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Group helps veterans tackle job market

The Tampa Bay WorkForce Alliance is a nonprofit job placement organization that gives veterans priority.

By PAUL DE LA GARZA, Times Staff Writer
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TAMPA - After serving a one-year tour in Iraq with the North Carolina National Guard, Reynaldo Diaz came home to a tight job market.

Diaz, his wife and their two young girls were living in Jacksonville, N.C., and the future looked bleak. Last month, following in a friend's footsteps, Diaz relocated his family to Oldsmar.

Within days, he landed a job with Verizon as a customer service representative.

Diaz, 26, credited the Tampa Bay WorkForce Alliance for his good fortune.

"They helped us out tremendously," he said.

The WorkForce Alliance is a nonprofit job placement organization that gives veterans priority. Funded through the Labor Department, it serves 7,000 veterans each year, on average.

Special projects manager Michael Garcia said the group places seven of 10 veterans it serves.

In addition to working with veterans in the community, the group helps run the Transitional Assistance Program at MacDill Air Force Base. It the first of its kind in the state.

Overall, Garcia said, the WorkForce Alliance sees a mix of veterans, but recently it has started to see a bump in veterans who served in Afghanistan and Iraq.

"The biggest challenge," he said, "is helping with the transition from military to civilian life."

Retired Air Force Col. Charlie Ohlinger, a former base commander at MacDill, said veterans oftentimes lack job-seeking skills because those skills are not part of military life.

Job applicants in the Air Force don't send out resumes or go through job interviews, Ohlinger said. "The Air Force," he said, "decides where you go."

To help ease the transition from military to civilian life, the WorkForce Alliance uses several tools. A program specifically tailored to help veterans, for example, features 12 staff members - all veterans, said Garcia, a former Marine.

The group offers veterans training in fields such as information technology and medicine, whatever job specialty is in high demand.

The group also helps veterans hone their job-interviewing skills - offering tips such as what to wear - and equips them with the proper techniques to negotiate higher salaries.

The organization operates four career centers in Hillsborough County.

"We want them to understand they are a very marketable commodity," Garcia said.

Patrick Camille, 47, worked as a corrections officer in New York City until he moved to Carrollwood upon retirement last year.

An Army veteran, he wanted to work in law enforcement. In February, Camille went to the WorkForce Alliance.

He said what helped him most were interview tips. "Working with former vets, it was good for me. They really care about the veteran."

Camille said he went to several job interviews and received a couple of job offers.

A few months ago, Camille began working as a detention officer at the Pasco County Jail. His goal is to work as a sheriff's deputy.

The WorkForce Alliance has been recognized by veterans organizations, including the American Legion, because of its work with veterans locally and beyond the bay area.

Garcia said that with the Transitional Assistance Program at MacDill, the organization has succeeded in job placements nationwide.

Ohlinger, the former MacDill commander, also is executive director of the Tampa-based Florida Council of 100, a nonprofit group of business executives that promotes economic growth and quality of life.

He praised the WorkForce Alliance, characterizing the program at MacDill as a "godsend."

"Having to do a resume and do the interview process can be scary," Ohlinger said. "Having somebody help them is a wonderful service."

Garcia said the message he wants to convey to veterans is that they are not alone.

"They have a venue to get them to where they need to be," he said.

Diaz, the National Guardsman who served in Iraq, appreciates the helping hand.

For now, Diaz and his family are staying with a friend. His wife is looking for work, and once they save enough money, they plan to get their own place.

Diaz also is taking college classes online, and the future, he said, couldn't be brighter.

"I think we can make it a home here," he said.

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