

**The Bill Blackwood
Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas**

Employing Veterans: The Ultimate Asset

**A Leadership White Paper
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
Required for Graduation from the
Leadership Command College**

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Lake Worth, Texas
February 2020**

ABSTRACT

Known for their leadership, physical abilities, firearms training and their respect for discipline and authority, veterans possess many qualities that make them desirable law enforcement employees (The International Association of Chiefs of Police, 2009). The need for qualified police officers is well-known, but the process is lengthy, labor intensive and expensive (Wright, Dai, & Greenbeck, 2011). More than 1.7 million veterans call Texas home which makes the state a prime place to find quality police candidates. By tapping into the capital investments made in veterans by the military, law enforcement agencies (LEA's) can bolster their ranks with diverse, experienced, and capable people who are inherently diverse and high in human capital (The International Association of Chiefs of Police, 2009).

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Abstract	
Introduction	1
Position	3
Counter Arguments	6
Recommendation	11
References	14

INTRODUCTION

According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (2017), there are approximately 19 million military veterans in the United States and roughly 1.7 million call Texas home. Veterans are high in human capital and come equipped with skillsets that can be quickly adapted for work in law enforcement. Known for their leadership, physical abilities, firearms training and their respect for discipline and authority, veterans possess many qualities that make them desirable law enforcement employees (The International Association of Chiefs of Police, 2009). It is because of their unique, unmatched value that Texas law enforcement agencies (LEAs) should hire more military veterans.

Hiring veterans brings diversity to the workplace. According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (2017), Texas ranks first in the number of women veterans and second in the number of minority veterans who live in the state. These veterans bring with them unique life perspectives and come from all walks of life. This affords Texas LEAs the unique opportunity to draw from one of the largest and most diverse veteran pools in the United States. The life experiences that veterans bring to the workplace can provide a great balance to college educated recruits within an agency (French, 2015).

The ability to manage stress effectively is an essential component of a well-rounded police officer. LEAs recognize the importance of selecting officers who can handle the stress and exhaustion of police work and they do so by attracting those with military experience (Ivie and Garland, 2011). Generational differences are a cause for concern among many law enforcement leaders, but the stress management skills

acquired by veterans through their military service provides an avenue for cohesiveness within the LEA.

It is estimated that one-third of returning combat veterans suffer from the psychological disorder known as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and some law enforcement leaders may be leery of their ability to successfully operate in the law enforcement environment (The International Association of Chiefs of Police, 2009). Regardless of its prevalence in veterans, PTSD has existed in law enforcement for some time. In fact, it is estimated that 7 to 19 percent of law enforcement officers have experienced PTSD and up to 34 percent have been diagnosed with partial PTSD (Fagan, 2013). Fortunately for veterans and law enforcement officers alike, PTSD is a treatable condition that if managed properly, can allow both to live healthy, productive lives (Olson and Gabriel-Olson, 2012).

Hiring veterans can be complicated and even avoided by some law enforcement agencies. It is often the unfamiliarity or a lack of experience with the military that causes LEAs to pass on the hiring of veterans while some even view them as a liability (French, 2015). Texas law makers have recognized the importance of drawing veterans into law enforcement by offering reciprocity through the Texas Commission on Law Enforcement (TCOLE) for certain qualified military jobs. Participation in this program greatly reduces costs for the hiring agency and capitalizes on the human capital endowments of those who have served (Kleykamp, 2009). Furthermore, the ability to effectively understand military documents can provide a wealth of information to LEAs which also saves considerable time and money.

POSITION

The United States military attracts people from all walks of life. Often referred to as a “melting pot”, the military is a mixture of people of different races, cultures, ethnicities, genders and sexual orientations who come from all over the United States and its territories. The military is one of the least-racially segregated communities in the United States and it is perceived by minorities as an egalitarian workplace (Kleykamp, 2009). As the second largest state in the United States, Texas is its own “melting pot” for military veterans and because of its size, it provides unique opportunities for law enforcement agencies to recruit from a large, diverse group.

Among all states, Texas ranks first in the number of women veterans who live in the state (United States Department of Veteran Affairs, 2017). Statistics indicate that the number of women veterans does not appear to be slowing as women are the fastest growing group among military and veterans (United States Department of Veteran Affairs, 2015). Texas also ranks second in the number of minority veterans who live in the state (United States Department of Veteran Affairs, 2017). Foreign language proficiency is higher in veterans and the languages that are spoken are often broader than the general population (Storlie, 2017).

Individually, veterans are unique and diverse, but it is their experience interacting with others who are different that makes their diversity so special. Veterans are not simply exposed to diversity, but rather immersed in it. During their service, veterans work, live, eat and regularly put their lives in the hands of other military members who are in the “melting pot”. This hands-on immersion into a diverse community builds trust amongst military members and allows them to develop relationships with people who,

without the military, would have never come in contact with. The inherent diversity of veterans and their ability to work with others who are equally diverse is one of the things that makes veterans so valuable in the civilian workplace

Employers regularly evaluate the skillsets, qualifications, experience, etc. of applicants during the hiring process and generally choose the person who has the greatest potential to bring value to the organization. The term 'human capital' is often used to describe a person's value both tangibly and intangibly. According to Kleykamp (2009), veterans are high in human capital because of the investments made in them by the military. Examples of specific investments include: physical fitness, firearms proficiency, leadership experience, combat experience, discipline, respect for authority, and cultural diversity (The International Association of Chiefs of Police, 2009).

Access to veteran education benefits like the GI Bill enhances the potential human capital of veterans by making education attainable for those who may not have been able to afford it otherwise (Kleykamp, 2009). According to studentveterans.org, veterans using GI Bill benefits are expected to increase by up to 25 percent (as cited in Olson and Gabriel-Olson, 2012.). Additional research suggests that many Operation Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom veterans who are using their GI Bill benefits are 24 or older, ethnic minoritys and first generation college students (Olson and Gabriel-Olson, 2012.). With the exception of those who receive scholarships, the ability to obtain higher education without dependence on student loans or employer assistance is a benefit that is available exclusively to veterans. As the emphasis on higher education grows within

the law enforcement community, the veteran's potential capital makes them a worthwhile investment.

Selye defines stress as the body's nonspecific response to any demand (as cited by Ivie and Garland, 2011). LEAs recognize the importance of selecting officers who can handle the stress and exhaustion of police work and they do so by attracting those with military experience (Ivie and Garland, 2011). Common stressors experienced in the military include long work hours, separation from friends and family, sleep deprivation, performing technical tasks under pressure, combat, and more. French (2015) states, "Service members are exposed to stress at levels that are not imaginable for those who have never served." (French, 2015, p. 1). In a study designed to compare the stress and burnout rates of veteran police officers to non-veteran police officers, Ivie and Garland (2011) found that exposure to negative events was not a significant predictor of work-related stress for veteran officers. But it is the veteran's uncanny ability to cope with stress that makes them an asset to LEAs.

Training is a fundamental element of law enforcement as it forms the basis for all decisions. Perhaps the most critical and heavily debated training officers undergo is use of force training. The use of deadly force by police recently took center stage following the highly publicized officer-involved shooting death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. Brown's death fostered calls for reform in deadly force training for police. The debate revealed that deadly force training could only be simulated and therefore, it was

hard for LEAs to predict exactly how officers would react when placed into real life or death situations (Miller, 2019). Veterans, however, may offer more predictability.

The International Association of Chiefs of Police (2009) found that through combat experiences, veteran police officers were able to take many of the things they learned in training and apply it to real-life situations. The use of deadly force is an experience shared by many combat veterans, however, only a small percentage of police officers will use their gun in their career. Conversely, the same could be expected for veterans hoping to transition to law enforcement. The veteran's experience in high-stress combat situations gives them the experience they need to make the simulated training they undergo as a police officer applicable and more realistic. Furthermore, the literature widely acknowledges veteran's experience and proficiency with firearms (Fagan, 2013; Kleykamp, 2009; Storlie, 2017; The International Association of Chiefs of Police, 2009).

COUNTER POSITION

Research indicates that as many as 25-35 percent of returning combat veterans may experience psychological disorders like post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression and anxiety (The International Association of Chiefs of Police, 2009; Hink, 2010; Olson and Gabriel-Olson, 2012). The International Association of Chiefs of Police (2009) believes that some law enforcement agencies are not prepared to deal with these disorders which is a cause for concern. Even if law enforcement agencies have mental health safeguards in place, some combat veterans simply avoid treatment or are reluctant to disclose their illness due to misconceptions related to confidentiality (The International Association of Chiefs of Police, 2009). Untreated PTSD and other

psychological disorders can make employing veterans difficult and perhaps, even a liability.

While approximately one third of returning combat veterans have been diagnosed with PTSD, it is important to remember that approximately two-thirds of veterans do not have PTSD at all (The International Association of Chiefs of Police, 2009). In order to facilitate the successful transition from military service to law enforcement, LEA leaders must understand the specific difficulties veterans face so that they are better able to support them through training and support (The International Association of Chiefs of Police, 2009). Furthermore, current research indicates that law enforcement leaders who are veterans themselves are more attune to the needs of veterans than those with no military background (The International Association of Chiefs of Police, 2009).

Treatment allows veterans diagnosed with PTSD to live healthy, productive lives (Olson and Gabriel-Olson, 2012). Mental health services are available free of charge through Veterans Administration hospitals and veterans may also elect to be seen by private doctors at their own expense. Using focus groups, interviews, roundtable discussions, and surveys of leaders and veterans, The International Association of Chiefs of Police (2009) identified several “best practices” and recommendations that can be used by LEAs to ensure veterans have a successful entry or re-entry to policing. Among them are: public acknowledgement of military service, specialized veteran field

training officer programs, peer support groups, confidentiality protocols, and many others.

It is also important to acknowledge that PTSD exists in law enforcement regardless of military service. Fagan (2013) concludes that police officers are exposed to violence and threats of harm on a regular basis and the reoccurring nature of those threats can establish a foundation of mental health issues to include PTSD.

Furthermore, there have been no studies that have been able to distinguish combat-related PTSD from that which police may experience (Shernock, 2016).

Police academies are expensive, and LEAs make tremendous investments in the police academy training experience in order to produce people who are able to function effectively as police officers (White, 2008). In September 2009, The Texas Commission on Law Enforcement (TCOLE) made significant changes to its reciprocity statutes for military police and Special Forces veterans. New reciprocity options allow qualified candidates to bypass the academy and take a fast-track to licensure. The hiring of these specially-qualified veterans drastically reduces the time agencies spend understaffed as they wait for recruits to graduate from an academy. It also drastically reduces the potential financial loss LEAs experience when recruits do not graduate the academy. The recruiting and hiring of veterans who are eligible for TCOLE's reciprocity program has the potential to save agencies money and efficiently turn veterans into peace officers.

In order to be employed as a peace officer in Texas, TCOLE requires that all officers undergo a psychological examination in addition to other screenings that are the financial responsibility of the LEA (Texas Commission on Law Enforcement, 2014). Not

all applicants pass the screening tests which ultimately results in a monetary loss for the agency. Furthermore, not all applicants who pass the screening go on to successfully complete a police academy. However, the reciprocity program allows agencies to make a minimal investment in the applicant while limiting risk. Agencies interested in hiring a veteran under the reciprocity program have the option to postpone traditional pre-employment screenings until after the qualified veteran passes the TCOLE exam. If a prospective military applicant does not meet the TCOLE criteria for licensure or is unable to successfully challenge the state examination, then the LEA can simply disqualify the candidate without making any additional investments.

According to the latest TCOLE Statutes and Rules Handbook (2014), prospective military police and special forces veterans must meet the minimum standards for initial licensure (§217.1) before being considered for eligibility under the military reciprocity program (§219.2). If the prospective applicant meets the requirements, TCOLE will allow the applicant to challenge the state licensing examination. Once passed, the applicant becomes a Texas Peace Officer and is eligible for employment. Only after a veteran becomes licensed is he/she able to fully bring their skills to bear. At the forefront of their skillset are veteran's ability to manage stress effectively.

The veteran designation is a key indicator of personal characteristics that, if examined closely by LEA administrators, can provide valuable insight from a human capital perspective. To serve in the military, potential applicants are heavily screened and must undergo a myriad of tests to determine eligibility. In fact, Kleykamp (2009) states, "Military entrance standards disqualify many young men from service..." (p. 269). Nearly all military enlistees are required to have a high school diploma or a GED

and pass the Armed Forces Qualification Test (Kleykamp, 2009). Therefore, if a person has served in a branch of the armed services, a prospective employer can assume that the veteran met a set of stringent medical, anatomical, cognitive, and educational standards that made them eligible for service.

While much can be learned about a veteran from their acceptance into the military, even more can be learned from their time of service. Most military jobs require unique technical skills, but some require even more screening and training. Those who are required to possess a security clearance, for example, have had their personal lives scrutinized and thoroughly examined to receive the clearance. At a minimum, security clearance background checks involve a regular review of the applicant's credit, criminal history checks, and interviews with immediate family members and associates. If at any point the applicant is determined to be ineligible for a security clearance, the applicant is disqualified from working in proximity to classified information and equipment. Therefore, if a veteran applying for a law enforcement job has a current security clearance, the LEA could conclude that the applicant is of high moral character who has consistently demonstrated such conduct throughout their service in the military.

A veteran's Certificate of Release or Discharge from Active Duty document (DD Form 214) can also provide valuable information to potential employers. It indicates the type of discharge the veteran was given, the type of job(s) the veteran had, the period of military service, and any honors or awards that were earned. It also indicates if the veteran is eligible for military reentry (National Archives, 2018). This single document

offers an enormous amount of information to a background investigator which can, in turn, save the LEA considerable money.

According to Kleykamp (2009), an honorable discharge provides proof that the veteran adhered to the military's standards of behavior and performance during their service. It also certifies that the veteran received job-specific training, maintained disciplined work ethics, performed in a hierarchical work environment, and had the ability to take and execute orders from superiors (Kleykamp, 2009). A one-page document (DD Form 214) that veterans can provide can speak volumes about a veteran's character and provide assurance to the LEA.

RECOMMENDATION

Across the state of Texas, LEAs are struggling to find and retain quality law enforcement officers. Wright, Dai, and Greenbeck (2011) state "The selection and training of prospective police officers is a lengthy, labor intensive, and expensive process for the applicants and the police department. There is a need to find qualified and capable individuals who can meet the standards..." (p. 625). With millions of veterans living in Texas and millions more nation-wide, Texas LEAs should capitalize on the unique pool of talent in the state and employ more military veterans.

As a group, veterans are much more diverse than the general population. Texas is home to the highest number of female veterans and the second highest number of minority veterans in the United States. Veterans have high human capital due to the investments made in them by the military and tend to be mature, understand a chain of command, have a sense of purpose and mission, and are capable of handling high

stress environments. Veterans also have high levels of potential human capital due to the availability of educational benefits under the GI bill programs.

As many as 25-35 percent of returning combat veterans may experience psychological disorders like post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression and anxiety (The International Association of Chiefs of Police, 2009; Hink, 2010; Olson and Gabriel-Olson, 2012). Conversely, it is also estimated that 7 to 19 percent of law enforcement officers have experienced PTSD and up to 34 percent have been diagnosed with partial PTSD (Fagan, 2013). Although these findings are inclusive of both military veterans and law enforcement officers, the fact remains that PTSD is treatable and those who properly manage their diagnosis can go on to live healthy, productive lives (Olson and Gabriel-Olson, 2012).

Hiring veterans can be difficult and unfamiliar to some law enforcement leaders (French, 2015). The Texas Commission on Law Enforcement (2009) offers reciprocity for certain qualified military veterans which can save LEAs money and expedite the hiring process for veterans. Furthermore, the ability to sift through and effectively understand military documents can provide a wealth of information to LEAs which also saves considerable time and money.

Agencies interested in capitalizing on the opportunity to hire military veterans should first adjust their expectations and then begin researching the reciprocity programs offered by the Texas Commission on Law Enforcement. Adequate research is needed to properly administer the program and to advise interested veterans. To increase competitiveness, LEAs should consider hosting or offering to pay for the Peace Officer Supplement Course (TCOLE 1018) required for military police and Special

Forces veterans. Average costs for online versions of the course are less than two-hundred dollars but costs can be lowered considerably if the LEA is willing to host the class itself. It is important to remember that an investment of less than two-hundred dollars in a qualified veteran is far less than the cost of sending a new officer through an academy.

Storlie (2017) made the following suggestions to help LEAs ensure they hire the best veteran for the job: Look to hire local veterans first and then expand outward, actively seek military job-fairs and hiring events, allow veteran candidates to tour the department and interact with fellow veteran officers, and be leery of excessive non-judicial punishment (NJP). LEAs may also consider recruiting events at local or regional military bases or veteran services offices. Participation in Texas' "We Hire Vets" employer recognition programs may also help attract interested veterans to LEAs. Recruitment is the first step to hiring quality veterans but a long-term structured support system is needed to support them throughout their career. Following the recommendations outlined in The International Association of Chiefs of Police (2009) best practices guide, *Employing Returning Combat Veterans as Law Enforcement Officers*, is also highly encouraged.

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