

Improving Opportunities for Veterans and Spouses Through SkillBridge

Executive Summary

Since its launch as a Department of Defense pilot program in 2011, SkillBridge has become one of the most recognized tools for helping service members transition into civilian employment. The program allows active-duty military personnel to participate in internships, training, or fellowships with civilian employers during their last 180 days of service while continuing to receive their military pay and benefits. In a labor market where workforce shortages and veteran underemployment are on the rise, SkillBridge plays a critical role in connecting military talent to high-demand private-sector jobs. While the program has been a clear success, with over 50,000 service members having completed the program by 2023, there have been limitations in access for service members, which vary according to their branch of service, posting, and level of command support. And military spouses, who could also benefit while not impacting service levels, are excluded entirely and instead have access to the Military Spouse Roadmap, operated in affiliation with Hiring Our Heroes.

The program has gained momentum following the Department of Defense's recent emphasis on employment-based outcomes. These changes have made it possible to better track the economic impact of SkillBridge and to hold both military leadership and employers more accountable for delivering measurable results. However, SkillBridge's growth has also highlighted several ongoing challenges: inconsistent access between enlisted personnel and officers, lack of awareness or support from military command, and the exclusion of military spouses, despite their high rates of unemployment and underemployment.

Though over 70 percent of service members express interest in SkillBridge, only about 32 percent participate. One major reason is accessibility. According to a Government Accountability Office report, more than half of military installations lack sufficient local partnerships with employers, forcing service members to either relocate or forgo participation altogether. Employers, too, face roadblocks. Many cite bureaucratic confusion and lack of clarity

around how to become approved SkillBridge partners. A 2023 US Chamber of Commerce survey found that nearly 40 percent of businesses were unaware of how to join the program.

Another major issue is alignment. A 2023 RAND Corporation survey found that 40 percent of SkillBridge participants felt the training didn't align with their long-term career goals. Without better customization to match veterans' skills and aspirations, the program's full potential won't be realized. Administrative delays are also a persistent problem. A 2021 Army study reported that 47 percent of SkillBridge applicants experienced slow responses from command leadership, often preventing them from finalizing participation in time.

Understanding the broader impact of SkillBridge also requires looking at the real-life experiences of transitioning families. Findings from the Military Family Advisory Network's 2023 Military Family Support Programming Survey shed light on this. Among over 10,000 respondents, recently transitioned families—particularly those who were enlisted—reported relying on programs like SkillBridge (32 percent), the GI Bill (58.5 percent), and the Transition Assistance Program (64.4 percent) to navigate the shift to civilian life. However, many still expressed a need for more personalized support, especially military spouses, who frequently cited the lack of employment resources tailored to their needs. Spouses make an ideal option, as improving their economic position aids not only military retention but also improved transitions.

While families using SkillBridge often reported higher work-life satisfaction and stronger skill alignment, many remained dissatisfied with their income and job flexibility. Additionally, financial stress remains a major barrier to stability. More than 60 percent of recently transitioned families scored low or very low on the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau Financial Well-Being Scale. Over 48 percent were considered “housing burdened,” spending more than 30 percent of their income on rent or mortgage. Food insecurity also affected 26 percent of respondents. Mental health concerns, loneliness, and limited access to quality care were more pronounced in families reporting lower overall well-being—further illustrating the ripple effects of unemployment and income instability.

Despite these obstacles, the SkillBridge model has shown notable success stories across sectors. Companies like SRS Distribution, Amazon, and Microsoft have used it to build stable hiring pipelines. In aerospace, NASA's Glenn Research Center has trained veterans in engineering roles. In renewable energy, programs like Solar Ready Vets have prepared service members for careers in wind and solar power—demonstrating how the program can align with both national priorities and local labor needs.

To unlock its full impact, SkillBridge must be expanded and modernized. Standardizing approval procedures across commands would reduce delays and make access more equitable. Simplifying the employer application process—and investing in outreach—would boost private-sector participation. Offering centralized databases to help service members find opportunities more easily, tailoring training to career goals, and tracking employment outcomes would further improve program efficacy. Perhaps most critically, expanding eligibility for all resources to military spouses would help address a major gap in transition support and contribute to overall family stability.

SkillBridge is more than just a workforce program—it's a strategic solution to a national challenge. By helping veterans leave the military with confidence, enter the civilian workforce with experience, and support their families through stable employment, SkillBridge can significantly improve post-service outcomes. With thoughtful reforms and sustained investment, it can become a cornerstone of both veteran policy and national workforce development.

The full report will be available in late spring 2025 at <https://milkeninstitute.org/content-hub/research-and-reports/reports/impact-skillbridge-veteran-employment-outcomes>.