

“Deja Vu All Over Again,” Yogi Berra

Statement of Mr. Wesley Poriotis

**CEO, Wesley, Brown & Bartle Co., Inc.,
Chairman of The Center for Military and Private Sector Initiatives**

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Veterans Employment and Training Service (VETS)
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Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Herseth, Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to testify before you today regarding the Labor Department’s Veterans’ Employment and Training Service (VETS).

When I was originally invited to testify before this panel on March 17 – St. Patrick’s Day – I was so excited I ran out, bought a green tie and tried to change my name to O’Poriotis. My 84 year old father was relieved to hear that the date was changed and not my name.

However, I am equally pleased to be here today, May 12th, which as any good New Yorker should be able to tell you is the 80th anniversary of the birth of one of our nation’s great unsung philosophers, Lawrence Peter Berra, better known as Yogi Berra.

So let me start by saying, in the words of Yogi Berra, that testifying before you today feels like “deja vu all over again.”

Mr. Chairman, this is the third time since 2002 that I have had the honor to sit at this table to testify on ways to enhance the federal government’s role in helping veterans secure quality employment opportunities.

Eleven years ago, at the request of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, I produced a report analyzing how veterans were faring in their transition from the military to civilian employment....Especially, in overcoming deselective biases in accessing and competing on a level playing field for quality opportunities in the non-defense growth sectors of the economy.

Sadly, at that time, I found that veterans’ employment and career transition services were inadequate and outdated. Based upon a scientific survey and other research, I made a dozen recommendations to the Joint Chiefs about how to improve federal veterans’ employment programs.

Furthermore, I founded The Center for Military and Private Sector Initiatives, a nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization to help pursue implementation of those recommendations and other initiatives to improve employment prospects for transitioning military personnel, veterans, and their families.

Unfortunately, what I am about to report in terms of the sorry state of federal veterans employment programs may sound to you like “d  j   vu all over.”

In the decade since I gave the Joint Chiefs my recommendations and personally met with the President to address this issue VETS has made some reforms, improved some services, and expanded its budget. But at the end of the day, it is still a fair characterization to say that the Veterans' Employment and Training Service neither 'employs,' nor 'trains,' nor adequately "services" veterans employment needs.

Mr. Chairman, the problem at its core is that VETS is a government program trying to succeed in the private sector with government solutions. Let me give you a perfect example. Last week the Chairman of the President's National Hire Veterans Committee testified about the accomplishments of his Committee. I have read his statement carefully and here's what I found:

In the two and one half years since Hire Veterans Committee was authorized, the only measurable achievement he could enumerate was the signing of 28 "Hire A Veteran Month" proclamations by state governors, with another 15 proclamations to be signed by the end of June this year. That's how government approaches a problem: create a committee, sign a proclamation.

Let me share how the private sector approaches this same problem.

After a year of planning – together with the efforts of General Tommy Franks and Roger Chapin, the founder of A Salute to America's Heroes – we brought 138 of the most severely wounded in the War on Terrorism and their families to Orlando for a three-

day retreat, conference, and work session to help them on their Road to Recovery.

In addition to numerous activities and programs to heal their spirit and provide them with tangible and material assistance, The Center organized a comprehensive program to meet and provide employment navigation and counsel with each and every military service member and his or her spouse.

Our program utilizes a working group of hero/coach counselors and job developers – especially for disabled veterans – who will now go into the veteran’s home; determine a career track and meet with local employers to literally get the veteran an interview. The hero/coach counselor in some cases helps in the negotiation and closing and in essence champions the so-called veteran payload to the employment target.

This combination of experienced employment navigation plus the actual relationship building and opening up of what I call the hidden job market goes through the “pain of placement” – something that VETS has never done.

And while we were meeting individually with these brave men and women, twenty VETS representatives were in another room doing what they are tasked and trained to do: hand out written information, refer veterans to websites, and check off the boxes on their to-do lists.

Mr. Chairman, I don’t blame the men and women in the field working as LVERs and DVOPs. They are doing the job they

were assigned; some of them are remarkable, caring, compassionate, and effective people.

Yet, they have no hard metrics upon which their performance is judged. Think about it. If each of the 3,000 or so government employees under the broad umbrella of VETS placed one veteran per week as a mandate, 150,000 additional veterans would acquire jobs. At present, there is no performance criteria to meet and develop relationships with a minimum number of employers; meet a metric of job interviews; and fulfill a quota of jobs for veterans. And, we are not even adding aspects like “speed to market;” or numbers and quality of placements which any private sector recruiter must meet or perish.

Unemployment and the immeasurable yet omni-present underemployment has reached unacceptable proportions for many in our so-called *kitchen cabinet*, a national informal consortium of corporate, business and government leaders. An individual of no less stature than new VA Secretary, Jim Nicholson recently met with me and several corporate executives to lament the outrageously high unemployment for young veterans. Even though he does not have the statutory responsibility for veterans employment; nevertheless, he stated multiple times in our meeting that he would market the veteran to the private sector and meet with corporate executives to influence them to the value of hiring veterans in their workforce.

Unfortunately, this contrasts dramatically with VETS leadership who, so busy with their internal meetings with themselves, could not find the time to meet with Jack Welch’s successor, Jeff Immelt, who in August of 2003 gave up two hours of his

personal time to meet with me and other executives to determine the ways he and the General Electric Company could influence other American companies to the value of hiring veterans.

But the fact is that you will never solve a private sector problem with government approaches and programs.

Yogi Berra famously said, “it ain’t over till its over.” But, respectfully, Mr. Chairman, in the case of VETS, I believe its time is over.

One of America’s most important entrepreneurs recently gave a remarkable speech on education at a summit meeting of our nation’s governors. Bill Gates minced no words.

“American high schools are obsolete,” he told the governors. “By obsolete, I don’t just mean that our high schools are broken, flawed and underfunded.... By obsolete, I mean that our high schools – even when they are working exactly as designed – cannot teach our kids what they need to know today.”

Mr. Chairman, we merely need to substitute Mr. Gates words on obsolete high schools with the obsolete Veterans Employment and Training Service.

Rather than reforming and coping with an obsolete federal agency which itself labors as a distant stepchild in the Department of Labor, we need to seriously develop a blueprint that reconsiders the entire notion of government-centered programs to help veterans get jobs in the private sector.

If Mr. Gates can be so blunt in crying out for a redesign, we can do no less for our veterans.

This Committee needs to quickly and comprehensively evaluate the efficacy of outsourcing the VETS function, or at least significant parts of that function. An outsourced entity would be mandated to carry the veterans' employment football across the goal line. At present, the veterans' employment payload is simply not hitting the target.

It is like a boxer who moves deftly, jabs rapidly, and throws powerful uppercuts, but never actually hits its opponent. Unless we task people to go out and find the "hidden job market" among private sector employers, we will never succeed. Until they are measured by how many jobs they find for veterans, rather than how many daily tasks they perform, success will continue to elude us.

At the very least, I would recommend that this Committee authorize pilot programs that allow the private sector to infuse its knowledge, creativity, and energy into the noble task of finding high quality jobs for the men and women who have so honorably worn the uniform of our nation.

We know that in order to create jobs in our modern economy we have to unleash the talent and creativity of the private sector. Similarly, if we want to find quality new and existing jobs for veterans, we also need to unleash the private sector.

And, Mr. Chairman, like Teddy Roosevelt's famous political barnstorming, often called "a bully pulpit"....we need to be bold and reach out for a head of VETS like Jack Welch, former NY Stock Exchange Chairman Dick Grasso; UBS Paine Weber's Joe Grano; or a "Lou Gerstner" of IBM fame. Let the able administrators administer the internal workings of the Agency. For \$1.00 in salary and the capacity to leave a personal legacy for infusing the treasure of military service into the American business bloodstream, we can recruit a passionate corporate leader to head VETS and forge a bully pulpit for veterans' employment.

The above is not only possible; it is quite probable. These corporate leaders are worth hundreds of millions; are often without a new national mission; and because of the ego it took in the first place to get where they got, we can rechannel their prodigious energies and contacts to our cause.

Mr. Chairman, let me close with one of my favorite Yogi-isms: "when you come to a fork in the road, take it."

To put that another way, the Veterans Employment and Training Service is done; stick a fork in it, move on, and let's create a new public-private partnership to help veterans get quality jobs.