How SERVICE MEMBERS fare in the civilian labor market

Health care, RACISM, and the threat to patient safety

Seven ways to build a truly equitable DEI STRATEGY

A FRESH START FOR VETERANS

HOW ONE BAKERY IN WASHINGTON, D.C., HAS BECOME A MODEL OF SUCCESS AND SERVICE PAGE 12
Securing U.S. Elections

Election systems consist of multiple components—e.g., voter registration, pollbooks, voting machines, tabulation equipment, and official websites—that are administered and controlled at different levels, depending on the state. Researchers have developed a methodology for understanding and prioritizing cybersecurity risk in election infrastructure to assist state and local election officials.

MORE AT www.rand.org/t/RRA512-1

How the Effects of Racial Bias Compound

Researchers illustrate the ways in which even small effects of racial bias can compound over lifetimes. Users of this tool can adjust the amount of racial bias to see its effects on educational achievement, income, and wealth. Even ostensibly small amounts of bias can compound to create significant differences in outcomes in these metrics over time.

MORE AT www.rand.org/t/LA960-1

988 Mental Health Hotline

Senior behavioral scientist Stephanie Brooks Holliday and policy researcher Ryan K. Mc Bain describe findings from their recent study that examined how prepared states and counties are for the launch of 988, the new mental health emergency hotline.

MORE AT www.rand.org/v220715

China’s Engagement with Pacific Island Countries

In August 2022, senior defense analyst Derek Grossman testified before the U.S.–China Economic and Security Review Commission on the implications of China’s Pacific Island strategy for the United States and its allies and partners.

MORE AT www.rand.org/t/TA2198-1

The Idea of “Replacement Theory” Is a Danger to Us All

Senior behavioral and social scientist Douglas Yeung describes why meaningful action to counter systemic injustice requires not just demographic representation, but electing leaders who hold a more inclusive understanding of what it means to be American.

MORE AT www.rand.org/b220708yeung

Voter Registration

Print clearly using black ink. (1) have your Social Security number or other identifying number; (2) have your political party preference; (3) have your telephone number; (4) have your name, address, and city to verify your identity.

BOOK

TOOL

VIDEO

TESTIMONY

BLOG
The American health care system has spent decades working to improve patient safety and reduce needless suffering. But minoritized patients continue to face higher risks of patient safety events. Health care providers often do not collect data that could help address the problem.
Building Resilience to Truth Decay in the Deepfake Era of Disinformation

A few years ago, a grainy video emerged that appeared to show Richard Nixon announcing the loss of astronauts in a failed moon landing. It was convincing, right down to the gravelly voice—but it was a deepfake, a video manipulated with artificial intelligence to show something that never happened.

If you think disinformation is a problem now ... well, just ask Richard Nixon what the future may hold.

Deepfakes—of political leaders saying things they never said, for example—could sway elections, inflame social divisions, and wear away trust in basic institutions like the courts or the press. A recent RAND paper warned that deepfakes could supercharge truth decay, the diminishing role of facts and analysis in public life.

For now, creating a good deepfake requires time, money, hours of video samples, and a massively powerful computer. But deepfake videos are becoming easier and faster to make—and better. When researchers discovered that people in deepfakes don’t blink at a normal rate, for example, developers went back and fixed their algorithms to give their deepfakes a more natural blink.

The intelligence community should step up efforts to detect adversarial uses of deepfakes. The government and private industry should also invest more in developing technologies that could catch a deepfake when the naked eye cannot. Journalists and other video producers should embed metadata in their images that could show when something has been altered.

But the past several years have provided one long lesson in how quickly lies and disinformation can proliferate across social media. That underscores the importance of promoting media literacy and resistance to disinformation as a last line of defense against truth decay, especially in the deepfake era. As deepfake Richard Nixon shows, seeing cannot always mean believing.
American Attitudes to U.S. Diplomacy

Americans tend to have a positive view of the U.S. Foreign Service, a RAND survey has found. Explaining what the U.S. Foreign Service actually does? Not so sure.

Two-thirds of survey respondents agreed that the diplomats of the Foreign Service contribute to national security. Around a third said their overall impression of American diplomats and embassies is favorable or very favorable. But more than half said they have no opinion or are neutral.

Likewise, most respondents understood that embassies can help American citizens abroad. A majority also knew that the State Department works to advance American interests. But fewer respondents knew that it also negotiates treaties, promotes American exports, and supports American farms and businesses in international markets.

Respondents who were older, male, higher-income, and higher-educated tended to view the Foreign Service more favorably. But the survey found no significant difference between Republicans and Democrats. Across all demographics, respondents thought that political appointees were less qualified and less dedicated than career diplomats.

The State Department has been working to raise its profile and make sure the American public knows what it does around the world. RAND’s survey suggests it should be more clear about the support it provides to American businesses. It should also reinforce its nonpartisanship and spell out what it means when it says it advances American values.

The federal government spends around 1.5 percent of its budget on the State Department and American embassies. It spends at least ten times more on the military.

When survey respondents learned that, their support for increasing State Department funding went up by more than a third.

Researchers fielded the survey to around 2,000 U.S. adults in 2020 and 2021. They also conducted more than a dozen focus groups, to delve deeper into the results. Not everyone thought it was a negative that the Foreign Service doesn’t always make headlines. “If you don’t hear about it,” one participant said, “it must be going well.”

Diversity and Military Effectiveness

The armed services should consider reaching beyond their usual ranks to keep their edge in a time of rapid change, a RAND report has found.

Researchers at RAND and RAND Europe concluded that leveraging diversity could make the British and American militaries more innovative, more agile, and more effective. “Diversity,” here, means people of different races, ethnicities, and genders, but also of different ages, different cognitive traits, different language skills, and different backgrounds.

That kind of diversity would improve the quality of military decisionmaking by bringing in new voices, researchers noted. It would also help ensure the military is able to attract people with the skills it needs. Israel, for example, has started to recruit autistic youth to analyze satellite images for potential threats, a task that requires continuous focus for several hours.

The armed services of both the United States and the United Kingdom face swift technological change, the rise of “data warfighting,” international discord, and a more-unpredictable climate future. The sheer weight of challenges calls for a strategic and ambitious effort across all service branches to improve diversity and inclusion, which the researchers described as enablers of strategic advantage.

That can start with recruiting. But the armed services of both countries also need to identify and remove barriers to inclusion—ensuring, for example, that their leadership ranks reflect diversity as well as their junior ranks. That will help them not just attract, but retain, the right people with the right skills.
Dwayne Butler served for 20 years in the U.S. Army, in positions that took him from the battlefield to the inner circles of the Pentagon. His approach to research at RAND is still Army-officer direct: "Problems should be solved," he said, "and I'm a problem solver."

His resume runs to 11 pages. He’s been a battalion commander in Iraq, a logistics officer, the executive officer of a commission investigating care at then–Walter Reed Army Medical Center, and a speechwriter to the Army chief of staff. He also has two bachelor’s degrees, a master’s degree, and two doctorates.

At RAND, he’s a senior management scientist whose research has covered topics ranging from leadership to adult education to military strategy and homeland security. His recent work has focused on helping the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) and individual service branches promote diversity, equity, and inclusion.
What experiences from your time in the Army stand out to you now as foundational to the work you do at RAND?

I was second in command of a battalion inside a Stryker combat brigade in Iraq when they pulled me out to become a speechwriter for the chief of staff of the Army. I went into that assignment a little reluctantly, but what I learned is that as a speechwriter, you’re principally a researcher. You conduct the analysis, you provide evidence, you craft the message. That assignment really informed my professional path in ways I hadn’t anticipated.

What lessons did you take from the military that you apply now to your work on improving diversity, equity, and inclusion?

I come in and I look at organizational systems, how major organizations run, and that goes back to my Army experience. I care less about changing the hearts and minds of the naysayers than I do about establishing effective institutional mechanisms. To simply say, “Advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion is the right thing to do”—that is not always enough for some people. But if you can point to how it affects readiness, how it affects battlefield outcomes, how it affects the bottom line, now they’re listening. That’s what matters to them. I can talk that language.

What’s one finding from your research that you wish more people knew about?

Until there are more underrepresented people in true seats of power and until we reduce the wealth gap, no change is real. Those two things constitute power. So we can change hearts and minds, we can have affinity groups and kumbaya sessions, but until an organization puts underrepresented people in seats of power, it’s done nothing. If you really support the narrative that underrepresented people are in high demand, then manage them that way. Go out and find this precious gold like you’re supposed to.

You’ll hear hiring managers at large organizations say, “We have a diverse pool of candidates.” Great. Then they’ll say, “And we rounded that out with a diverse selection committee,” and they pat themselves on the back. But then we ask about how many diverse candidates they hired. “Oh, that’s protected data,” or “We don’t track that,” or “They’re the same numbers they’ve been since the 1950s.”

People often fall back on this idea that there aren’t enough underrepresented people to hire. “Oh, we were supposed to do this.” Why, in this day and age, would you communicate that? When leaders undermine themselves like that, that’s a problem.

What motivates the work that you do now?

My parents were both government employees. My mother worked for NASA and the DoD, and my dad was an Army officer before becoming a career FBI agent. They instilled in me an attitude of service, to the nation and to others. I came to RAND because I wanted to still have an impact on national security and to give back. Leaving a legacy is nice as well—I did that in the Army, and I wanted to do that here.

What are you working on now?

It’s a study on increasing senior leader representation across the DoD. We identified four groups that can determine—through their words and actions—whether a large organization like the DoD can meet its goals. First, there are the underrepresented people themselves, who might avoid or be discouraged from pursuing certain career paths. Then there are the so-called allies, who talk about underrepresented people sometimes without them even being at the table. Next, we have the neutrals, who aren’t invested either way. And finally, the obstructionists, the racists, the -ists who want to keep the existing power structures in place.

One of the things we found is just how important it is for leadership to set the tone. That sounds trivial, but it’s not. Case in point: One of the services set up a working group to look at these issues. A senior officer said, “I’m not sure we need this.” Why, in this day and age, would you communicate that? When leaders undermine themselves like that, that’s a problem.

I came to RAND because I wanted to still have an impact on national security and to give back. Leaving a legacy is nice as well—I did that in the Army, and I wanted to do that here. ☑
Seven Ways to Build a Truly Equitable DEI Strategy

By Rhianna C. Rogers

Rogers is the inaugural director of the Center to Advance Racial Equity Policy and a policy researcher at RAND. She is an expert on cultural and ethnic studies, intercultural competencies and diversity education, cultural mediation, and virtual exchange programmatic development and implementation.
The cultural impacts of a racialized pandemic have created a rejuvenated interest in DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) spaces over the past few years. Such interest has opened new doors for folks to join the ranks of “DEI experts,” while also creating new pathways for underrepresented peoples to gain access to positions of power—and perceived power. According to LinkedIn data, between 2015 and 2020, there was a 71 percent increase worldwide in all DEI roles. The number of people globally with the “head of diversity” title more than doubled (107 percent growth).

Despite this growth, not much has changed regarding the power structure in these spaces, which still center on the C-suite (statistically less diverse), and tend to be populated with groups that are less knowledgeable on research in the DEI space. Black and Indigenous people and other people of color (BIPOC) make up just 17 percent of the C-suite, according to Gartner, a technology research and consulting company; less than 1 percent of Fortune 500 CEOs publicly identify as LGBTQ+.

This power imbalance is further compounded when people in these positions of power fail to actively engage in corporate DEI training themselves, which often means a missed opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of the factors impacting underrepresented peoples.

As part of my academic work in the DEI space, leading up to my appointment as director of the RAND Center to Advance Racial Equity Policy, I was heavily engaged with an organization called #BlackandBrilliant, an advocacy group for creating a more-diverse workplace. In 2020, I was part of a series of conversations focused on “Breaking Through the Middle” and had a LinkedIn conversation with Ronnell Rock, the managing director of Brand Apostles, who said that among the challenges of the C-suite paradox are “building and maintaining diverse pipelines for hiring, holding everyone accountable for building sustainable infrastructure, devoting leveraged energy to the mission, and achieving measurable outcomes.”

As a by-product of these conversations, I started to ask myself what it means to be an “expert” in the DEI space, who gets to make that determination, and how these folks might best create a DEI framework within organizations and businesses that reimage power and positionality in equitable ways.

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**Here are seven strategies for building a more equitable DEI program.**

### Embrace equity-centered design

Equity-centered design is the practice of involving diverse communities throughout planning and implementation, to allow their voices to impact solutions to the inequity at hand. Equity doesn’t happen by chance, but with intent and focus. While it is a broad practice, applicable to all kinds of institutional environments, equity-centered design lends itself well to education and learning—and it has applications for research design. It can also be used to redesign existing power structures in an organization or business, such as advisory boards.

One example comes from my work at the RAND Center to Advance Racial Equity Policy, where our equity-minded board members include public- and private-sector leaders who provide wealth in at least one of three key areas: critical strategic guidance around community knowledge and advocacy, academic research and/or policy expertise, and relevant philanthropic experience that will help to meet the objectives of racial equity research and policy analysis at RAND.

### Partner with trusted messengers

While a profitable consulting sector has risen up to help companies achieve their DEI goals, they often exclude the voices of the communities their work is supposed to advance. For organizations wanting to pursue DEI, partnering with trusted messengers within underrepresented communities is not an act of charity or goodwill—it is an act of economic and social justice. Establishing trusted messengers takes time, active listening, and humility. This means relinquishing some power to allow others to feel included in the conversation. It is important to note that due to lack of access in specific communities, it will take time to create the feeling that they are a part of the conversation. One strategy I would recommend is to create safe and brave spaces for folks to articulate their understanding of DEI without judgment, and allow for growth at all levels of the organization. This means facilitating difficult conversations with intention. Here are a few strategies for developing trust:

- **Engage in community stakeholder conversations** that intersect with your company stakeholders and culture—invite community members as well as company staff members to regular dialogues that create space for input, opinions, ideas, and feedback.
- **Don’t be afraid to formalize discussions:** Specify who gets to speak when and for how long; specify what topics are off-limits; and assign roles, viewpoints, questions, or topics in advance.
- **Allow data and reflection to drive the conversation**—not emotion. The focus of deliberation is on the exchange of ideas rather than trying to win everyone over to a singular viewpoint. Recognize where and how reasonable disagreement can exist, and give folks time to build on each other’s ideas, rather than assuming every issue has just two or three possible viewpoints.

Including trusted messengers can enable us to shift the optics away from the superficial reasons organizations might engage in DEI—it refocuses this work on real organizational and systemic change.
Offer DEI learning opportunities

One person cannot change an organization. It takes a team of individuals trained in DEI spaces to truly create organizational impact. It is also crucial to recognize that people will be in different parts of their journey. That is okay. You cannot expect each person to be in the same space. Taking a developmental, ongoing approach to DEI learning opportunities is vital to allow such learning to spread across your organization. In my work at RAND, I have set up learning opportunities that target different levels of knowledge in the racial equity space (introductory, intermediate, and advanced). This should be an iterative process. No one can know all there is to know about DEI. Things change, terminology expands, and issues that impact DEI evolve. You must build a fluid, not stagnant, structure—or risk getting left behind.

Include wellness in DEI

Another potential strategy is to destigmatize mental health breaks and exhibit healthy work/life boundaries by role modeling healthy corporate norms and processes. This might encourage employees to find mentors or sponsors who can help with balancing personal, professional, and (if applicable) spiritual needs. Or this might look like a corporate-wide healthy work/life balance program. At the organizational system level, this might involve prioritizing mental well-being by offering self-care days, instituting more-robust holistic health programs that address racial fatigue and trauma, and embedding required well-being and self-care components in leadership and employee competencies.

Realign around inclusive language

Drop noninclusive terms like “diversity hires.” Conducting a thorough analysis of your organization’s culture and employee experiences within that culture and across stakeholders is a good first step. Language is culture, and how we frame our DEI-related terminology matters. One strategy for developing inclusive language is to create a list of words and ask stakeholders to provide their definitions. Leadership could then cocreate working groups to finalize terms. It would be important that these groups are made up of different levels of people in the organization and that leadership of these subgroups has leadership representing different levels of the organization. Doing so illustrates an intentional recognition of power dynamics that may be in play within the organization and expands ownership of definitions to a larger group of stakeholders at your company. As part of your process, be sure to recognize and celebrate those who were a part of the process and not just the folks who remain engaged through the entirety of the process. Everyone’s contributions matter, even if the DEI engagement is intermittent.

Reexamine written vs. actionable commitment

This would mean interrogating your organization’s articulated and implied “why” for committing to this work. It also means monitoring your organization’s strategic follow-through on identified blind spots and gap areas. For example, you could read over materials and listen to leadership to determine if the work is rooted in principles like “competition, innovation, profit” versus concepts like “collaboration, inclusivity, and active listening.” If the former rationales supersede the latter, then you should think critically about the authenticity of the work in that space. Committing to diversity and inclusion for “profit margins” only pales in the backdrop of a socio-political environment where oppressed populations are literally under assault.

Create ongoing checks and balances

Adding ongoing checks and balances on all levels of the DEI organizational process can hold everyone accountable, from the C-suite to entry-level employees. It is important to reiterate that all stories must be included in these conversations and training; I state this because I have frequently encountered exceptions for middle management and the C-suite. When this arises, the DEI loop is broken. Often, the policies in these spaces are drafted at the top, so it is crucial to make sure that all levels of leadership are held to the same standards as employees. As Ronnell Rock said to me, we all need to “stay focused beyond the moment to ensure movement.” I would take this one step further: Sustainable change occurs when we begin to take a hard look at our various life experiences and practices, and only when we unpack those can we create truly equitable workplaces.

This commentary originally appeared on fastcompany.com in August 2022. Commentary gives RAND researchers a platform to convey insights based on their professional expertise and often on their peer-reviewed research and analysis.
The woman was desperate by the time she arrived in Lucy Schulson’s exam room. Patches of itchy blisters had spread across her skin. Other doctors had assured her it was nothing, a skin infection, and had sent her home with creams to soothe the itch. They had not worked.

Schulson wasn’t sure what it was, either. But she knew the woman needed to see a dermatologist immediately. She would later learn the woman, who was Black, had a rare autoimmune disorder that attacks the skin, “a pretty terrible thing to live with.” She suspected race may have played a role in the delayed diagnosis and treatment.

Schulson, an internist at Boston Medical Center and a physician policy researcher at RAND, had just finished a study of what the medical field calls “patient safety events.” The term can cover any number of medical harms, from bad drug interactions to surgical site infections to missed diagnoses for a persistent rash. The study found clear and consistent evidence that minoritized patients are at especially high risk. But the way the health care system tracks patient safety too often makes them and their experiences invisible.

“It became clear that even if we have the technology, and we have the science, and we have the medicine, that’s not sufficient to address all these underlying structural issues that lead to the disparities we see,” Schulson said. “We need to start thinking differently about this, and that starts by naming the problem for what it is, which is racism.”
Schulson and her team read back through nearly 20 years of medical studies and interviewed more than a dozen top medical specialists. They found that Black patients suffer more surgical complications than White patients, even in the same hospital. Black patients also are more likely to experience harmful drug interactions, to go without needed pain medicine, and to die following coronary bypass surgery. Black, Hispanic, Asian, and Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander patients have much higher rates of hospital-acquired infections.

The researchers found no shortage of explanations for those disparities. Minoritized communities often lack easy access to top-quality hospitals. They are more likely to breathe polluted air, to have substandard housing, and to live with other health-harming environmental hazards. Black, Hispanic, and American Indian or Alaska Native people are less likely to have health insurance.

But few of the studies reached back any further to identify racism as a root cause of those inequities. The medical specialists the researchers interviewed—physicians, nurses, pharmacists, all of them prominent in their fields—were not so hesitant. They were almost unanimous in describing racism as a contributing factor in some or all patient safety events. “It impacts everything,” one said.

For example: Bed sores. A standard medical textbook might note that poor nutrition puts patients at higher risk of developing a bed sore. But it’s another step to recognize that patients of color are more likely to live in formerly redlined neighborhoods where the nearest grocery store might be miles away. It’s not by chance that they tend to have higher rates of bed sores. Health care providers who understand that could better anticipate and reduce the risk.

“When you shift your focus like that, and look at racism as the root cause of almost all health disparities that we see in this country, you can intervene earlier and more effectively,” Schulson said. “Redlining is a perfect example. It perpetuated food deserts, impacted social cohesion, had all these downstream effects on health care access and quality—and that leads, ultimately, to disparities in patient safety.”

For all its do-no-harm ethos, the health care system has too often compounded the problem. Diagnostic tests have been shown to delay treatment for people of color. Medical textbooks still show what rashes and skin infections look like on mostly White skin. In one small survey of medical residents, published in 2016, a quarter said they thought Black people have thicker skin than White people. The would-be doctors who endorsed that and other false beliefs were less likely to provide adequate pain treatment to a hypothetical Black patient for a broken ankle or a kidney stone.

Researchers used the adjective ‘minoritized’ rather than ‘minority’ to acknowledge societal power structures that have conferred minority status on certain populations and to emphasize that race and ethnicity are social constructs rather than biological.
In early December 2020, a Black woman named Susan Moore looked up from her hospital bed and pushed the record button on her phone. She was being treated for COVID, she was in relentless pain, and her White doctor had refused to give her the medicine she needed. “He made me feel like I was a drug addict,” she said in the video, which she posted on Facebook. In reality, she was a physician herself, whose Facebook posts explained that her pain was due in part to the “large mediastinal” masses a subsequent chest scan revealed.

“I was in so much pain from my neck,” she says in the video from her hospital bed. “I put forth, and I maintain, if I was White, I wouldn’t have to go through that…. This is what happens.”

She was released from the hospital as her vital signs stabilized, then rehospitalized less than a day later when her temperature shot up and her blood pressure plummeted. She died less than three weeks after posting her video. An outside investigation concluded the care she received did not contribute to her death, but that she experienced cultural incompetence and a lack of empathy from those treating her.

The American health care system has spent decades trying to improve patient care and prevent needless suffering. But with few exceptions, researchers found, it still does not track patient safety events by race, ethnicity, or preferred language. And previous research, by Schulson and others, has shown that voluntary clinician reporting systems of patient safety events don’t always capture the experiences of minoritized patients. That may be because patients are not comfortable speaking up—or because bias prevents some clinicians from hearing them when they do.

Hospitals and other health care providers need to develop better reporting systems that collect data on race and other demographics, the researchers concluded. That would allow them to identify disparities in their own care, and to address them. If all providers took that one step, the researchers wrote, they could start to develop best practices for reducing disparities, improving safety, and protecting patients who are at disproportionate risk of harm.

“The big thing is just getting the data and starting to think about this,” Schulson said. “It’s hard to make recommendations beyond that because we don’t even know how bad this issue is.”

This research, a RAND-MedStar collaborative project, was funded by the California Health Care Foundation.
Christen Sumner was adrift, treading water, not quite sure what she wanted to do with her life or whom she wanted to be. She needed a new direction, a reason to start kicking. She found it at a bakery in an old rowhouse on Grace Street in the Georgetown neighborhood of Washington, D.C.

The bakery is called Dog Tag, and while it’s known for its brownies and butterscotch blondies, that’s never really been its sole purpose. It’s a living business school where service-disabled veterans, military spouses, and caregivers can get a taste of running their own company. It counts change not only in dollars and cents, but also in self-confidence, fulfillment, dreams pursued, and lives saved.

A RAND study found the bustling bakery on Grace Street has become the center of a thriving community, a model for helping veterans and other members of the military community reestablish their lives. One former student described it as boot camp for the civilian world. For Sumner, it was a chance to not just find work after a recent move with her Army veteran
husband, but to silence the nagging doubt that told her she didn’t measure up. She wrote in her application to Dog Tag that she wanted to find herself.

“I didn’t know what that would look like,” she said. “I didn’t go in with a business plan, I didn’t go in with an idea. I just knew I wanted something different. I wanted to find my voice.”

Dog Tag opened in 2014 with a few prize-winning recipes, a hashtag (#PurposeBakedIn), and a big idea. It would bring together small teams of service-disabled post-9/11 veterans, military spouses, and caregivers. For five months, it would immerse them in an intensive entrepreneurial-focused business program. They would take classes through Georgetown University to earn a certificate in business administration, and apply what they learned in Dog Tag’s bakery, café, and online business. Along the way, they would focus on their wellness, share personal stories of obstacles and growth, and define for themselves what success looks like.

Success, for Dog Tag, on the national stage has included a Starbucks promotion in 2018 that put its chocolate-and-potato-chip brownies on café shelves nationwide. A viral video that same year showed Barack Obama and Joe Biden catching up over sandwiches at the Dog Tag counter (“We so appreciate you guys,” Obama can be heard telling the bakery crew). But the most significant measure of the program’s success has always been its impact on each individual fellow. As Dog Tag looked to the future, and to expanding the program beyond its Georgetown roots, the organization asked RAND to help it measure that impact.

Researchers interviewed nearly 50 people who had gone through the program. Every one of them described it as transformative—personally, professionally, or both. Many talked about how hard it had been to leave the military and try to build a new life in the civilian world, before they found Dog Tag. “I’m the gray house on the block of 99 blue houses,” one said. “And the blue houses say, ‘Why can’t you just paint yourself blue?’” Three former fellows said Dog Tag had saved their lives.

Mateo Clough came to the program after years of isolation and pain from multiple back surgeries and other health problems. He had served for nearly two decades in the Marines, the Air Force, and the Air National Guard, with four deployments. All of that was gone. He joined Dog Tag looking to belong to something bigger than himself again, a community that would accept him for who he is. He had just recently come out as gay.

“I needed to reconnect with the world around me, and I wanted to do it from an authentic place, which was new to me,” he said. “I had to learn to be myself, to speak my truths, and to be someone I could be proud of. Dog Tag was an

Researchers interviewed nearly 50 people who had gone through the program. Every one of them described it as transformative.
opportunity to find my voice, to find those true connections, to help me get where I was trying to go.”

RAND researchers took what they heard in the interviews and developed a survey that they sent to around 150 Dog Tag alumni. More than 70 percent of those who answered said the program continues to shape their personal and professional lives. More than half were working on their own business ideas: a pop-up shop for natural hair accessories, an embroidery business, a dog park with a bar attached. Most said they now felt that they had a professional mission.

Many also said the program had given them a focus that reached beyond business and entrepreneurship. A majority of the former fellows said they were engaged in work or volunteering that served their communities. They ranked their own personal well-being as a higher priority than their resumes. More than 80 percent said they left the program with more confidence.

For Christen Sumner, the turning point was a speech. It was on how healthier workplace snacks could improve worker productivity, a topic she knew well as a certified nutritionist. But she was so nervous that she memorized every word and would wake up at night reciting lines in her sleep. When the time came and her name was called, she nailed the speech—and then decided she had put herself through too much unnecessary stress trying to make it perfect.

“I realized it’s okay to mess up; failure is going to happen,” she said. “I think that was one of the biggest parts of the program for me. Just because I fail doesn’t mean I’m a failure. From that moment on, I really embraced that. I might fail, I might stumble, but I can get back up.”

RAND’s study underscored some of the challenges that veterans and other members of the military community continue to face. Around half of Dog Tag’s fellows said they had physical or mental health conditions that kept them from their goals. More than a quarter said they were unemployed—some by choice, but some not. Nearly half said they were underemployed during the early months of the pandemic.

Tens of thousands of service members—and their families—transition out of the military every year. The many organizations set up to help them need to know what works, and what doesn’t. Dog Tag’s partnership with RAND provides a case study in what that could look like. “Dog Tag wanted a stronger understand-

ing of what it means not just to go through this program, but to rebuild your identity after the military,” said Kathryn Bouskill, a social scientist at RAND who helped lead the study.

“This work is one small glimpse into a big challenge, and a big opportunity, for this country,” she said. “It’s an example of how one small organization is able to put rigorous research into how we understand this pretty precarious time for people, and respond.”

Dog Tag has used the results to assess every aspect of its program, to ensure it’s still meeting the needs of the people it serves. It has put more focus on wellness activities—including a personal narrative exercise it calls, appropriately enough, Finding Your Voice—after the survey showed how life-changing those had been. For Dog Tag, the study provides a baseline as it looks to the future. It recently expanded its fellowship program into Chicago.

“It really serves as a model for what other veteran-serving organizations can do,” said Stephanie Holliday, a senior behavioral scientist at RAND who coauthored the study. “They’re so invested in each individual person. They don’t just let them go afterward; they really hold tight to this community.”

Mateo Clough graduated from the program in 2020—not with a business plan, exactly, but a calling. With the national fabric seeming to fray on all sides, he has made it a personal mission to foster dialogue between people who don’t agree with each other. Dog Tag, he said, has become part of his community, a community he was so hoping to find. “I believe it will be part of me for the rest of my life,” he said.

Christen Sumner graduated in 2021. She’s been working since then as an executive assistant while she takes classes at Georgetown for a health and wellness coaching certificate. “The first thing I tell people about Dog Tag is that it changed my life,” she said. “For the longest time, I felt like I was just projecting what others wanted from me. Dog Tag helped me take off that mask and really find my own voice.”

The business plan she developed as a Dog Tag fellow was for a health and wellness coaching service for military and veteran women. She called it Wildwood Coaching, inspired by a personal motto that was also the title of her Finding Your Voice presentation: “Bloom where you’re planted.” She filed the paperwork in July.
Jim King thought he would have no problem making the leap from his job as a U.S. Navy recruiter to a civilian job with better hours and fewer demands. That lasted for a few weeks. Then panic set in.

Around 200,000 service members make that same leap to the civilian world every year. Like King, they often find it’s like falling into another dimension, one where employers don’t even speak the same language. Studies have shown that veterans earn more over time than people who never served—but there’s a sharp dip in their earnings right when they leave the military and have to find their way in the civilian world.

More than a decade of RAND research has sought to ease that transition. Researchers recently looked at how service members with different military specialties fare in the civilian labor force. They found a huge disparity in how much service members in some occupations, like intelligence, can earn compared with those in others, like the infantry. The results can help the military better prepare departing service members to make that leap and land on their feet.

“It’s scary. It’s frustrating,” said King, who now works as the chief programs officer for a career counseling and support nonprofit called Still Serving Veterans. “I was maybe a little arrogant about it and thought I didn’t need any assistance. But when I look back—it’s been 12 years, and I still remember those moments of panic.”
Civilian earnings during the first year after separation from the military shown with selected job categories from the Air Force, Army, Marine Corps, and Navy.

Mean adjusted earnings for male veterans with less than 20 years of enlisted service and a favorable discharge status. Income is shown in 2013 dollars.

- Below 90 percent of service branch average
- 90–120 percent
- Over 120 percent

Note: Larger circle indicates greater earnings.
As the American economy crashed during the early months of the Great Recession, researchers began to notice a troubling trend. Young veterans were several percentage points more likely to be looking for work than civilians. By 2011, the military was paying out nearly $1 billion a year in unemployment compensation.

The most likely explanation? According to RAND research, those young veterans were hitting the job market cold, often without college degrees or work histories that fit neatly on a civilian resume. RAND researchers later developed a tool to help veterans translate their military training into civilian job skills. “Basic combat training” became “handling work stress.”

The most recent numbers show that the trend lines have flipped. Post-9/11 veterans are now more likely to be working than people who never served, and they earn more money. But RAND researchers suspected those big-picture statistics were obscuring persistent challenges for some former service members trying to make a living in the civilian world.

Over the course of several years, they negotiated a data-sharing agreement with the U.S. Department of Defense and the Social Security Administration. The agreement allowed them to link military service records to individual earnings records, with any identifying information scrubbed out. Then they ran the numbers on more than 1 million enlisted service members who had left the military between 2002 and 2010.

The differences by occupation were so stark that they surprised even the lead researcher, Charles Goldman, a senior economist who studies workforce training and employment. Even within the same branch of the military, and with the same number of years of service, veterans coming from some occupations could make nearly four times more than veterans coming from others.

A male Air Force veteran with less than 20 years of enlisted service, for example, could make nearly $80,000 in his first year out of uniform—if he specialized in geospatial intelligence. If he worked in the aerospace medical service, he’d barely scratch $20,000.

The pattern was remarkably consistent. Service members who had worked in intelligence or information technology could expect to be well compensated in the civilian world. Those who had served in combat arms or in health care, supply, and transportation fields could not.

“This really highlights that there is still reason to be concerned,” Goldman said. “Transitioning service members in some occupations need more targeted employment assistance than others.”

A bachelor’s degree could boost postservice earnings by more than $10,000 a year, RAND found. A previous deployment helped some veterans of the Air Force and Marine Corps, but was associated with lower earnings for Navy and some Army veterans. An unfavorable discharge, such as for disciplinary problems, could erase thousands of dollars from a veteran’s annual pay stub.

Black male veterans tended to earn less than similar White veterans, especially when coming from the Army, Navy, or Marine Corps. Hispanic veterans tended to earn more than similar White veterans, except those who had served for more than 20 years.

And regardless of the branch, military compensation—which includes allowances for housing and food—surpassed civilian compensation for all but the most experienced and high-demand veterans.

The study, sponsored by the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, looked specifically at total annual earnings. Researchers could not tell from the data whether any given veteran was working full- or part-time, going to college, or had left the labor force entirely. Nonetheless, the results can help the military provide more support for departing service members who need it the most.

One program in particular shows promise. The military calls it SkillBridge, and it releases service members from some or all of their duties during their final six months of service to get civilian internships or other on-the-job training. The military also has put more focus on helping service members build up credentials and college credits that can transfer with them when they leave.

A combat medic, for example, might previously have found work as an emergency medical technician, a job that pays an average of around $37,000 a year. By working toward transferable credits and credentials in the military, that same medic could instead aim to become a registered nurse, with an average annual salary closer to $83,000.

The military’s bill for unemployment compensation for veterans has fallen sharply since the worst days of the Great Recession. But it still exceeded $100 million in 2019, the last year for which numbers were available. “It might be
worthwhile for them to spend a little more up front to ensure people have a successful transition,” Goldman said, “to avoid having to pay so much in unemployment compensation down the road.”

Jim King thought he would have no problem with his transition from the military—and, by most measures, he should have been right. He had two college degrees and 22 years of service, mostly in an occupation—recruiting—that translates well onto a civilian resume. But he still went through four jobs in ten years, never quite finding the right fit, until he landed at Still Serving Veterans.

The organization, based in northern Alabama, helps service members transitioning out of the military avoid the many pitfalls he encountered—the unfamiliar job requirements, the resume writing and rewriting, the culture shock. He tells the veterans he works with that they will go through stages of grief—sadness, anger, acceptance—as they make that leap from the military world and start building a new career in the civilian world.

“Frankly, every veteran, every transitioning service member, has valuable skills that will translate to the civilian workplace,” he said. “Some are just easier to translate than others. Intel or cyber or IT—those are going to be much easier. Infantry or torpedoman’s mate, they might need a little more assistance. There just aren’t a lot of torpedoes floating around in the civilian sector.”

A tool developed by RAND researchers in 2016 helps veterans who served in combat arms occupations translate their professional military training into civilian job skills.

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- a key skill taught in the course
- a key skill taught in a previous course
- * Marine Corps Recruit Training course materials were not available for analysis. However, students in that course likely learn skills similar to those taught in Army Basic Combat Training.
- ** Taken by a subset of personnel. Not completed by all Marines.
A Grant from The Heinz Endowments Will Help Advance Veterans Policy Research

A $2 million grant from The Heinz Endowments will help RAND identify and address critical issues that affect veterans living in Pittsburgh, throughout Pennsylvania, and across the United States. The grant from the Pittsburgh-based foundation, directed to the RAND Epstein Family Veterans Policy Research Institute, will fund research, analysis, and outreach to improve federal support for veterans.

RAND will work to identify and analyze policy priorities on key areas affecting veterans. The grant will support a comprehensive strategy to widely disseminate RAND’s findings and communicate recommendations to Congress and other policymakers—with the goal of informing decisionmaking and the creation of policies to better serve veterans.

“With this generous grant from The Heinz Endowments, RAND has an opportunity to examine and inform the federal veterans policy landscape,” said Carrie Farmer, codirector of the institute. “We are grateful for this investment in analysis that can support interventions to help military families, as well as prospective policy change to improve the lives of all our veterans.”

RAND will evaluate federal programs intended to help service members transition to civilian life, examining their effectiveness and providing decisionmakers with data to help support investment in successful programs.

“We know that the transition from military service to civilian life—in western Pennsylvania and throughout the United States—can be difficult. Providing opportunities and support to veterans during this period and throughout their lives is essential,” said Megan Andros, senior program officer for veterans at The Heinz Endowments. “We are proud to support RAND, an organization, like the Endowments, with a commitment to using evidence-based research to help individuals and communities thrive. Together, we can bring awareness to the specific needs of our diverse veteran population and find new ways to care for veterans and their families.”

Additionally, the grant will help RAND create the Veterans Policy Research Collaborative. The collaborative will bring together RAND researchers with those from other institutions, universities, and veterans-focused organizations to share research findings, build relationships, and help identify ongoing and future veterans policy research priorities.

For more information about the RAND Epstein Family Veterans Policy Research Institute, visit www.rand.org/vpri.

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