

Turning Veterans into Craftspeople

George Bliss

When our military personnel return from active duty, they face the transition from a career in the Armed Forces to another kind of career. The United Association (UA) has recognized that these hardworking servicemen and servicewomen are prime candidates for careers in the plumbing and pipefitting fields.

The construction industry needs to find 1.6 million new workers during the next 5 years. That is an important reason why the UA has joined the Mechanical Contractors Association and the Union Affiliated Contractors of the Plumbing, Heating and Cooling Contractors Association of America in a new program to recruit military veterans.

"Helmets to Hardhats" was designed by the Building and Construction Trades Department (BCTD) to meet the critical skills shortage in the construction industry by enlisting U.S. military personnel as they return to civilian life. We are eager to help members of the U.S. Armed Forces transfer their experience and can-do attitude into secure jobs in the construction industry.

Earlier this year, the Helmets to Hardhats initiative established the Center for Military Recruitment, Assessment and Veterans Employment—a not-for-profit organization providing one location for all opportunities in the construction industry. The Center helps assess an individual's level of training and experience and connects that person with an apprenticeship program such as

those offered at UA local unions. Veterans receive training or, if appropriate, are provided direct entry at the journeyman level with participating employers.

Military veterans can make ideal candidates for the demands of the skilled building trades. At least 99% are high school graduates, and they are racially diverse. As a group, they are dependable, maintain a high level of integrity, and were trained in technical skills during military service.

Helmets to Hardhats wants to recruit approximately 700,000 men and women from the military into the construction industry. This program will provide them the opportunity for a true career after military service. Registration information is available online at www.helmetstohardhats.com, which also features testimonials from real people who have found a new career as a result of the program. There is a forum where those interested can communicate with mentors about the building and construction trades. The mentors have served in the military and now are working in various unions. They are able to offer advice and guidance to anyone considering this path.

All BCTD programs are high-quality training centers recognized by Regional Education Certifying Councils and Boards. This educational certification is what qualifies programs such as the UA's for the use of the Montgomery G.I. Bill or various state, National Guard, or Reserve educational funding programs. The G.I. Bill and some state programs normally pay qualified apprentices a monthly stipend in addition to their earned wages.

Acceptance into the building and construction trades is a first step to a great future for our veterans. A career in the United Association allows apprentices to earn while they learn and get rewarded for their hard work. Our 5-year apprenticeship and ongoing journeyman training programs are unrivaled in the industry.

Because of our extensive training efforts and new programs, the UA will continue to lead the industry in supplying the best-trained workforce well into the 21st century. No one matches our commitment or investment. The UA spends more than \$100 million annually on training program efforts involving approximately 100,000 journeymen and apprentices in more than 400 local training facilities at any given time.

Many people have said that jobs in the building trades unions feel like "coming home" for veterans. In both arenas there is a sense of camaraderie, a standard of excellence, and a heartfelt commitment to building America's future. We in the UA are proud to welcome America's heroes into the ranks of America's builders. Whether in helmets or hardhats, these hardworking men and women serve an important role in making our country a better place. ■

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