



Association of the United States Army

Voice for the Army—Support for the Soldier

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Soldier for Life

Honor the service and sacrifice of our veterans, retirees, wounded warriors and families by preserving the highest possible quality of life, on our installations and wherever Soldiers serve and live. Assist Soldiers transitioning out of Army service to return to civilian occupations successfully. Once a Soldier, always a Soldier.

General Raymond T. Odierno¹

Introduction

Today's all-volunteer Army, which recently celebrated its 40th anniversary, is the most experienced, best trained and highest quality force in the world. Steadfast for more than 12 continuous years at war, the total Army (active, Army National Guard, Army Reserve) has repeatedly answered the nation's call to duty, both at home and abroad. America's sons and daughters, inspired by patriotism and opportunity, choose to volunteer to be part of something bigger than themselves.

The American Soldier is the centerpiece of the premier all-volunteer Army. Identified as the most respected profession in the country,² military service is characterized by commitment, selfless service and sacrifice. Ultimately, at the end of an enlistment or a long career, Soldiers transition out of the service and become military veterans within America's communities. Military veterans are respected leaders and experts in their field whose common traits often include self-confidence, loyalty, discipline and determination to get the job done.

The Army's senior leaders have made the premier all-volunteer Army a top strategic priority. To preserve the all-volunteer Army means continually recruiting and retaining the best talent. The quality of the Army is underpinned by the faith and trust of the Soldiers who volunteer to serve and veterans who have served, all of whom have an expectation that they will have opportunities after their service. The Army is dedicated to assisting Soldiers as they transition out of military service to return to civilian occupations. Soldier for Life (SFL) is the Army's program to earn that trust by providing resources and opportunities for Soldiers, veterans and families who are in transition.



Background

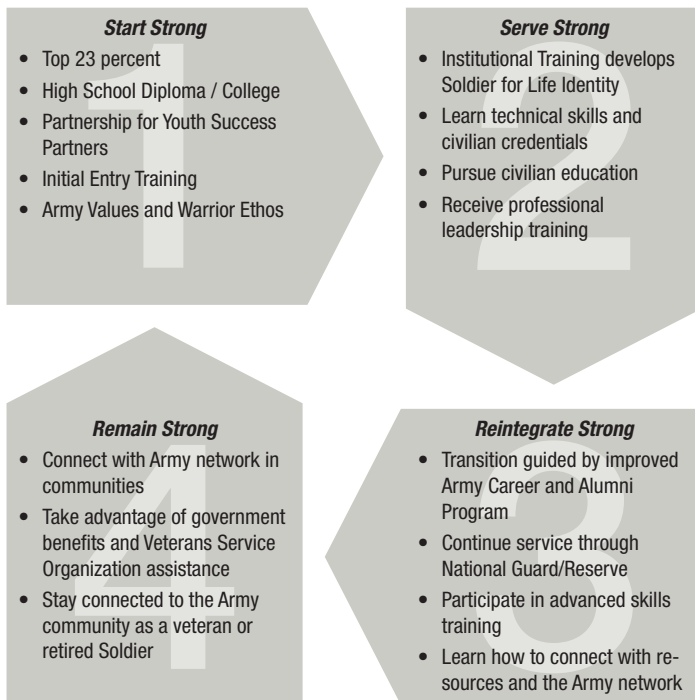
The preservation of the all-volunteer Army was not the sole motivation for founding the SFL program. The situation for transitioning Soldiers in 2012 was marked by significant challenges in gaining employment and making positive transitions into communities. The transition from military service is not always seamless; unemployment and homelessness are far too widespread among the military veteran community. The general economic situation, the Army process for pre-separation procedures and large numbers of transitioning Soldiers due to force drawdown all impacted the ability of servicemembers and families to reintegrate successfully. The Army's share of unemployment expenditures topped \$500 million as Fiscal Year (FY) 2011 drew to a close; the Army's senior leadership responded by forming SFL in July 2012.

The SFL program is founded upon the central idea that once a Soldier joins the active or reserve component of the United States Army, he or she is a Soldier for life. His or her legacy of service will

¹ General Raymond T. Odierno, "Waypoint #2: Follow-up to CSA's Marching Orders," 19 February 2014, http://www.army.mil/article/118873/Waypoint__2__Follow_up_to_CSA_s_Marching_Orders.

² Pew Research Center, "Public Esteem for Military Still High," 11 July 2013, <http://www.pewforum.org/2013/07/11/public-esteem-for-military-still-high>.

Soldier Life Cycle



Source: Headquarters, Department of the Army

persist well beyond the inevitable transition out, regardless of the duration of that service. This journey from civilian to lifelong Soldier is outlined in the Soldier Life Cycle.

The mission of SFL in its initial charter was to “Connect Army, governmental and community efforts to build relationships that facilitate successful reintegration of our Soldiers, veterans and their families to keep them Army Strong and instill their values, ethos and leadership within communities.” In an environment typified by over 44,000 separate entities working separately to provide services for veterans, the program’s task was monumental. SFL quickly adapted into an organization that complemented the ongoing efforts of the Army Career and Alumni Program (ACAP) to prepare Soldiers for successful transition. **SFL does not provide new services to transitioning Soldiers; it synchronizes the existing resources, making them more accessible to the individual Soldier, retired Soldier, veteran and family member.**

Resources fall into three categories: employment, education and health services. The challenge is to deliver these resources in a way that transitioning Soldiers and veterans can locate them, access them and execute an individual transition plan developed during the ACAP process. SFL’s four priorities to achieve this connection are to:

- develop the Soldier for Life mindset;
- facilitate Soldier access to resources;
- build relationships that benefit transitioning Soldiers; and
- maintain trust in the Army among Soldiers and the American people.

Ongoing Initiatives

Soldier for Life Portal. The establishment of a digital platform brought resources together in one location, easily accessible and navigable by an individual Soldier. On 1 May 2014, the portal came online, simplifying the process of searching for employment, education and health resources by linking them at a single point (<http://www.soldierforlife.army.mil>). The portal is the Army’s solution for bringing government, industry and nonprofit services directly to Soldiers. It will reduce the time and complexity of searching multiple locations for benefits or employment opportunities.³

Credentials, certifications and licenses (CCLs). The Army recognized that a skills gap existed in the transitioning Soldier population. Although Soldiers receive world-class training and become experts in their various specialties while serving in the Army, translating these acquired skills for civilian employers can be a challenge. In fact, many vocations in the private sector require credentials, certifications or licenses that are not needed for military service. It is vital that private industry has the ability to leverage the skilled veteran population as they return to the civilian workforce. The Army is working to expand current efforts to fund and prepare Soldiers to receive civilian CCLs within their military occupational specialty (MOS). Today, there are 96 separate CCL pilot initiatives within 46 MOSs. These initiatives not only improve readiness by providing valuable training opportunities for Soldiers, but they also provide industry-recognized skills that future employers will demand.

Apprenticeships and internships. Soldiers unable to achieve CCLs within their MOS, or who wish to move into a different field, may require retraining to acquire new skills as they transition. Under new authorities granted by the Department of Defense, unit commanders now have the discretion to allow selected Soldiers to participate in apprenticeships or internships during the 180 days prior to their transition date. Several industries have already partnered with the Army to establish apprenticeship and internship programs targeted to transitioning veterans at local military installations—apprenticeships in welding, automotive technology and information technology are just three examples. SFL’s role is not to direct these programs but to collect and

³ Businesses interested in reaching out to transitioning Soldiers should establish a virtual connection using the eBenefits employment portal: <https://www.ebenefits.va.gov/ebenefits/employers>. Nonprofit organizations who want to assist Soldiers/veterans should e-mail csa.soldier4life@us.army.mil to explain what the organization does. Soldier for Life will connect them to the right agency to begin to assist.



share the best practices and to advocate increased participation from both Soldiers and potential industry partners. These programs can create a tremendous opportunity for industry to meet, train and potentially hire proven Soldiers with a sound work ethic as they transition from the Army.

Increased Support to Retired Soldiers. Retired Soldiers, who embody the ideals of a lifetime of service, are the bedrock of Army outreach at the local level. Modernization of Army Knowledge Online (AKO) eliminated AKO services to the retired Soldier population in 2014. The Army is working to reconnect with its retired alumni and to help facilitate a peer-to-peer network for Soldiers as they transition from the Army. In February 2014, SFL merged with the Retirement Services Office (RSO). The merger led to an important feature on the SFL Portal for retired Soldiers—the retired Soldiers tab (<http://www.soldierforlife.army.mil/retirement>). This feature on the portal will replace many of the AKO services and serve as a primary connection tool for retirees. The merger was a significant step forward to ensure that regardless of when a Soldier separates, he or she will be an important and involved part of the Army network.

Regional Outreach. The most important ongoing SFL initiative is regional alignment. The outreach is divided into four regions and aligned with the Department of Veterans Affairs regional construct. Each SFL regional outreach office is led by a lieutenant colonel and a master sergeant who are focused at the local level where transitioning Soldiers will ultimately live and work. The regional focus helps the Army connect with local communities to share the Army's message and ensure that veterans who reside there are aware of the opportunities and resources that are available.

The Way Ahead

The Soldier for Life program continues to build a coalition of interagency and industry partners to spread awareness of veterans' issues and bring resources to the installation level. As the Army enters the high point of its transformation, large numbers of Soldiers will transition from service in the next five years, bringing more urgency

Improving Connections to Retired Soldiers

- **What retired Soldiers now have**
 - New stand-alone public website
 - Pull: Exhaustive retirement information that's quick to find
 - Push: Newsletter updates pushed to those who opt in
 - Retired Soldiers can communicate concerns to the Army using Soldier for Life and Retirement Services Office e-mail boxes
- **What retired Soldiers will have in the future**
 - News blog/discussion forum
 - Social media capability
 - White Pages (opt in)
 - Robust FAQs database

Source: Headquarters, Department of the Army

to accomplishing the SFL mission. The Army is developing means to translate extensive national-level government and industry support to the installation and community levels. While the development of these resources is a huge step forward in caring for veterans and Soldiers, the grassroots level is where those resources ultimately find their way to those who need them most. By developing networks of involved local leaders and prominent veterans, SFL will connect communities and veterans to ensure that each individual Soldier receives the right assistance, from the right source, at the right time.

What is Needed

The SFL program is one of many powerful voices advocating for awareness of veteran and transition Soldier issues as America emerges from its longest armed conflict. Support at all levels is critical.

Congress. The nation's lawmakers accomplished much in the past three years through legislation to assist transitioning veterans, beginning with the Veterans Opportunity to Work (VOW) Act in 2011. More legislation is needed, however, to streamline veterans' ability to return to the community of their choosing and begin making an immediate impact. The



House of Representatives recently passed HR357, the GI Bill Tuition Fairness Act of 2014, which mandates that public universities grant in-state tuition waivers to returning veterans. This would allow the GI Bill to cover the entirety of a veteran's four-year degree at any public university. This bill is currently in committee, awaiting approval by the U.S. Senate. Additionally, Congress and the state legislatures must work together to streamline state credentialing requirements, which can vary widely. This allows both veterans and families, who have been forced to make frequent interstate moves during their time in service, to rapidly transition to meaningful employment in whichever state they elect to live.

The Army. The Army demonstrated its commitment to Soldier transition by improving the Army Career and Alumni Program (ACAP) process and establishing the Soldier for Life program. The next step is to implement and fully fund the existing programs that showed promise during the pilot phase. The CCL pilot program funding is nearly expended, and current Tuition Assistance rules do not allow Soldiers to apply this form of funding to pay for the training and testing materials required to achieve CCLs. Soldiers should not have out-of-pocket costs for this. The Army must either modify existing regulations or determine other avenues of funding for these valuable programs. Additionally, commanders at all levels must increase their awareness of Soldier transition issues and support vocational training programs and internships at the installation level by allowing Soldier participation whenever possible. Involvement by commanders at all levels will ensure that Soldiers are successful both in and out of uniform.

Communities. The community is the most important determining factor in the success of veterans. Here they will work, establish homes and find the emotional support they need to make a positive transition. Community leaders must raise awareness of veteran issues and establish networks between transitioning veterans and local leaders who are aware of available resources and opportunities. The American population has done an admirable job of showing their support for Soldiers, but this must ultimately translate into jobs, education and assistance in physically acclimating veterans to a new community. There is no standard solution for accomplishing this; communities must come together and decide what mechanisms work best at their level for assisting their veteran population.

Employers. The outpouring of support by major employers over the past several years has been staggering, with over half a million jobs pledged to veterans by corporations nationwide. Simply pledging employment is only half the battle, however. SFL has



conducted hundreds of corporate engagements and has found that many companies do not have policies in place to locate veterans to hire or retain them after a position is accepted. Employers interested in hiring veterans can contact local installations or National Guard and Reserve Centers to connect with transitioning veterans. The launch of the VA's new eBenefits employment portal (<https://www.ebenefits.va.gov/ebenefits/employers>) is also an outstanding way to connect with Soldiers as they rejoin the civilian workforce. Many successful companies also facilitate affinity groups for the veteran employees that have proven invaluable to a successful transition to their new career.

Transitioning Veterans. Veterans themselves have significant responsibilities in their own transition. Although there are many resources available, successful reintegration still involves detailed planning and personal initiative. Veterans must tackle this challenge head on, making plans early for the many details of life that the Army has provided throughout their career—skills training, education, pay, housing and health care. The ACAP process now begins 12 months from separation; Soldiers must not wait to begin taking advantage of the many mentorship, résumé writing and skills development resources available to them. Those who do not take advantage of these resources prior to their transition date may ultimately struggle.

Conclusion

The premier all-volunteer Army flourishes when America's best and brightest view service to the nation as an honor and have an expectation that they will be recognized for that service. The SFL program is an important way to help preserve the quality of the force by facilitating Soldier access to resources and building relationships to create opportunities for Soldiers, veterans and families who are in transition. It is the least this country can do for its veterans—men and women who have honorably served and sacrificed for their nation.