Over the next five years, up to 50,000 military veterans are expected to return to Michigan, bringing with them skills in IT, healthcare, engineering, skilled trades, advanced manufacturing and public safety, among other fields.

As more of Michigan’s vets exit their military service, several statewide and local programs bolstered by West Michigan businesses are helping the returning vets make the transition back to the civilian workforce.

“We have about 660,000 veterans in the state, and 50,000 of those are post-9/11 veterans,” said Jeff Barnes, director of the Michigan Veteran’s Affairs Agency. “We expect that post-9/11 generation to double in the next five years. “We have about 660,000 veterans in the state, and 50,000 of those are post-9/11 veterans,” said Jeff Barnes, director of the Michigan Veteran’s Affairs Agency. “We expect that post-9/11 generation to double in the next five years.

“What we are really trying to do is raise awareness to employers that this is an incredible pool of talent that’s available, and will continue to be available for the next 3 to 5 years,” Barnes said.

“50K

Number of Michigan veterans expected to return to the state in the next five years.

But often the skills and experience veterans gained in the military are lost in translation as they try to gain jobs in the civilian world. Many times, companies don’t understand how to best integrate the unique qualities veterans bring to the workforce, which is why Barnes said it’s so important for companies and veterans work together to make sure there’s a good fit.

“The idea behind it is that if we can get employers that are interested in hiring vets to connect with the right vet, they will have lower attrition rates,” Barnes said. “Sometimes there are core things that the military brings, especially leadership and adaptability and the ability to work well with the team and in high-pressure situations. Those skills are usually hard to train.”

Barnes said West Michigan employers need to recognize that those soft skills are incredibly valuable in the workplace, and that the other, more technical skills that are needed to fill a position can be trained and taught.

“The two biggest things that we see, and they’re the same things between the veteran and the employer, are skills translation and locating one another,” said Barnes. “So we really try to help both the employer and the veteran focus on trying to improve the way that they were able to relate the military experience skill set and a civilian job. We help the employer understand where those skill sets would fit into their organization and into their future plans.”

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MIBIZ SALUTES
VETERANS IN THE WORKPLACE

MEET THESE LOCAL HEROES FROM WEST MICHIGAN ORGANIZATIONS

FLIER’S QUALITY WATER SYSTEMS, INC.
JOE CAUDILL
Hired in 1998
Army
Highest Rank: E3

HOW HAS THE EMPLOYEE’S MILITARY SERVICE POSITIVELY INFLUENCED HIS WORK AT YOUR COMPANY? No question, the military made me a stronger person. I was 17 when I entered. I had just lost my father and needed self-control. Six months later I lost my mother. The military taught me perseverance, self-discipline, and to look ahead. This training not only helped me get a job at Flier’s, but how to be a team player.

FLIER’S SPRINKLING
RON TJEPKEMA
Hired in 1996
Army National Guard
Highest Rank: E4

HOW HAS THE EMPLOYEE’S MILITARY SERVICE POSITIVELY INFLUENCED HIS WORK AT YOUR COMPANY? Six years in the Army National Guard left me a disciplined and self-confident person. This helped me significantly in Sales, and eventually helped me to manage people and work at Flier’s Underground Sprinkling. My service left me a confident people-person which has helped in all parts of my life.

STUDENT, WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY
GREGORY MILLER
Major: Criminal Justice ’15
Army
Highest Rank: Sergeant First Class

HOW HAS YOUR MILITARY SERVICE POSITIVELY INFLUENCED YOUR ACADEMIC SUCCESS AT WMU? Service in the military provides a person with a variety of beneficial skills that can be directly applied to their pursuit of an academic degree. I developed self-discipline and commitment in the Army. Both of these skills have helped me to set realistic goals, monitor progress, and achieve positive outcomes.

AMERICAN AUTOCAT
MIKE BLASZCZYK
Hired in April 2014
Army
Highest Rank: Sergeant E5

HOW HAS THE EMPLOYEE’S MILITARY SERVICE POSITIVELY INFLUENCED HIS WORK AT YOUR COMPANY? Organization, team work and discipline! Mike is always on time, does what he is supposed to do and when he is supposed to do it. He gets things done. The Army teaches how to follow a schedule and a routine. This is very helpful training for a manufacturing environment. We are proud of Mike and his efforts towards our success!

AMERICAN AUTOCAT
JOSH CURTIS
Hired in January 2014
Army
Highest Rank: E4 Specialist

HOW HAS THE EMPLOYEE’S MILITARY SERVICE POSITIVELY INFLUENCED HIS WORK AT YOUR COMPANY? Josh was a leader in Iraq and dealt with a diverse group of people, background, ages, etc... Experience leading a team in a stressful environment has taught Josh how to keep cool under pressure. This experience has given Josh the ability to lead his team at American Autocoat to get the job done! Thank you for your service, Josh.
“It is the soldier, not the reporter, Who has given us freedom of the press.
It is the soldier, not the poet, Who has given us freedom of speech.
It is the soldier, not the organizer, Who gave us the freedom to demonstrate.
It is the soldier, Who salutes the flag.
It is the soldier, Who serves beneath the flag.
And whose coffin is draped by the flag.”
Father Dennis Edward O’Brien, USMC

Jim Flier, President
Flier’s Quality Water Systems

WHY VETS MAKE OUTSTANDING EMPLOYEES

BY JIM FLIER, PRESIDENT FLIER’S QUALITY WATER SYSTEMS, INC.

My father, Berne Flier, served during the Korean War, and founded this company in 1964. His experiences in the service helped shape him into the man he became. And the examples he set – as a father, a friend, a businessman, and a community leader – continue to inspire the way we do business.

VETS KEEP THEIR COMMITMENTS
When a person joins the service, he or she pledges to defend the country and honor the Constitution. When they are in the service, they learn to take responsibility for the serious consequences to the decisions they made. When they return as vets, they’ve proven they are willing and able to keep important promises.

VETS ARE TRAINED TO MEET CHALLENGES
It’s very common for vets to remark that their time in the service showed them they could do things they never thought they could accomplish. They leave the service more knowledgeable, disciplined, confident, self-reliant – and far more capable of meeting all kinds of challenges in their personal and professional lives.

VETS MAKE GREAT TEAM PLAYERS
Starting with the first day of basic training, life in the military is all about working in a group of people in order to accomplish specific goals. To survive, you have to learn how to collaborate, compromise and work hard for the good of the team. Especially when the going gets tough, vets don’t let their buddies down.

VETS HAVE A SOLID WORK ETHIC
Reliable employees can be difficult to find. But vets have been forged in an environment where you always show up for work, you earn respect by working hard, and you get promoted for working smart. So is it any wonder that vets are consistently the most dependable, consistent, and productive people on a payroll?

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JIM FLIER, PRESIDENT FLIER’S QUALITY WATER SYSTEMS, INC.
VETERANS

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Veterans need to be thoughtful about their goals when it comes to employment, and to lay the initial groundwork for their careers through internships and informational interviews, Barnes said.

For veterans, it’s a matter of learning to translate your experience into what the civilian career could be, Barnes said.

“In order to do that, you really need to effectively sit down and think about what some of your personal and professional goals are,” he said. “Because it’s not always a natural transition from your military occupational specialty...to what you will do in your civilian career.”

A new program in West Michigan has three major corporations working together with a state government program to get veterans successfully back into the workforce. Known as the Veteran Explorers Program, it was started by Spectrum Health in 2013. In 2015, Spectrum Health partnered with Michigan Works!, a statewide workforce development system, to provide network and other program support as they work to re-enter the workforce.

“This is a natural program progression that allows veterans to have experience in other industries beyond health care,” said Nicole McConnell, director of Employee Lifecycle, Inclusion & Diversity at Spectrum Health. “Expanding opportunities for veterans in other West Michigan organizations opens doors for collaboration and creates even more success stories.”

Gary Groom, a graduate of the program who now works as a recruiter for Spectrum Health, says the program offers more than just job training.

“I think the best part about the program is you start off with a group of people that you’re familiar with, you meet guys from the same background.” he said.  

Decuto said after years struggling to find a career that was a good fit for him and that would also support his family, the Veteran Explorers program has been incredibly helpful.

“This is truly a program that should be a model for other organizations to follow. Being able to recognize the sacrifices that the veterans have made for their country and knowing that they’ve got good qualities that they can provide to their organization,” Decuto said.

He said he now has a job that he truly loves. “I actually wake up wanting to come to work because it’s just really that rewarding to have this opportunity.”

Holland-based furniture maker Haworth’s reasons for participating in the Veteran Explorers program are twofold.

“First and most importantly, Haworth is committed to employing veterans because it is the right thing to do for individuals that have sacrificed for our country. This initiative aligns with our Company’s values,” said Haworth’s Talent Attraction & Recruiting Manager Cassandra Volkers. “Secondly, we recognize that individuals who have served in the military are highly trained and motivated. It is a highly skilled labor pool that is untapped.”

The program has an 86 percent immediate employment rate, and has placed 17 veterans in permanent jobs, including application developer analyst, recruiter, facilities project leader, payer relations manager, transportation coordinator and other management and support roles.

Eligibility requirements for the program include U.S. veterans who served at least 180 active-duty days in the military with honorable discharge, can provide a copy of their official discharge form, and are currently unemployed or underemployed. Veterans also must be willing to work 20 hours per week, and meet other employer hiring requirements.

“Veterans are very unique segment of our society,” said Jon Trellier, former Army Ranger and owner of Grand Rapids-based consulting firm JetCo. “I think that what they have, and what makes them successful...is perseverance, persistence. With the veteran folks today, you get honest, hard-working individuals that are used to being in charge and used to getting the mission accomplished. So if you can arrange scenarios like that within your organization, within your company, I think you’ll be setting them up for success.”

Hungerford Nichols would like to thank and honor our men and women in uniform...past, present and future.

We are also proud to recognize our own workplace Veterans: Shareholders Jerry Nichols, Mitch Burgers and Phil Saurman.

Thank You For Your Service!
How the Army helped me start my business

By JILL HINTON WOLFE
U.S. Army Veteran
Founder, Outdoor Book Club

Being a U.S. Army veteran and a small business owner is really a natural fit. During my time in the military, I learned how to take calculated risks, and how to persevere in the face of constant challenge—which is a daily occurrence when you own a business. I also learned how to properly pack gear and manage my time and set goals effectively, which is something that I do all the time these days.

My company is called Outdoor Book Club (www.outdoorbookclub.org). I lead workshops and trips for women in the great outdoors, all inspired by great books like Cheryl Strayed’s Wild and Ernest Hemingway’s Nick Adams Stories.

My military service didn’t just provide me life lessons and experience that I can bring to the business. It also helped me fund it. I received $10,000 in start up funding from a business plan competition that was open only to women veterans. I entered the 2014 Citi Realize Your Dream business plan competition and placed third.

I took advantage of resources such as the Small Business Administration, Grand Rapids Opportunities for Women, and even organizations like Start Garden to help start and grow my business. Talking and networking with other business owners has been key, and I’ve been overwhelmed by the support I’ve received as a veteran.

Army veteran Jill Hinton Wolfe is a contributing writer for MiBiz as well as the founder and Chief Heroine of Outdoor Book Club. She can be reached via email at jill@outdoorbookclub.org.

Serving those who have served

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Our eyes are always on your finish at American Autocoat.

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