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## N.C. needs good public policy choices to support its veterans and service members

*Policymakers need to keep North Carolina a military-friendly state by addressing joblessness, hunger, homelessness and health care issues for our service members, veterans and their families.*

By **WILLIAM MUNN** and **LUIS TOLEDO**

North Carolina is home to at least 775,000 veterans<sup>1</sup> and 129,000 active duty personnel.<sup>2</sup> As nearly a tenth of the state population, our active duty members, veterans and their families are extremely important to the fabric of our society. Their backgrounds from all of over the world inject a vibrant culture throughout the state. In terms of economic impact to North Carolina, the total value of goods and services (GDP) associated with the federal military in North Carolina was \$11.1 billion dollars in 2015. In all, veterans and our state's military have a [\\$66 billion economic impact](#) on the state.<sup>3</sup>

North Carolina is committed to being a military-friendly state, which is why it is important that proper policy is applied to the quality of life of veterans. Thousands of North Carolina veterans struggle daily with unemployment, homelessness, hunger and the lack of health insurance. Calling attention to these shortcomings and addressing them with sound public policy is the best salute we can offer to our heroes.

### **After serving, many rural veterans are finding it harder to find employment**

There are approximately [18,000 unemployed veterans in North Carolina](#) according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, which corresponds to a rate of 4.5 percent.<sup>4</sup> While this is an improvement from recent years, many veterans living in rural counties with higher than average unemployment are finding it difficult to secure jobs. If a veteran decides to return home to a county that is not Durham, Mecklenburg, Forsyth, Guilford and Wake (or in its commuting zone), then it is likely finding a job is much more difficult. Seventy-eight percent of new jobs in North Carolina were created in urban and suburban counties since 2009, leaving far fewer prospects for veterans choosing to live in rural parts of the state.

Additionally, as more public sector jobs disappear as a result of state and federal budget cuts, veterans transitioning into the civilian workforce may face greater challenges. National data shows that since 9/11, veterans are twice as likely to work in the public sector as non-veterans.

To create more opportunities to connect veterans to employment, investments in skills training and workforce development must be committed and maintained. While expanding the provision of tuition free community college education to veterans is a good first step, ensuring that the curriculums are aligned with industry demands is a necessary second. In order to position veterans for long term sustainable careers in this evolving economy, it is also critical that the state focus on proven job creation strategies that support good, quality job availability in every county..

### **No veteran should be without a place to call home, yet homelessness is still a problem in NC**

Veterans represent 12 percent of North Carolina's adult homeless population. While the size of [North Carolina's homeless veteran population](#) reached a record low (888) in 2016, the numbers continue to remain stagnant when assessed over time.<sup>5</sup> Over the past nine years, the number of homeless veterans in NC has ranged from 888 to 1,413--an average of 1,105 a year--according to point-in-time counts.

[2016 figures show](#) that 82 percent of homeless veterans were sleeping in emergency shelters or transitional housing.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, 82 percent of the state's homeless veteran population was concentrated in urban areas. Buncombe County had the most homeless veterans (22 percent of all homeless veterans in the state), while Mecklenburg County had the second-largest homeless veteran population (17 percent). Five other counties (Cumberland, Durham, Forsyth, Guilford, and Wake) had homeless veteran populations that ranged from 5 to 9 percent.

Increasing access to affordable housing is critically needed in the state. Currently, [over half a million NC households pay more than half of their income on housing](#). This challenge must be solved in order to combat homelessness. Additionally, the state policymakers must do more for veterans and the military community, such as promoting and partnering with HUD and VA programs that aim to help veterans who are homeless and their families find and sustain permanent housing. The VA has documented various success stories due to [programs combating homelessness among veterans](#), such as<sup>7</sup> programs that deliver housing vouchers to veterans, alongside supportive services such as case management and referrals to job training and health care, as well as temporary and transitional housing for homeless veterans that includes access to health care and counseling.

### **Veterans and military families are at risk of going hungry**

Hunger in America is a real issue, particularly for veterans and service members. Across the country, nearly [1.5 million veterans are at-risk of becoming homeless and going hungry](#). This is a great challenge for North Carolina, given that 10 percent of the population consists of veterans and active-duty service members and that the state has the [8th](#) highest rate of food insecurity in the nation.<sup>8</sup>

One in five households served by food banks nationally have at least one family member who has served in the military, according to Feeding America's [Hunger In America 2014 study](#).<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, more than 130,000 veterans are homeless and hungry on any given night in the United States, according to Feed Our Vets, a nonprofit organization dedicated to fighting veteran hunger.

A [2016 report from the Government Accountability Office](#) found that active-duty service members do need food assistance, however, the extent of hunger issues is not fully known as the Department of Defense does not currently track how many military families are going hungry (i.e., the number of active-duty service members who are using food assistance programs, such as SNAP and WIC).<sup>10</sup> The report points out that SNAP was used by about 23,000 service members during 2013.

In North Carolina, policymakers continue to make the wrong choices for people like our veterans and their families who don't have enough to eat. For example, they voluntarily reinstated a harsh federal law in 2016 requiring a three-month time limit on SNAP for nondisabled, childless adults statewide--including jobless veterans--even though part of the state could have been exempt.<sup>11</sup> And now, with the state facing uncertainty with federal funding of programs like SNAP, lawmakers are pursuing tax cuts for the wealthy and profitable corporations instead of preparing for funding cuts.

### **Veterans with serious needs are facing a health insurance coverage gap**

There is a misconception among many North Carolinians. Many believe that if a veteran served one day of military service that they are entitled to health care benefits through the Department of Veteran Affairs (VA). This is not true. According to the VA a veteran must have satisfied minimum duty requirement and not received a dishonorable discharge to be eligible for VA health benefits. There are 30,000 uninsured veterans and an additional 23,000 spouses and children of these veterans who are also uninsured.<sup>12</sup>

Veterans who return to the more remote regions of the state are at a clear disadvantage in receiving their VA health benefits. There are only a couple of large scale VA medical centers nestled in urban areas and some overcrowded regional outpatient clinics. For many higher ranking military retirees who have access to alternate forms of health care, VA medical care is refused due its inaccessibility. For veterans without such options, or those living in rural North Carolina where the closest VA facility is more than an hour away, health care access simply becomes nonexistent. Many veterans experience inordinate wait times and subpar care when seen as a function of an overburdened system. These veterans who do not have additional insurance are left in the cold after years of strenuous service.

The state could solve these challenges by increasing Medicaid and assistance gap coverage to extend health insurance to nearly 80 percent of North Carolina's uninsured veterans. Many veterans who were discharged due to complications with PTSD could finally have access to the mental health treatment they need. As there are 54,000 In North Carolina who are currently covered by Medicaid, current efforts to cut or limit services in Medicaid is unhelpful.<sup>13</sup> If successful, 1.75 million veterans nationally who have no other source of health care coverage would be weakened.

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