

FROM COMBATING ENEMIES TO COMBATING UNEMPLOYMENT - FOR WAR VETERANS' THE BATTLE ENDURES



Tens of thousands of young war veterans have returned home, from war torn zones, in Iraq and Afghanistan, much to the happiness and relief of their families. But their joy has been short-lived as they find themselves, struggling to find work that will keep their home fires burning. Unemployment for veterans, especially in the ages between 18 and 24, is increasing even as the country's jobless rate declines. In an interview Paul Rieckhoff, founder and executive director of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, a New York-based advocacy group said, "Unemployment is our No. 1 issue. Unemployment is not down, it's up. And it's a serious problem." After returning to his home in the suburbs of Cincinnati, U.S. Army Private Brandon Click delivers Papa John's Pizza at night for a little more than \$31,000 a year, to help support his infant son. Till now his search for a job has proved futile. "It gets the bills paid, but barely," said Click. Click was driving a 68-ton Abrams tank in Iraq on March, 2008, when a roadside bomb blast, "melted his eyelashes and peppered the left side of his body with shrapnel." The army said that Click was honorably discharged. Over the two years since his return home, he has been delivering pizza, continuing unsuccessfully, to search for more rewarding work to help support his infant baby, he fathered with a girlfriend. The US Bureau of Labor reported that the unemployment rate for veterans who've served since the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks was 12.1 percent last year, up from 11.5 percent in 2010. Among non-veterans, 8.7 percent were jobless last year, down from 9.4 percent in 2010. The gap is likely to increase further. The President has announced plans to withdraw combat troops from Iraq and Afghanistan by the end of 2014. This, coupled with Pentagon's plans to reduce US military by 5.5 percent, means that there will be that many more veterans searching for jobs. Compounding the problem is that young veterans, who left high school to join the army, have returned to the civilian workforce with no obvious marketable skills. "I've looked at other things," Click said as he waited to talk to recruiters at a job fair in Fort Mitchell, Kentucky. "I can't find nothing. I don't even know what a resume looks like. I don't know what's supposed to be on it." Emily King, a Herndon, Virginia-based consultant who specializes in recruiting and training veterans for civilian jobs observes, "These people are out in the market without a clue, they either never get an interview, or they get an interview and they don't know how to tell the story of their experience." Companies however, are saying that they are giving cognizance to the government's appeal to provide jobs to veterans. According to spokesman Bryan Goettel, more than 30 companies pledged last year to hire at least 100,000 veterans collectively by 2020. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce has held 102 job fairs over the past year in 45 states and the District of Columbia is helping more than 8,400 veterans and spouses land jobs. A silver lining to the unfortunate job situation for the job veterans is that, the job fair was lucky for Click, who landed a job at a call center and said he would take up the job starting April 16.