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Battle Buddies

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Cover Story

By DONNA BOYLE SCHWARTZ



Battle Buddies

National nonprofit U.S. VETS helps former service members build a new support team to ease the transition to civilian life

Many veterans face complex physical, psychological, and social challenges when they return home after military service, including chronic pain, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, unemployment, and homelessness. These factors contribute to about half of post-9/11 veterans reporting difficulty readjusting to civilian life, significantly more than veterans from earlier eras.

Fortunately, one national organization is working to ensure that every veteran enjoys dignity, purpose, and a place to call home: U.S. VETS. U.S. VETS is the nation's largest nonprofit provider of housing, mental health care, career programs, and wraparound services, helping more 20,000 homeless and at-risk veterans and their families every year. The group operates residential and service sites nationwide, with the mission of preventing and ending veteran homelessness.

"Veterans must learn to navigate an entirely different lifestyle once they transition out of the service," points out Dr. Paige Johnson, a former U.S. Army Corporal and now U.S. VETS Ambassador. "They may need to seek help for medical or mental health challenges that stem from their time in the military. Additionally, they have to identify and apply their transferable military skills within the civilian job market, which can be both challenging and rewarding."

Johnson herself hit some roadblocks in her post-military career. "I was working in a stable position as a biology instructor at a healthcare academy when the company downsized, and I was unexpectedly laid off," she relates. "I tried to find work in the same field in Florida, where I was living at the time, but no matter how hard I searched, nothing opened up. I kept hearing that Houston had far more opportunities in my field, so I made a difficult but hopeful decision: I packed up my five children, and we headed to Texas on nothing more than faith, determination, and a wing and a prayer.

"I had a 401(k) and some savings, enough to keep us afloat for

about six months, and I truly believed I would find a job within two," she adds. "But that did not happen. Instead, my children and I ended up living in an extended-stay hotel for nearly five months."

According to Johnson, her mental health was fragile, with symptoms from post-traumatic stress disorder she suffered for years following military sexual trauma. With just two weeks of savings left to keep her children housed, she limited her job search to fast food restaurants, discounters and dollar stores, searching for an opportunity to support her family. "I had packed my kids up. I thought it would be OK, and then I was struggling. I said, 'Let me just get something to take care of my family.' But no one was hiring."

Johnson reached out to the local U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, which pointed her to the U.S. VETS offices, where she met workforce development coordinator Sharhonda Williams, who helped her secure a part-time job at UPS. "Sharhonda made sure I had the warehouse clothes, the shoes I needed, everything," Johnson says, describing the encounter as a powerful turning point in her journey. "Sharhonda connected me with a housing specialist who found safe, stable accommodations for my children and me. U.S. VETS helped with the rental deposit, utilities, and even furniture, support that gave us the foundation we urgently needed."

While at UPS, Johnson received an unexpected call from the program director of Texas Southern University's Biomedical Science department. "She interviewed me for an instructor position, and shortly after, I got my dream job," Williams recalls. "The first person I called was Sharhonda. When I told her the news, she celebrated with me and said, 'Well, you're going to need some new clothes! Loafers, dress shirts, slacks for work, even office supplies.' She made sure everything was going smoothly."

Johnson was recently promoted to teach graduate students in pharmacy and health sciences, and she also has become a U.S. VETS Ambassador, spreading the word about the myriad of services



the organization provides. "I want others to know that U.S. VETS and the services they offer are truly phenomenal, and they are available," she asserts. "U.S. VETS is that battle buddy who is ready to reach out a hand when you need it most. Whether you are struggling with mental health challenges, facing homelessness, or simply in need of a hot meal, U.S. VETS is there to support you. All you have to do is ask.

"When life gets hard, it is important to know there is a place where you can go to get back on track, a place that is judgment-free and staffed by people who genuinely care," she continues. "They understand veterans, our experiences, and even our unique sense of humor. U.S. VETS meets you where you are and helps you move forward with dignity, compassion, and real support."

Johnson joined the military at 18 years old and served as a radiology technician, eventually leaving the service to pursue her college education. She notes that civilian life presents startling challenges. "What surprised me most about adjusting to civilian life was how difficult it was to accept and understand my new 'normal;' I did not expect the transition to be easy, but I also did not realize just how much it would impact both me and my children," she comments. "In the military, I had structure, a regimented schedule, clear expectations, and comrades who understood exactly what I was going through. Once I left that environment, the absence of those familiar routines and the loss of that support system hit harder than I anticipated.

"I also had to seek mental health support to process some of the experiences I went through during my service," she continues. "I needed to feel safe again, both emotionally and mentally. Part of my transition involved learning how to become a new version of

myself: the civilian Paige. I was no longer waking up for physical training, heading to chow, and reporting to work in the same rhythm every day. Rebuilding a structured routine on my own, without the military framework, was incredibly challenging. It took time, patience, and a lot of self-reflection to adjust."

Johnson says U.S. VETS has been instrumental in helping her shape her civilian life. "The message I would share with another veteran is: Do not suffer in silence. Asking for help is not a sign of weakness. In fact, strength and courage are shown by those who recognize when support is needed and take the steps to reach out. Every time you ask for help, you move one step closer to accomplishing the mission of being okay mentally, emotionally, and physically. You deserve that support, and you deserve to thrive."

"My family, community and support system have all transformed because U.S. VETS has become a part of our lives," she continues. "They are not a 'one and done' organization - they provide wrap-around services that support veterans through every stage and every challenge. Knowing they are there gives me confidence that if life ever throws me a curveball, I will not have to face it alone. Because of their support, my family is secure, stable, and thriving. We are happier and living a better life than we ever did in Florida. My children received a fresh start, and so did I. U.S. VETS helped us rebuild, and they remain a trusted part of our journey.

"I will continue to reach out to other veterans and support U.S. VETS in any way I can," she adds. "They changed our lives, and I want to help ensure that other veterans receive the same opportunities and support that made such a difference for my family and me." 🇺🇸

U.S. VETS Launches Veteran Connection Hubs

U.S. VETS is deepening its commitment to veterans by expanding its mission beyond crisis response to proactive prevention, ensuring the next generation never experiences the trauma and indignity of homelessness. In January 2026, the organization announced the national rollout of Veteran Connection Hubs - one-stop community-based resource centers that engage at-risk veterans to prevent homelessness, mental health crises, chronic unemployment, and social isolation.

These Veteran Connection Hubs provide targeted resources that help veterans and their families secure stable housing, strengthen financial resilience, and build lasting support networks—laying the foundation for long-term independence in civilian life. The hubs consolidate essential services—housing, employment, mental health, and peer support—under one roof, with community at the core, reinforcing stability and belonging.

Cindy Monticue, U.S. VETS National Director of Communications & Marketing, explains, "Early intervention identifies veterans at risk—those facing eviction, financial hardship or mental health challenges—and connects them with support before they lose housing. Job training and placement programs reduce unemployment among veterans by as much as 40%, especially when combined with housing support.

"Preventing homelessness is significantly less expensive than emergency shelters, hospital stays or incarceration that often follow chronic homelessness," she adds. "The Veterans Connection Hub represents a transformative service delivery model—grounded in dignity, accessibility and long-term sustainability—designed not merely to respond to veteran homelessness and hardship, but to prevent it entirely."

