances. “The response from the people doing the hiring has been absolutely overwhelming,” Ms. Adams said. “Everyone is touting the benefits of these programs.” Participants are also having a great experience and are telling others about the programs. Ms. Adams is now receiving several applications through word-of-mouth recommendations.

This mutually beneficial relationship between the veterans and DCMA is clearly working well. “Who wouldn’t want to hire a qualified injured warfighter who, in many instances, has already been working on or with the equipment they’d be managing contracts for on the civilian side?” Ms. Adams asked. “They are most often the best candidates for jobs at DCMA. They have the knowledge of the equipment and military environment, and they carry the technical and leadership skills necessary to move ahead. It’s a win-win situation!” Pfc. Nelson agreed: “I think it’s good for both sides. [DCMA employees] get to work with people they were serving, and the soldiers get a chance to give something back to those still in the field.”

Ms. Adams finds placing qualified applicants extremely rewarding and said her favorite aspect of working with these two programs is “the feeling I get when a hero thanks me for helping them. It’s a very humbling experience. Obviously these people have served our country and paid an enormous price for what they’ve done, and it gives me pause when they say, ‘Nobody has

ever helped me this much before inside the government.’ They’re deserving, they’ve got the skills, we want them, and yet they’re thanking me for doing my job. I’m always taken aback by their gratitude, because they’ve certainly given so much to America.”

For More Information

The challenge now is getting the word out about the two programs. “Once [supervisors] find out how easy it is to work with *Operation Warfighter* and *Hire a Hero*, I get a response like, ‘This is great — I should have been doing this before,’” Ms. Adams said. To help publicize the programs, marketing materials will soon be released Agency-wide. Additionally, more information about the program is on the *Hire a Hero* Community of Practice Web page on the DCMA Knowledge Management link. The Web site contains information on how to hire an employee or volunteer; points of contact and Agency mentors willing to assist; program highlights; and detailed information on reasonable accommodation and assistive equipment that is available from the Department of Labor’s Job Accommodation Network and DoD’s Computer/Electronic Accommodations Program.



(Above) Ms. Nancy Adams, Military Training program manager, DCMA Headquarters, is in charge of placing *Operation Warfighter* interns and *Hire a Hero* employees at DCMA. (DCMA staff photo)

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Serving His Country, Now as an Engineer

Mr. Paul Higginbotham, a former Navy petty officer second class, works as an electronics engineer at DCMA Lockheed Martin Marietta through the *Hire a Hero* program. We asked him about his experiences with the program.

C: How did you get involved with the *Hire a Hero* program?

PH: I was working in the corporate world, but I never felt I was giving back to society as I felt in the Service. My intentions were to teach and in that way give back to society. Then the VA [Department of Veterans Affairs] called me and asked me if I would consider working for DCMA.

C: How do you like working at DCMA?

PH: Everybody treats me with respect, and I feel like part of the team. I suspect that if you talk to the commanding officer, she would tell you that any fears she may have had hiring someone with such obvious disabilities turned out to be unfounded. I’m very independent, as most physically disabled veterans learn to be.

C: What types of accessibility modifications did Lockheed Martin make to the building?

PH: A supervisor and I did a walk-through, noting anything that needed to be adapted. We mainly had to make sure that I was able to open all doors and operate all cargo elevators and that I could use all the bathrooms. (It is one thing to say a building is compliant with the ADA [Americans with Disabilities Act] and another for it to be actually usable to those who, like myself, use a wheelchair for locomotion.) We also rode around with security in my adapted van to pick the best parking spot for me then assigned that spot with my name and painted it with the appropriate hash marks and signage so I could park and lower my ramp for exiting my vehicle.

At most, a few door hinges and a couple of doors had to be replaced and the rest of the doors just needed their hinges adjusted for ease of opening and, of course, a little blue paint for my parking space. Nothing too spectacular had to be done, mainly adjustments to the things required by any federal building under the guidelines of the ADA. What most federal agencies would find if they would hire physically disabled veterans is that the cost of modifications/adaptations, if there are any needed, are very low at best.

C: DCMA obviously benefits from your engineering experience — what else do you bring to the Agency?

PH: DCMA gained an engineer who has direct experience with the military product and someone who personally wants the product to be as reliable as possible.

Most disabled veterans are not looking for a handout but are looking for a job classification commensurate to their qualifications and experience and for their government to consider them first in hiring.



(Above) Mr. Paul Higginbotham, an electronics engineer at DCMA Lockheed Martin Marietta, joined DCMA through the *Hire a Hero* program. (DCMA staff photo)