

JOBS & EDUCATION

Working State

Wisconsin partners with Hiring Our Heroes to draw transitioning service members

By Matt Alderton

EVERY DAY, U.S. ARMY intelligence analyst Jeremiah Hill wakes up in paradise. Although he's originally from South Jersey, the 32-year-old husband and father of two is currently based at Schofield Barracks, Hawaii's largest Army post. Located on the island of Oahu, about 16 miles north of Honolulu, it's everything you'd expect — peppered with palm trees, bathed in sunshine and surrounded by volcanic mountains. Soon, however, Hill will say "aloha" to island life when he moves his family 4,000 miles east to what some might consider Hawaii's polar opposite: Wisconsin.

"People say to me all the time, 'Wisconsin? Man, what's up with that?'" chuckled Hill, who expects to be discharged from the U.S. military by Jan. 1, 2019, at which point he'll begin the transition to civilian life. "I had a company commander in my past who used to say, 'There's only four major days in the Army: the day you sign paperwork, the day you leave for basic, your first day in (a) country on a deployment and the day you decide to transition.' The day you decide to transition is one of the hardest."

That's because transition can be fraught with uncertainty. After years in the service, soon-to-be veterans can't help but wonder whether the skills they honed in the military will translate to the civilian economy.

"When (service members) are in the military, their purpose, their sense of community, their mission — all those things are very clear to them," said Eric Eversole, vice president at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and president of Hiring Our Heroes, a program through which the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation helps transitioning service members prepare for civilian careers. "We know from dealing with service members that one of the worst things that can happen to them is for them to lose that sense of purpose when they transition."

Hiring Our Heroes helps service members find a new mission by hosting transition summits on U.S. military installations around the world. It's at one of these events — each of which includes panel discussions, networking receptions, employment workshops and a job fair — that Hill first met representatives from the state of Wisconsin, which in August became Hiring Our Heroes' first statewide partner.

The partnership is consequential because it shifts the transition paradigm. Instead of a competitive process whereby individual companies jockey for talent, recruiting becomes a cooperative process with the public and private sectors collaborating to create mutually beneficial opportunities for service members, employers and economies.

"When a state comes together and

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PROVIDED BY JEREMIAH HILL

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PROVIDED BY U.S. CHAMBER OF COMMERCE FOUNDATION

Retired U.S. Marine Steve Jenke, third from right, participates on a panel at a Transition Summit at Camp Pendleton, Calif.

starts to recruit as a unit, the impact of its efforts is so much more significant because people are not just transitioning to a job; they're transitioning to a community," Eversole said.

When Hill saw representatives from Wisconsin were attending a Hiring Our Heroes' transition summit at Schofield Barracks, he realized he didn't know anything about the state. So, he did what any good intelligence analyst would do: He researched it.

"The next thing I knew, it was 3 o'clock in the morning, and I was still stuck on Wisconsin," said Hill, who met the next day with U.S. Marine Corps veteran Steve Janke, the statewide veterans field representative for the Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs (WDVA).

"I sat down with Steve and said, 'I'm all

hands in on Wisconsin.' There are a lot of jobs there. They're doing a lot of things for veterans. They have great schools for my children. And just the personality of the state itself; everyone I've spoken to from Wisconsin has this air of geniality about them that's infectious. It just spoke to me."

That Wisconsin's message resonated so well is a credit to the state coalition that crafted it, which encompasses not only WDVA, but also the Wisconsin Economic Development Corp. (WEDC), the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development and the Wisconsin Department of Tourism. Together, they're executing a \$1.9 million campaign to attract transitioning service members to Wisconsin, which faces a serious talent gap as its aging baby boomers retire.

"If you look at the pipeline of young professionals coming up behind them, we don't have enough workers to replace them," explained Tricia Braun, deputy secretary and chief operating officer of WEDC. "Also, being in the Midwest, we face a migration challenge because a lot of folks want to move to states with bigger cities or warmer weather, where they feel the opportunities are greater. We don't believe that should be the case, so we knew we needed to change the conversation about what Wisconsin has to offer."

Although its unemployment rate is just 3 percent, jobs are only part of Wisconsin's message. The state also is touting its educational system, low cost of living, high quality of life, affordable housing market and ample veterans

service offerings.

"If you come to Wisconsin, not only will we connect you to employment through our Department of Workforce Development, but we'll also make sure you're connected to the local resources you need in order to establish housing and find educational opportunities for your children," Janke said. "We don't have to talk much about the state of Wisconsin; it sort of sells itself because we're that good for veterans."

As for Hill, he hasn't accepted a position yet, but he's moving full steam ahead.

"I like being part of a community," he concluded. "I'm looking forward to planting roots. I want to sow some seeds and watch those seeds grow in a way that really makes a difference."