

# VA Pacific Islands Health Care System – Same-Day Hiring Employment Fairs

An Innovative Practice in VHA Homeless Program Operations

White Paper

**VA**



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Developed by  
**VHA National Homeless Program Office**

## INTRODUCTION

The VHA Homeless Program Office identifies and disseminates innovative practices in homeless program operations. The VA Pacific Islands Health Care System (HCS) has been identified as a site with an innovative practice for hosting effective employment fairs.

## PRACTICE OVERVIEW

**Identifying employers who have immediate job vacancies in positions commonly sought by homeless and formerly homeless Veterans, and inviting these employers to participate in employment fairs, is effective in securing same-day job placements.**

Employment fairs are one of the most commonly used tools in the toolkits of Homeless Veteran Community Employment Services (HVCES) staff across VA to help homeless and at-risk Veterans find and obtain meaningful employment. Also called job or career fairs, these events seek to match employers, recruiters, and sometimes schools with potential employment candidates. While there are many benefits to job seekers, including opportunities to meet employers, learn about prospective vacancies, and complete applications, most job seekers have a singular outcome in mind – to actually get hired on the spot. Disappointingly, this primary goal is seldom realized as candidates are often directed to apply online on company websites. Many homeless and formerly homeless Veterans lack access to computers with Internet connectivity or lack the basic computer skills needed to complete this task without assistance. Additionally, if resumes are collected during the event itself, it is often unlikely that a given Veteran's resume will stand out among the possible hundreds of other resumes and applications submitted. The result in both situations is continued unemployment for the Veteran. At the Pacific Islands HCS, having seen great success with their recent employment case conferencing sessions<sup>1</sup>, in May of 2019, the Community Employment Coordinator (CEC) shifted her attention to improving the employment fair experience. Partnering with a Housing and Urban Development-VA Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) Employment Specialist (ES) and a Peer Support Specialist (PSS) within the Pacific Island's homeless program, they got to work.

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<sup>1</sup> VA Pacific Islands HCS – Employment Case Conferencing:  
<https://r03cleapp06.r03.med.va.gov/hub2/app/hp/library/record/visit?id=1496>



The employment team started out by conducting a review of the current homeless and formerly homeless Veterans they were actively working with to identify commonalities in job skills and employment history. This information helped them identify the positions with the greatest chance for same day hiring, as well as which employers to contact. They found that their best bet was to target entry-level opportunities in the areas of food service, hospitality service, truck driving, warehouse, and construction. It also helped them identify prospective Veterans who would be strong candidates for employment. Next, they conducted an informal environmental scan of the job market in Honolulu, HI, gathering information on which companies had vacancies that best fit the skills and experience and interests of the identified Veterans, as well as those companies' needs, goals, and values. This context would be critical when approaching employers to participate in their employment fair – the experience had to be worth it to them too.

Fortunately, the scan identified some employers that had prior successful collaborations with the CEC and the Veterans who were referred for jobs. These employers understood the valuable skills these Veterans brought to their companies, understood the complexity of their lived experiences, and had developed trusting relationships with VA staff. The HVCES team met with these initial employer prospects face-to-face, with the first two employers approached immediately agreeing to participate in the job fair. This was critical as the CEC, ES, and PSS were able to leverage these early wins into their pitches with new employers with whom they did not have existing relationships. When discussing which companies had already signed on to participate, the employment team were careful not to share company names and instead shared the field or industry the company belonged too. Honolulu was a relatively tight-knit community where nearly everyone knows everyone, so keeping those names confidential during planning helped not dissuade other potential employers from participating. Counterintuitively, despite not knowing precisely who would be attending, employers often felt more at ease when they knew that there are other employers from similar industries who would also be in attendance. This was most likely due to the employers seeing themselves less as risky, early adopters and more like they were participating in a popular,

*“We avoid saying homeless Veterans. In doing so, we assert their dignity as people. We say Veterans, or Candidates, or Job Seekers. This change in identity makes a difference in how potential employers relate to them. You can instantly see the change in their body language.”*

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commonplace practice. They were careful to also ensure that the employers had a shared philosophy about the importance of hiring Veterans.

The first in-house employment fair was scheduled for October 2019. With an array of promising potential employers, and an event date set, the Honolulu team set out to confirm which Veterans would attend. Prescreening activities took place during the week prior involved reviewing and updating resumes, briefing the Veterans on the anticipated employers, and ensuring that the Veterans had important documents, transportation, and appropriate attire. On the day before the event, vocational specialists offered to meet with Veterans, either in person or by telephone, to do some last minute coaching and provide words of encouragement.

The first event was generally considered a success. Though only six Veterans attended, all of them obtained jobs on the spot. Envisioning these fairs as monthly activities, they repeated the events in November and December. In November, seven Veterans attended and five obtained jobs on the spot. December saw the attendees increase to nine, and again all nine obtained jobs. Despite categorically achieving their goal, the employment team was disappointed as they hoped more Veterans would attend. The employers who participated had many more vacancies to fill and the team did not want them to get frustrated due to the low number of Veteran attendees.

Brainstorming ways to increase attendance, it was decided to host the January 2020 event at the Department of Labor American Job Center. This would change the scope from homeless and formerly homeless Veterans to all Veterans, but the heavy foot traffic would lead to more attendees and possibly even better outcomes for employers. As anticipated, the January fair had 28 attendees, and eight were hired on the spot, one of whom was a homeless Veteran. The organizers did not believe the presence of non-homeless Veterans impacted the hiring prospects of the homeless Veterans that attended. Despite the lowered hiring rate, many viewed the event to be particularly successful as evidenced by the high energy and non-stop networking and social interaction. Additionally, satisfaction surveys given to both Veterans and employers demonstrated that all participants found the experience to be valuable and positive. Despite hiring on the spot, most companies had onboarding processes that took days to weeks. Fortunately, the CEC was able to identify a temporary staffing agency who was willing to provide short-term employment opportunities to fill the gap between being hired and actually starting the job. This helped Veterans begin earning income prior to their permanent job's start date, while also providing an environment to brush up on their business soft skills.



It was important for the CEC to support the employer in situations where hired Veterans were not successful in the job setting. This support involved validating any feelings of frustration and identifying a new prospective candidate. Building trust in the VA employment staff was critical to employers feeling that they were part of the mission. This trust was strengthened in circumstances when problems arose and employment staff, PSS, social worker, or mental health clinicians were on hand and available to help. In essence, they were not just hiring a Veteran, they were also getting the full force of VHA as well.

In contrast to more direct methods of job recruitment, VA Pacific Island's employment fair format offered many benefits. Homeless Veterans sent directly to employers for interviews often missed appointment times due to a variety of issues, such as a lack of reliable transportation or a lack of familiarity with the interview location. Additionally, these Veterans often experienced significant anxiety symptoms that would potentially interfere with interview performance and related communication skills. The more inviting and less intensive environment of the small job fair likely helped to mitigate these issues. **Since October 2019, 28 Veterans immediately obtained jobs thanks to VA Pacific Island's in-house employment fair.** Reflecting on their success, all agreed that what made their job fair different from the customary job fair was in developing strong, collaborative, and warm relationships with employers in advance. The CEC noted that, although counterintuitive, they were working for the employer too, taking care of their fiscal needs (in the form of quality job candidates) as well as their psychological needs (in the form of a good experience). Being effective at connecting Veterans to jobs necessitated being effective at fostering and maintaining referral relationships with employers. For example, many employers are eager to hire Veterans either due to company policy or because they have federal contracts that mandate them to outreach and hire Veterans. The CEC noted that many employers expressed frustration when they attended job fairs but left with no potential candidates at all, much less direct hires who were Veterans. This frustration was compounded as participating in larger job fairs often came with table fees and the risk of being lost among hundreds of other potential employers. With the CEC's smaller, boutique-style job fair, the tables, parking, and refreshments are all free. Not only was the experience less chaotic and more enjoyable, but they also engaged with many more quality Veteran applicants, satisfying many needs all at once.



## CONCLUSION

VHA's national employment subject matter experts noted that, whether an employer was part of a large national chain, or a small independent business, one key to improving employment outcomes for Veterans who have experienced homelessness was to make connections with local managers, developing warm and collaborative relationships. Pacific Island HCS's comprehensive strategy for connecting Veterans to jobs took that recommendation to scale, creating a community of employers that were willing and eager to hire Veterans. Having immediate openings, matched strategically and appropriately to candidates, leads to immediate gratification for all parties.

We would like to thank the dedicated staff at the VA Pacific Islands HCS for sharing their practice with us. For more information, please contact Jackie Nguyen, Community Employment Coordinator at [Jackie.Nguyen2@va.gov](mailto:Jackie.Nguyen2@va.gov).

