

Report to Congress

Beginning Farmer Training for Veterans and Agricultural Vocational and Rehabilitation for Veterans

Background

The Office of Partnerships and Public Engagement (OPPE) was established through a Secretarial Memorandum in 2017 to improve customer engagement, maximize efficiency, and improve agency collaboration. The office was delegated the oversight of the Office of Advocacy and Outreach (OAO), the Office of Tribal Relations, the Military Veterans Agricultural Liaison, the Center for Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships, the Women in Agriculture initiative, and the USDA Youth Programs. The Agricultural Improvement Act of 2018 (2018 Farm Bill) recognized OPPE in statute. Section 12406 of the 2018 Farm Bill changed the name of OAO to OPPE, and the duties previously delegated to OAO are now delegated to OPPE. Additionally, OPPE will continue the oversight of the Military Veterans Agricultural Liaison, established under Section 12304 of the Agricultural Act of 2014, requiring the Department to help connect returning Veterans with beginning farmer training and agricultural vocational and rehabilitation programs at USDA and to advocate on behalf of Veterans in their interactions with USDA.

Section 12402(f) Reporting Requirement:

(1) In general

Not later than 1 year after December 20, 2018, and annually thereafter, the Military Veterans Agricultural Liaison shall submit a report on beginning farmer training for Veterans and agricultural vocational and rehabilitation programs for Veterans to-

- (A) the Committee on Agriculture of the House of Representatives;
- (B) the Committee on Veterans' Affairs of the House of Representatives;
- (C) the Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry of the Senate; and
- (D) the Committee on Veterans' Affairs of the Senate.

(2) Contents of report

The report submitted under paragraph (1) shall include-

(A) a summary of the measures taken to carry out subsections (b) and (c) *(See Appendix on the last page);*

USDA Response – OPPE has created a coalition of many organizations (Federal/State and Veteran Organizations) to inform Veterans of the opportunities that the Department provides, including:

- Department of Labor (Apprenticeships) – USDA has 3 approved Apprenticeships by the Department of Labor. They are:
 - Agriculture Commodity Graders
 - Wildland Fire Fighters Specialist
 - Food Inspector and Consumer Safety Inspector
- Department of Defense (DoD Skill Bridge Program) – all USDA agencies are aware of this program, and we have used the program throughout.

- The DoD SkillBridge program is an opportunity for Service members to gain valuable civilian work experience through specific industry training, apprenticeships, or internships during the last 180 days of service. SkillBridge connects Service members with industry partners in real-world job experiences.
- Department of Veterans Affairs (VBA and VHA) – Briefed over 100 VR&E counselors about USDA programs
 - If you have a service-connected disability that limits your ability to work or prevents you from working, the VA Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) program—also referred to as Chapter 31—can help. Find out if you’re eligible and how to apply for vocational rehabilitation benefits and services, like help exploring employment options and any required training needs. In some cases, your family members may also be eligible for certain benefits.
- National Association of State Directors of Agriculture – USDA MVAL sends updates via e-mail to all of the State Directors to include updates to any USDA programs.
 - NASDA grows and enhances agriculture by forging partnerships and creating consensus to achieve sound policy outcomes between state departments of agriculture, the Federal Government, and stakeholders
- National Association of State Directors of Veterans Affairs (NASDVA) – Deputy Secretary has briefed this organization at their 2019 Mid-year conference.
 - The National Association of State Directors of Veterans Affairs (NASDVA) is an organization with history dating back to 1946. In the aftermath of World War II, many Veterans earned State and Federal benefits, which required coordinated efforts to assure that Veterans received these entitlements. Thus, States developed a Department or Agency specifically to manage Veterans Affairs and carry out the responsibility for Veteran services and program. The NASDVA members represent all fifty states, the District of Columbia, American Samoa, Guam, Northern Mariana Islands, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands. Nationally, they are the second largest provider of services to Veterans and their roles continue to expand.
- National Association of State Workforce Agencies (NASWA) – USDA MVAL has briefed this organization during their Mid-Year conference
 - NASWA is an organization of state administrators of unemployment insurance laws, employment services, training programs, employment statistics and labor market information. Throughout its more than 75-year history, NASWA has strengthened the workforce system through information exchange, liaison, and advocacy.
- Veteran Service Organizations (VSOs)—American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars, Disabled American Veterans – USDA MVAL has briefed the American Legion Annual Conference and their Mid-year conference. MVAL has briefed leadership of other VSOs.
 - There are so many VSOs that it’s hard to narrow down what they do to a single mission statement but, in general, a VSO exists as a “partnership agency” to help service members in a variety of ways, including claims and benefits but, depending on the agency, there may be lobbyist or other political work on behalf of the VSO’s members, plus scholarships, training, counseling, and related programs. A VSO exists to help its’ members and to raise awareness about the issues they address.

- Farmer Veterans Coalition (FVC) – USDA MVAL has briefed their annual conference for the last 2 years and has a great relationship with FVC.
- The Mission of Farmer Veteran Coalition is Mobilizing Veterans to Feed America. We cultivate a new generation of farmers and food leaders and develop viable employment and meaningful careers through the collaboration of the farming and military communities. We believe that Veterans possess the unique skills and character needed to strengthen rural communities and create sustainable food systems. We believe that agriculture offers purpose, opportunity, and physical and psychological benefits.
- Military Spouse Employment Partnership – USDA has signed a Memorandum of Agreement to support hiring military spouses. The Military Spouse Employment Partnership is a targeted recruitment and employment solution for spouses and companies that:
 - **CONNECTS** corporate and nonprofit organizations with military spouses representing ALL Military Services.
 - **PROVIDES** human resource managers with recruitment solutions – military spouses.
 - **PREPARES** military spouses to become competitive, "job ready" applicants.
 - **CONNECTS** military spouses with employers seeking the essential 21st century workforce skills and attributes they possess.

USDA’s Veterans website serves as a one-stop navigator for Veterans looking to learn more about employment, education, and entrepreneurship on or beyond the farm.

<https://www.usda.gov/our-agency/initiatives/Veterans>

USDA collaborated with the Veterans Administration, and they have spot-lighted our programs in their Vantage Blog that reaches over 7 million Veterans along with our weekly email updates.

(B) a description of the information provided to Veterans under paragraphs (1) and (2) of subsection (b);

USDA Supports America’s Heroes. Preparedness and defense are critical to America’s food and agriculture sectors and to sustaining and growing rural America. That’s why the U.S. Department of Agriculture is looking to military Veterans across the country to fill the roles that keep America’s food supply safe and secure, preserve and strengthen rural communities, and restore and conserve the environment.

USDA wants to ensure that Veterans looking to return home or start a new career on a farm or in a rural community have the tools and opportunities you need to succeed.

USDA’s Veterans website serves as a one-stop navigator for Veterans looking to learn more about employment, education, and entrepreneurship on or beyond the farm.

- **Employment**

- USDA is looking for smart, experienced people to work at one of the more than 2,100 county offices across the country or at the headquarters offices in Washington, D.C. USDA prioritizes hiring Veterans because we know that Veterans bring a wide range of experiences and strong work ethic that USDA wants and needs across the Department.

USDA has a wide range of employment opportunities. Military experiences can directly translate to USDA jobs in areas such as:

- Criminal Justice
 - Soil Conservation
 - Contracting and Procurement
 - Information Technology
 - Food Inspection and Public Health
 - Fire Fighting
 - Finance
 - Economics
- **Education**

Colleges Want to Train America's Heroes.

Ag experts are in high demand.

According to a recent [Purdue University study](#), there are thousands of jobs in agriculture and agribusiness that remain unfilled because there aren't enough graduates with expertise in food, agriculture, renewable natural resources, or the environment. Job opportunities in these areas are expected to grow. Veterans can fill this need by considering a bachelor's degree or higher in one of the following areas:

- Plant Science
- Food Science
- Sustainable Biomaterials
- Water Resources Science and Engineering
- Precision Agriculture
- Veterinary Medicine

You can also consider getting a certificate or gain education through working on a student farm. Many U.S. institutions and organizations offer certificates in sustainable agriculture. These can be earned faster than a college degree and can provide you with the deeper understanding needed to go out and start or grow an operation.

Student farms are another way to receive hands-on training and learn a variety of agriculture practices first-hand. Through these opportunities you can learn a variety of farming techniques and learn from others in the business. USDA's [National Agricultural Library](#) lists a variety of available college programs, certificate programs, and student farms.

In addition to [educational and training programs available in sustainable agriculture](#), USDA also has a number of [scholarship programs](#), as well as programs with [Hispanic-Serving Institutions](#), [1890 Historically Black Land-Grant Universities](#), and [1994 Tribal Land-Grant Colleges and Universities](#).

Gain Education through Experience.

USDA works with a number of interagency and nonprofit partners to bring education and training opportunities to Veterans.

Farm training and apprenticeships equip Veterans with the right tools and skills to gain experience and qualifications needed to participate in USDA programs.

- [ATTRA](#) is one organization that provides sustainable farming internships and apprenticeships. Their Armed to Farm program is for military Veterans and provides trainings from conference presentations to two-day workshops to week-long training events.
- [Farmer Veteran Coalition](#) is an organization that provides direct assistance to Veterans in their beginning years of farming or ranching.

[Extension programs](#) are where USDA works with universities to provide non-formal education and learning activities directly to ag producers, small business owners, consumers and families throughout the country.

More than [100 Land-Grant Colleges and Universities](#) provide a network of professional educators, trained volunteers, and local offices who can address your local priority needs, extend resources, and provide education of business operations and technologies.

From Farm to Fork – Veterans in Agriculture and Agribusiness

As a Veteran, you may find it challenging to determine what to do after military service, and to figure out how your experience can transfer to other career fields. USDA wants you to know that your experience and skillset can immediately and directly transfer to the field of agriculture. [New and Beginning Farmers](#) are Veterans who are part of the community of beginning farmers and are therefore eligible for programs to help start – and continue – a career in farming.

Access to Capital, Land and More – USDA can help Veterans transition into farming, ranching, and other agricultural opportunities by connecting you with financial, educational and training resources, and business planning support. These resources include:

- [Agricultural Conservation Easement Program](#)
- [Crop Insurance](#)

- [Environmental Quality Incentives Program](#)
- [Farm Loan Program](#)
- [Noninsured Crop Disaster Assistance Program](#)
- [SCORE](#)
- [Texas A&M's AgriLife Extension Service](#)
- [Transition Incentives Program](#)

USDA's [Discovery Tool](#) can help you identify which programs might be right for you.

Opportunities for Veterans in Rural Business

For those Veterans who are from rural America and chose to return home after service or for those who choose to move to a rural area, USDA wants to help you sustain and strengthen your communities.

Rural Business – USDA offers support to entrepreneurial Veterans who want to strengthen and develop your rural communities through starting or growing a business. To do this, USDA wants to empower trained leaders like you who know and love your local communities. USDA's Rural Development is here to help with more than [40 loan, grant, and technical assistance programs](#) that you can use to get started. These programs include support to:

- Purchase and develop land and facilities
- Purchase equipment and supplies
- Refinance for job expansion
- Finance for energy efficiency improvements

Get help with your business plan by visiting your local [Veterans Business Outreach Center](#).

Community Development – You may choose to continue to serve as a leader in your local rural community. USDA can help you in the revival and redevelopment of your community by buying, building or improving a community facility. This support is available through USDA's [Community Facilities Direct Loan & Grant Program](#) and can include direct loans, grants, and loan guarantees, which support large projects such as hospitals, health clinics, schools, and fire houses, or other facilities that provide an essential service to the local community. These funds can be used to purchase, construct, and/or improve these types of facilities.

(C) recommendations for best informing Veterans of the programs described in paragraphs (1) and (2) of subsection (b);

USDA Response: USDA has established a specific site for veterans on our website at <https://www.usda.gov/our-agency/initiatives/Veterans>. We provide information on employment, education, and entrepreneur opportunities in the Agriculture industry as a whole and opportunities within USDA.

Currently, MVAL has participated numerous television, radio, magazine, and newspaper interviews. All these interviews are built around what USDA has to offer transitioning service members and Veterans. These include:

- Interview with Public Broadcasting System
- Interview with “Got your SIX” TV show
- Held a webcast with Military Officer’s Association of America (MOAA)
- Articles – VA weekly advantage – reaching over 7 million Veterans
- Numerous interviews with Agricultural related magazines and newspapers
- Attended numerous Veterans Day at the Farm and spoke about what USDA offers Veterans
- Interviewed by USDA Radio
- Spoke at many wounded warrior events along with transitioning military servicemembers
- Attended Job Fairs specifically for Veterans

The USDA MVAL office consists of only two military retired personnel. Ideally, we could reach more Veterans if we were able to expand our representation in each state like the new and beginning farmers program and were appropriated additional funding for travel to attend more job fairs and conferences.

(D) a summary of the contracts or cooperative agreements entered into under subsection (c);

USDA Response – We have agreements with DoD for a Federal agency to participate in the DoD Skill Bridge Program, along with an agreement with the Military Spouse Employment Program. We recently added our 3rd apprenticeship program approved by the Department of Labor (Food Inspectors and Consumer Safety Inspectors)

(E) a description of the programs implemented under subsection (c);

USDA Response – We have a USDA Veterans Task Force which includes representatives from all our agencies. The Task Force meets bi-monthly to discuss new initiatives and how best to inform active duty and Veterans of programs that affect Veterans.

(F) a summary of the employment outreach activities directed to Veterans;

USDA Response – In addition to the employment information and opportunities posted on our website, OPPE sends out a weekly email that includes all jobs that are available to Veterans and Military Spouses. We also attend job fairs to promote the Chamber of Commerce’s “Hire our Heroes”.

(G) recommendations for how opportunities for Veterans in agriculture should be developed or expanded;

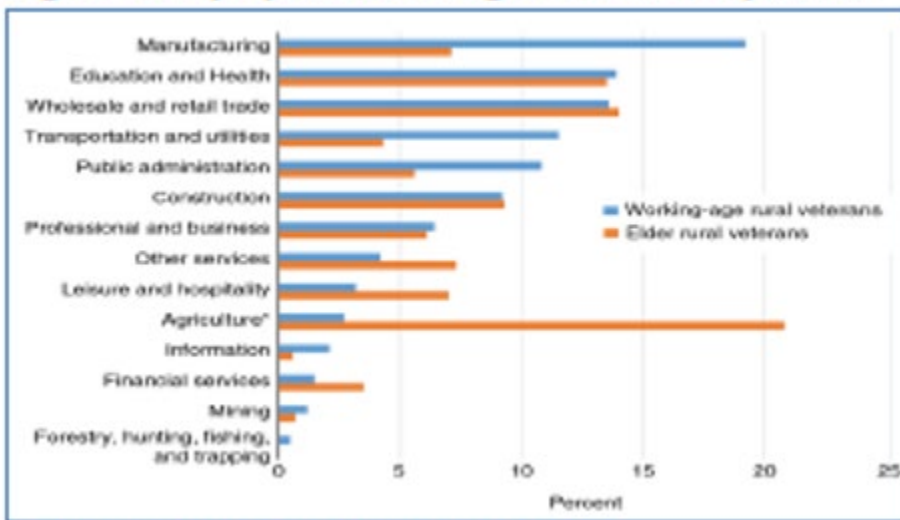
USDA Response – The Department is working with the Department of Labor to insert information into their brief at the Transition Assistance Program; currently USDA information is

not briefed at this program. We are also working on developing an AgBoot Camp to be part of the DoD Skill Bridge Program. This program would be an overview of what it takes to become a new and beginning farmer, to include all available USDA programs along with information about Agricultural business.

(H) a summary of Veteran farm lending data and a summary of shortfalls, if any, identified by the Military Veterans Agricultural Liaison in collecting data with respect to Veterans engaged in agriculture;

USDA Response – The 2017 USDA Census identified Veteran Farmers. This is the first time we have the data. There may be shortfalls in the data as, unfortunately, some Veterans don't identify themselves as Veterans, and Veterans with small farms do not always register themselves through Farm Service Agency to attain a Farmer ID number. We also track how many Farm Service Loans and single-family housing loans have been approved for Veterans. Although the dollar amounts are high, we still need to educate Veterans and the availability of these programs. Data from USDA indicates that the rural post-9/11 Veteran population increased from 200,000 in 2006 to more than 400,000 in 2016, raising the post-9/11 Veteran population to about 13% of the total rural Veteran population in 2016, up from about 4% in 2006. Nevertheless, overall, the rural Veteran population has been decreasing. USDA data also indicate that working-age Veterans tend to rely more on employment in manufacturing and far less on agriculture compared to elder Veterans. Data are not available on the number of Veterans who wish to enter farming or ranching. (Figure 1)

Figure 1. Employment Among Veteran Groups, 2015



Source: USDA, Amber Waves, September 2015.

Loans to include Farm Service Loans and Beginning Farmers and Ranchers to Veterans

FY-18 – 82 Million in Direct Loans and 76 Million in Guaranteed Loans

FY-19 – 83 Million in Direct Loans and 66 Million in Guaranteed Loans

Rural Development Home Loans, Refinancing current home loan and home repairs to Veterans

FY-18 – 167.8 Million in Direct Loans and 157 Million in Guaranteed Loans

FY-19 – 123.4 Million in Direct Loans and 116 Million in Guaranteed Loans

(I) recommendations, if any, on how to improve activities under subsection (b).

USDA response – One of our top priorities is to be able to offer our information and opportunities to transitioning service members via the Transition Assistance Program. This is a program that ALL transitioning service members MUST attend so we will be able to reach all active-duty members as they prepare for their next steps in life.

Appendix

7 U.S.C 6919(b) and (c)

(B) DUTIES

The Military Veterans Agricultural Liaison shall-

(1) provide information to returning Veterans about and connect returning Veterans with beginning farmer training and agricultural vocational and rehabilitation programs appropriate to the needs and interests of returning Veterans, including assisting Veterans in using Federal Veterans educational benefits for purposes relating to beginning a farming or ranching career;

(2) provide information to Veterans concerning the availability of and eligibility requirements for participation in agricultural programs, with particular emphasis on beginning farmer and rancher programs;

(3) serve as a resource for assisting Veteran farmers and ranchers (and potential farmers and ranchers) in applying for participation in agricultural programs;

(4) advocate on behalf of Veterans in interactions with employees of the Department;

(5) establish and periodically update the website described in subsection (d); and

(6) in carrying out the duties described in paragraphs (1) through (5), consult with and provide technical assistance to any Federal agency, including the U.S. Department of Defense, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, the U.S. Small Business Administration, and the U.S. Department of Labor.

(C) CONTRACTS AND COOPERATIVE AGREEMENTS

For purposes of carrying out the duties under subsection (b), the Military Veterans Agricultural Liaison may enter into contracts or cooperative agreements with the research centers of the Agricultural Research Service, institutions of higher education (as defined in Section 1001 of Title 20), or nonprofit organizations for

(1) the conduct of regional research on the profitability of small farms;

(2) the development of educational materials;

(3) the conduct of workshops, courses, and certified vocational training;

(4) the conduct of mentoring activities; or

(5) the provision of internship opportunities.